

The Time and Distance that Language Cannot Configure

by Dwight Holbrook

We distance time, separate it into units, minutes, days, years. And yet, when I wake up in the morning, I am at a loss simply how to separate this day from the previous one or from the night before. At what stage or point in time do I discriminate between the demarcation of this day and the previous? Where is that precise border? Invariably I go to my watch.

And what exactly does that tell me? It gives me measured time, a number in a number system that applies numbers to what I see. Yet how long is any unit of time? We can answer with smaller units -- minutes, seconds. Or we can take subdivisions in such a way that we never get to our destination in time and distance – Zeno’s paradox.

Where does that leave us?

Taking extent of time altogether out of events and the distance between them would seem to leave nature in the condition of being unextended in time, i.e. in a state of instantaneity – something that not even Stephen Hawking’s big bang notion of vertical time would give a hint of sanctioning.¹

Is there a way out?

One approach to an answer adopted in this presentation is to take, as an analogy to the meaning and significance of the instant, the perception of color for the first time, specifically the color that colorblind Mary sees for the first time, according to the scenario of the colorblind Mary thought experiment. In that scenario, Mary is as an expert on color -- color in the abstract, namely the mathematics and physics of it --, even though she herself has never seen any color – until one day. Hence, it is an experience without properties that previous remembered instants of her experience would have enabled her to recognize. Yet she suddenly recognizes what she sees -- color -- even though she lacks a name

¹ S.W. Hawking, “The Beginning of Time” [2018] [www.hawking.org.uk/the-beginning-of-time.html], [2, 4].

for it or a way to compare it with another color. One might translate that difficulty of hers with the way Aristotle speaks of the now: “Again, the ‘now’ which seems to bound the past and future – does it always remain one and the same or is it always other and other? It is hard to say.”²

Using the colorblind Mary experiment as an analogy, the proposal here is that the immediacy of the now exhibits an aspect similar to that of seeing color for the first time, namely that of a time without properties based on comparison and hence without a timeline of before and after.

How does one resolve this contradiction about time and distance – the amorphous now vs. time in an extended sense with its before and after? The proposal here is to take the now, this instant of the now, literally as the starting point, the beginning.