

It was Confucius who supposedly said, “study the past if you would define the future,” in an attempt to highlight the importance of history in understanding and shaping the future.¹ Indeed, the commonly used idiom, ‘history repeats itself’ implies a similar thought. The phrase is particularly familiar in recognising the repetitive violence and sadism that occurs throughout human history, and the reasoning behind such thinking is normally to reduce this aspect of humanity. However, this link between past and future is not so easily established. In a more metaphysical sense, it can be argued that past and future do not even exist, and the implications of this result in a conclusion that the question of past, and ‘guiding’ the future, and in turn the very notion of existence, are irrelevant.

Teachings from philosophical monists such as Parmenides may suggest that our universe is of one substance, such as God or nature. By modern standards, this approach is abstract, and it is difficult to argue a grounded case for substance monism from a standpoint of materialism. However, Einstein's work on general and special relativity in the 20th century, discussed by Brian Greene in his writings about string theory,² reveals a new kind of ‘spacetime’ monism. While there is little backing for ideas of one universal substance, general relativity emphasises the consistency of spacetime, within which all objects reside. Completely empty spacetime is of uniform shape, aptly described as flat. A completely massless particle in flat spacetime would not experience time. It moves through the ‘space’ element of spacetime at the speed of light, and cannot, from its own frame of reference, experience time. However, as soon as something gains mass, spacetime becomes warped, introducing the effects of gravity as the object must follow the ‘path of least resistance.’ This object must reduce its speed through space and begins to travel through time. This idea of spacetime necessitates time as a non-universal constant, merely one dimension of a four-dimensional reality, and the findings of special relativity (that an object’s perceived motion through time depends on the relative frame of reference of the observer) suggests that past and future are subjective for each observer.

If one looks into what ‘past’ and ‘future’ actually are, it becomes evident that there is no clear definition. In practical terms, people use the language of time to describe chronology. Something that

¹ This quote is not found directly in any of Confucius’s primary texts, but the sentiment aligns with Confucian principles.

² Greene, B. (2003). *The elegant universe*. New York: W.W. Norton.

has already happened is in the past, and something that is going to happen is in the future. However, with the introduction of philosophical thought and the findings of physics, time becomes a much more abstract and difficult concept to deal with. Indeed, time is already a controversial subject. A non-divisive way of defining time may be as a description of changes made to a singular, monistic reality. Past, therefore, could be described as any change to reality which has previously been observed. If this is the case, then our present is the state of reality from the same observer's 'current' perspective. The future could therefore be described as all the *potential* changes that can be made to reality. However, due to modern understanding of special relativity, these tenses, equivalent to 'states' of reality, do not appear to be the same for any observer at a given moment. Once again, the issue of variance within time crops up. With this, it is important to review ideas of what change is.

Aristotle felt that change was merely the actualization of potential, similar to the above description of future. Each object has a potential form, and any such object must, at some point, actualise its potential to take this form. As an example, an acorn has the potential to be an oak tree, so it therefore has impetus to grow into an oak tree.³ This 'growing' is the acorn actualising its potential to be an oak tree, or in other words, changing into an oak tree. Of course, if current models of our universe are accurate, then every object inside of it has potential to take infinitely many forms, but simultaneously must homogenise into one singularity. Furthermore, if one brings special relativity back into the equation, two different observers may see an object at two distinct stages of actualizing its true form. Taking once again the metaphor of an acorn, one observer standing directly in front of the acorn may wait for 10 years to see it grow into a young oak tree. A similar observer may circle the acorn at 99.9% of the speed of light at the same time, and after only 10 years from the perspective of this lightspeed traveller, they will see a tree that is not 10 years old, but rather 224 years old.⁴ For both observers, they have aged 10 years, but the tree has aged significantly more for the one in motion. For two different observers, time appears differently, and subjectivity as an issue appears again.

³ www.rep.routledge.com. (n.d.). *Motion - Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. [online] Available at: <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/motion/v-1>.

⁴ These calculations are based on an acorn on planet earth.

Parmenides, a philosopher from which Aristotle took much inspiration, held that motion roots purely from the appearance of one, single reality (Being), thus giving rise to his principle, 'all is one'.⁵ This principle understands reality to be constant, and any changes made are merely a perceived difference that originates from a change in perspective. This aligns well with those ideas put forth by special relativity, such that an object's motion through time appears differently depending on the frame of reference. Furthermore, if one looks at reality as a whole and assigns it a more conceptual role in metaphysics, it does not necessitate substance monism. We can have object distinction, as 'reality' simply becomes something in which everything exists. Even with an approach similar to that of Dean Zimmerman (that there is a singular privileged frame of reference)⁶ one could argue that the perceiving of change does not necessitate the existence of change. Just as a person does not intrinsically change as you view them from a different angle, reality remains the same from a different perspective, and thus every frame of reference becomes privileged.

Following Parmenides's approach to change, one begins to see that it becomes at most a descriptor of position, and thus why the tenses such as past and future are also unlikely to be physical aspects of reality. Any physical change to reality requires that something comes from nothing, and the law of conservation of energy (or basic intuition) already eliminates the possibility of such. This leads us to a conclusion that change is necessarily conceptual. By continuing this assumption⁷ we can rule out the possibility of a physical past, present and future due to their previously established dependence on change. A real timeline implies that there is real change (the passing of time). For this reason, one should take time to be a description of position rather than change, upon which an observer's perspective of reality is dependent. Everyday linguistic usage of tensed time becomes, at most, a tool to enable a human brain to perceive the reality within which it resides.

Having established the non-existence of the tenses, and that time describes a state of perspective, numerous questions may arise. One might ask how this can reveal the extent to which the past can guide the future. However, if the tenses are non-existent then they are of equal nothingness, and

⁵ Encyclopedia Britannica. (n.d.). *Parmenides* | *Greek philosopher*. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Parmenides-Greek-philosopher>.

⁶ Callender, C. (2011). *The Oxford handbook of philosophy of time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Cop.

⁷ Assumption is necessary due to the difficulties human minds face when attempting to understand time.

therefore one's considerations of the tenses should be of equal footing. A person should neither focus on the past over the present, the present over the future, or the future over the past. Additionally, due to a physically untensed time, the tenses cannot have any relevance with each other or reality, and this question becomes, in itself, trivial. The notion of reality as one induces a different question entirely. That is the question of free will, a necessary component of any discussions of time. If we take a view of reality that it is constant and unchanged, and thereby past and future do not exist in any physical sense, then any universe which is not deterministic is incompatible with our model for reality. For most, this deterministic universe lacks meaning, and reality exists as nothing more than a continuum of absurdity (an idea first formulated by Albert Camus in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*⁸). With this approach, the harsh incompatibility of the human will to live with the intrinsic lack of meaning in life is inconsolable.

The conclusion that arises from previously discussed ideas does not answer any question of how the past guides the future, because it instead nullifies the reason for the question in the first place. Since our reality lacks meaning, the human drive to better the future becomes a futile effort. The necessity of materialism created by such ideas implies that death is the total annihilation of the mind, and that life serves as nothing more than the path of least resistance to that inevitable end. When one asks the question, 'how can the past be a good guide to the future,' the only possible response is that the question is itself irrelevant, because existence is pointless. There is no way to reconcile the one inevitability of reality – death – with any form of optimism and attempts to do such will always be ineffective. The non-existence of time should, to any sensible person, incur a sense of doom, and this tragic way of existence is inescapable.

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⁸ Camus, A. (1942). *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Éditions Gallimard.

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