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## IN AND OUT OF THE STREAM

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by  
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What is the present? What do we actually mean when we say now? Is there in fact a 'now' that we can mean? Or is now a purely imaginary point on the scale of time, where past shades impenetrably into future as darkness into light: a kind of temporal equator, our 'individual' lives being one-way tickets to some extraordinary kind of cosmic circus-act? With Old Father Time a tightrope walker on - nothing!

It is interesting to notice here how often we use the word 'now' in precisely this dismissive sort of way, as when we say to ourselves with relief on the completion of some difficult or onerous task, "Now I have finished!" apparently quite oblivious to the fact that the precise instant in time that this notion of finishing crossed our minds is actually 'now' in the past. "Now I had finished would surely be a more accurate description of what happened, wouldn't it, if you can say it without wincing? Which brings to light the further point that what we mean by now as against what the clock means is not some Newtonian fixed point on a universal time-scale, the same for everyone everywhere. This, from the point of view of our ordinary experience, belongs, along with Kant's elusive Ding an

Sich, to the airy realm of the Unknowable. For our personal nows are, as physicist David Bohm (1) has recently pointed out, strictly relevant to our individual time-sense. Watching that Derby winner romp home or making love well are both instances where Time did the seemingly impossible and, in the words of the song, Stood still. Our lives are lived along personal time-lines, "passing shadows" thrown up by the image-making mind against the mysterious backdrop of its timeless ground.

All right, you are saying, if you've managed to bear with me this far, enough of this hair-splitting nonsense. I feel in my bones I knew what the present is, and I'm quite content to leave it to would-be philosophers such as yourself to waste time arguing about it. Particularly when after all that high falutin' razz matazz you come up with the fool answer that the now is merely specious, another illusion of perception like the sun 'sinking' below the horizon.

You could just be right, you know. Perhaps, in spite of what these clever philosophers say, this immediate present is every bit as real as it seems to be and it is time that is the

Grand Illusion here. But do you really know you are right, to the point of living that knowledge? Or are you, like the rest of us, continually taking thought for the morrow and all those past morrows irretrievably caught up in your 'time-binding' span of self-conscious attention to the almost total exclusion of the here-and-now?

To try and answer that question let's go into it a bit more closely. When we do begin to reflect upon this extraordinary business of conscious experience that we all take so much for granted, we begin to realise that what we call the 'present' is simply a convenient shorthand term for our total consciousness at any one moment. Which, if we pause to consider it, is something much more than whatever it is that we happen to be thinking about at the time. Just now, for instance, my mind has involuntarily 'selected out' a surprising number of variables from its environment, quite apart, that is from, the chain of thoughts, feelings, and images rattling away inside for the purposes of this essay. If I were to try to list a few of them, I might get something like this: the chatter of distant birdsong, the play of sunlight on the grass outside the window at which I'm sitting, a certain feeling of stiffness in my left (writing) hand, the acrid after taste of the Continental Blend coffee I have just been drinking - all this tempered by the deep felt sense that these peripheral goings-on are actually taking place against a background of darkness and silence. If at this point you wish to protest that much of this is sub- (or even perhaps super-) conscious rather than strictly conscious, I am not

inclined to disagree with you. All I do know is that I could tell you quite unequivocally if challenged whether or not the birdsong, for example, had ceased during the moment I was engaged in writing this down. Anyway I've had to set out on a line a fair chunk of symbols here to try and get across to you something of the flavour of my 'moment', haven't I? And there could be more! As such they serve to represent, however crudely, a considerable variety of happenings that my total mind has somehow managed to pick up from its general field of operations. So, is that what is going on now? Or should I say, rather, in the continuous succession of nows that follow one another with such lightning rapidity that they give one this curious sense of passing time, rather as the rapidly juxtaposed succession of stills on a movie-reel create an impression of movement (bearing in mind, of course, that writing them down here as I have just attempted to do, strung out neatly in a line, does violence to their simultaneity)? If as I still have to ask, if this inquiry is to have any pretension to truth, what it IS apart from what I, or anyone else chooses to **say** it is. To explain why necessitates a short sojourn into semantics, that branch of linguistics concerned with the relationship between language and reality.

The first thing that has to be realised here is that the symbol is **never** the thing it symbolises. This simple fact is at once the most obvious thing about language, if you take two minutes to think about it, yet the most frequently overlooked. It is only to say that the map is never the territory, you don't eat the 'sign'

FISH & CHIPS this side of a mental hospital. It follows directly from this that none of the words in the above description of my personal 'now-moment' are the events they can only describe. Nor, on the same count, are any other words or images whatsoever, including of course the **word** event. Words, and all the other various kinds of symbol we human beings use in order to communicate with one another, do however serve as useful pointers to things, and to what different things have in common with one another. Here am I sitting at this 'desk' for example. Now although my particular desk is not identical with the desk designed by Thomas Chippendale at the Victoria and Albert Museum (unfortunately!), it does have a sufficient number of characteristics in common with other similar articles of furniture - flat top, appropriate writing-height, drawers below with sufficient space between them for the knees, etc. ? for most English-speaking peoples to know what I'm talking about when I use that word. It goes without saying that class-terms such as 'desk' necessarily miss out innumerable other characteristics possessed by my particular desk, the severe dent to the left-hand corner of the top, as it jammed getting into the doorway, being just one.

So it would appear then from the foregoing that these precious symbols of ours upon which we place such heavy reliance have a further serious defect, built into them as it were. Apart from never being able to tell us what anything is except in terms of other symbols (like the words in any dictionaries!), they never tell us everything about

anything. In other words symbols always **abstract** from reality. They always leave something out. Not the least of which being the very thing they point to! Furthermore they generally do this from a direct 'sensation-level' of abstracting - Adam had first to pluck the apple from the Tree of Knowledge and **taste** it! Of course the more different kinds as objects we seek to include under any umbrella term - as when we go on to talk about desks as 'property' - the higher the level of abstracting the more we have to leave out in the interests of inclusion. Which all boils down to the fact that, if you really want to know what anything is apart from its image, you have to take the trouble to look at it as directly as possible. Actually experience it for yourself, get the feel of it, warts and all, at the lowest level of abstraction. (Which incidentally is where you are living, as embodied spirit, all the time). Remembering all the while that even the purest, most direct sensation is still a function of your human nervous-system. Never the last word.

Now if this is true, and I think it is, what becomes of my attempt at describing a moment? If you were to try playing me at my own game, you might come up with something like this: your present, as outlined above, seems to consist of various sensations and feelings that are not themselves words at all. Fair enough, touche! Indeed, you might care to add while you're about it, no verbal symbols - apart from Chinese ideograms and suchlike, or words imitative of sounds such as 'hiss' - bear any kind of structural resemblance to what is 'out there'. Does

this imply, then, that all our immediate (unmediated) experience is void? Niente! based on nothing at all like Old Father Time in the tightrope act?

Not quite, you may be relieved to hear for, however irrational it may be, there is something shivery about even the **idea** of total annihilation. One sufficiently sharp kick in the butt should be enough to jerk even the most dedicated philosopher of language out of that zany piece of logic. A moment's honest reflection would reveal to him that this, admittedly somewhat mundane, aspect of his experience is as 'real' as any other this side of heaven. Real in the most fundamental sense of that word: actual. And also (if he will but persist with his inquiry) utterly fresh and uncontaminated before his tired old mind got hold of it and he said, "Oww-!" Nonetheless it is also undoubtedly true that even our most direct sensations, purely by virtue of their very immediacy, are semantically empty **prior** to meaning which always involves recognition. And recognition is itself a function of time and memory, whether it be merely fractional - suddenly picking out that face in a crowd - or the ultimate fruit of years of painstaking study spent in unravelling the key to some ancient piece of hieroglyphics. For meaning or significance, at least as generally understood, always involves a 'moaner', an interpreter who is seeking to understand whatever it is that he has separated himself off for the purpose, anxiously peering in at life through his rear-view mirror of knowledge - and hence forever chasing his own tail! Nevertheless,

and this is the point I am labouring here, the symbols or images his mind throws up in the process are themselves as much part of the whole jazz, the universal 'goings-on', as the deep, dark, void from which they continually arise and to which they always return, if we look carefully enough. As such one could say that our alternating perceptions of image and emptiness, form and space are closely analogous to our perception of light (which is a pulse) as light **and** dark, day and night. Our perception of separate 'things' is always by contrast.

This being so, wouldn't it be more realistic to acknowledge the paradoxical nature of this stream of time, in which we struggle so hard to keep afloat, in the way in which we talk about it to ourselves? I use that overworked word 'paradoxical' advisedly here, for how on earth can these elusive now-moments of which it is composed be both streamlike **and** still, wavelike and solid, like those wave/particles or wavicles that are the thorn in the flesh of modern physics? Here again two surprisingly different things would appear to be happening according to the standpoint taken up by the observer. So why not re-christen the past, the word we use to indicate to ourselves that what we are talking about is **not** happening, the past-in-the-present? Likewise the future, that other strange creature of our imagination, always pointing back mirrorlike to itself, the future-in-the-present?

Thereby acknowledging to our timebound selves that both the remembered past and the imagined future are, as present psychological events, happening now, in this infinitely

mysterious now of present experience. Which, let me hasten to add, is nonetheless real for that. And which, furthermore if we are religiously inclined, we promptly turn into an idea: 'Before Abraham was I AM', (2), a transcendent Godhead to be worshipped or a spiritual aim, an 'omega point', to be achieved sometime in the future requiring of us some special kind of effort. Failing to realise that these heroic attempts of ours to pay attention, to ordinary attention, are as absurd and superfluous as trying to put legs on a snake. This kind of moral confusion, the fruit of an inverted spiritual pride (salvation must be earned) only arises when we forget that the past, with all its powerful associations, is simply an echo of a living, changing reality like the wake left by a ship, (3) and the future, upon which we set so much store, a useful predictive tool like the weather forecast. Neither, for all our overweeming attachment to symbols, being the weather which, because it is always subject to change, can never be captured by images of any kind. Better try catching the wind in a bag.

In sum then, what I have been trying to say is that the present, the immediate content of our experience, is void of meaning for it can never point away from itself. It doesn't 'mean' anything since, by virtue of its very being or suchness, it is meaning. It is always unique, a cosmic 'one-off' as it were, focused on the individual consciousness here-

and-now, at this very moment. Thus you are IT, and IT is constant change since, as has been said long ago, we never step into the same river twice. As such the present obstinately defies all our vain attempts at symbolisation - while this ink is still wet, i.e. everything has changed! It can't be fixed conceptually, as sensation, image, idea or even the mystical sense of 'timelessness', since it is at once all of these and none of these is constant flux. To put it another way, it doesn't mean anything apart from what it is. Not in some weird and high falutin' metaphysical sense, but as a matter of direct, moment-to-moment, observation in which the 'now' is clearly seen to be self-referential, 'a lamp unto itself'. Neither, on the very same count, can it be said to nothing, to be meaningless. For this, by venturing to say too little, would still be to say too much. Perhaps even to say it is meaning, as I have just done above, is to overstretch that word to the point of incomprehensibility as when one says Everything is White.

So better to remain silent along with Wittgenstein about 'that whereof one cannot speak', bearing in mind that, in spite of the famous jibe to the contrary by a so-called positivist critic (4), that one is being silent about **something**. Bit late in the day for that, do you say? But be careful here. For the gut-feeling of this eternal present, as against the idea of it, may well blow your mind.

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## References

- 1) ABOUT TIME - David Bohm: 'Memory, Anxiety and the Infinite Order' (Jonathan Cape London 1985)

- 2) HOLY BIBLE - 'Gospel according to John' (rev. auth. version)  
(Samuel Bagster London 1982)
  - 3) TIME - Alan Watts: 'The Essence of Alan Watts', et al. (Celestial  
Arts Millbrae Cal. 1974)
  - 4) 'Otto Neurath'
  - 5) TRACTACABUS LOGICO PHILISOPHICUS - Ludwig Wittgenstein  
(Routledge & Kegan Paul London 1961)
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## CROSS CULTURAL COMMUNICATION WORKSHOP 1986

### A Glimpse behind the Curtain

Szeged is a town in Hungary two hours or so by train south of Budapest. It lies in rich agricultural land where the corn and sunflowers grow freely in the warm summer sunshine. It was the setting for the 1986 Cross Cultural Communication workshop attended by some two hundred people from East and West Europe, the USA and South America. This was the second time the Hungarian Psychological Association had played host to this event organised by Chuck Devonshire of the Center for Cross Cultural Communication, and the warmth of the welcome of the Hungarian people was for me a major factor in the success of the workshop.

It is hard to put into words how exciting and hopeful these events are. Eastern Europe remains something of a mystery to most of us

in the West, and it is hard to understand the daily lives of people who experience such a profoundly different political and social system from ours. I had a real question to answer: would the Person-Centered Approach, being so firmly rooted in western democratic ideals, have any meaning in a decidedly contrasting political and cultural environment? It seemed to me after just a few hours at the workshop as I listened to the difficult and sometimes painful struggle towards understanding, that the Person Centered Approach, although rooted in a particular culture, is not dependent on it. Somehow, the sincere attempts being made by people to communicate with each other on a personal level both highlighted the cultural differences and transcended them. It became clear that peoples' understanding of words like