

IMMANUEL KANT'S IDEA OF TIME VS. NORBERT ELIAS' CRITIQUE ON HIS CONCEPTION

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Abstract: In his Critique of Pure Reason, Kant describes time as the formal condition on which all phenomena are based upon. He considers it as a one-dimensional subject, that is not an empirical perception, which is given a priori and nothing else but the form of an inner sense. Elias contradicts this, as he differentiates between a social time and a physical time. He demands an understanding for the relation between time in 'society' and in 'nature'. Elias states that languages (he specifically mentions German) often don't have a word that would be equivalent to the English term "timing". For Elias 'time' is part of the fifth dimension, the dimension of symbols, of experience, of awareness. Only this makes it possible to find out and know what time really is in a social context, a specific synthesis of occurrences, that has to be learned in higher developed societies that are based on the division of labour. Elias mentions 'time', but he states that it's only a synchronisation of positions in the seriatim of events.

Keywords: Kant; Elias; time.

Time as a matter of the internal sense

Immanuel Kant was one of the most influential thinkers in Western Philosophy. He developed a concept of time, which was based on his idea of the internal sense. For Kant time and space are not a necessary combination, as it is in physics, for him time is a formal condition upon which all phenomena are based on (Kant, B 46). In his "Critique of Pure Reason" Kant examines "time" and "space" in two different chapters and hardly ever mentions one expression in the other. In Kant's philosophy we have the problem that he doesn't give a real definition of what time really is. Kant states, that time is given a priori (Kant, B 46) and only in itself the reality of all phenomena is possible (Kant, B 46). So what we see here is that time had always existed and therefore every human knows what time is. When the mentioned phenomena or intuitions just don't happen, time still exists. Time can't be thought away from these phenomena, eventhough we are able to "represent to ourselves time void of phenomena" (Kant, B 46).

Kant characterizes space as a matter of the external sense. The human can recognize what space is by its five senses, even if there are no phenomena in space. The same goes for time, which is also given a priori, but a matter of the internal sense. It is "not an empirical conception, which can be deduced from some experience. For neither coexistence nor succession would be perceived by us, if the representation of time did not exist as a foundation *a priori*" (Kant, B 46). So time can't be experienced, it can't be examined empirically, which brings me to the question of the "why"? He states, that time is given *a priori* but that includes that every human would have the same idea of what time is. That different civilizations and societies could have a

different idea of time, he doesn't take into consideration. The idea, that time has to be learned through the process of socialisation doesn't come to his mind either. "Time is not a discursive, or as it is called, general conception, but a pure form of the sensuous intuition. Different times are merely parts of one and the same time" (Kant, B 47). Here he states, that only one time exists, which is one dimensional (Kant, B 47), and it consists out of many other 'part-times', which of course he doesn't tend to define. The problem with Kant is that he hardly gives any closer definitions, as everything is already given a priori. The concept of time at Kant is based on his idea that the human has an external and an internal sense and time can be only recognized by an internal sense. "Time is nothing else than the form of the internal sense, that is, of the intuitions of self of our internal state. For time can not be any determination of outward phenomena. It has to do neither with shape nor position on the contrary, it determines the relation of representations in our internal state." (Kant, B 49f).

Kant always speaks of an internal sense, internal state, an internal view, but he never says what that really is supposed to be. He states that "space, as the pure form of external intuition, is limited as a condition *a priori* to external phenomena alone" (Kant, B 50), but in the same sentence he brings in, that time is a "condition a priori of all phenomena whatsoever - the immediate condition of all internal (*our souls*¹) and thereby the mediate condition of all external phenomena." (Kant, B 51). I notice here an inconsistency, as first Kant insists that time is a matter of the internal sense, but then he suddenly sees it as a mediate condition of all external phenomena. As space is the matter of the external phenomena, how come that time is it as well? In physics time and space go hand in hand, but if they do in Kant's philosophy as well, how come he has talks about them in separate chapters of his "Critique of Pure Reason" as if they were strictly different conditions that have got nothing to do with each other? Occasionally he relates them, but in general there is a strict separation between space and time.

Time as a gauge of change

When talking about time, the term of "change" always comes up. But what does that really imply? In classical physics (mechanics), time and space go hand in hand and therefore everything else, like speed, velocity, in other words, the change of location of a subject is defined by them. Especially Isaac Newton had quite an impact on the definition of time and space and the correlation of the two. In his *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* he describes time as something absolute, which would flow consistent without any relation to any kind of external subject (Newton, 2007). As this view dominated mathematics and philosophy

¹ The original German edition speaks of "unserer Seelen" (our souls), while the English translation seems to have forgotten about that part of the sentence.

until Einstein's Theory of Relativity was published in 1905, it can be taken for granted that Immanuel Kant also based his concept of time on Newton's idea. He acknowledges time as "not something which subsists of itself, or which inheres in things as an objective determination [...],it would be something real, yet without presenting to any power of perception any real object" (Kant, B 49). So Kant considers time as existing and as something that would also have some content. Time has to be related to something and can't stand alone. In physics this is the relation between time and space, which implicates a matter of change, but in his "Critique of Pure Reason" Kant examines time and space separately.

Immanuel Kant combines the terms of "movement" and "change" though, as he writes that "the conception of change, and with it the conception of motion (as change of place) is only possible through and in the representation of time: that if this representation were not an intuition (internal) a priori, no conception, of whatever kind, could render comprehensible the possibility of change, in other words, of a conjunction of contradictorily opposed predicates in one and the same object, for example, the presence of a thing in a place and the non-presence of the same thing in the same place. It is only in time that it is possible to meet with two contradictorily opposed determinations in one thing, that is, after each other." (Kant, B 48f.). So we can see here, that the change of location is only possible when taking time into consideration as well. It is impossible to be in two places at the same time, but it is possible to be in one place at one time and not being there anymore in the following moment. This also implicates, that time flows constantly without any external influence or a different relation system. This theory by Newton was falsified by Einstein later, but as there is a difference of nearly 100 years between Kant's death and Einstein's publication, it can't be held against Kant, that he never thought about the possibility of time not being absolute.

Norbert Elias critique on Kant's conception of "time" as a matter of limited experiences and possibilities

Norbert Elias criticizes Kant's idea of time given a priori and being a matter of an internal sense that way, that it's a result of his own experience. According to Kant time is given a priori and the humans don't have to learn what time is, while Elias claims that every human has a different perception of time, which has developed over generations. When Kant and Descartes would speak of "experience, they only considered the idea of a single, complete autochthonic unit of a human and not the - over the centuries growing - experiences and thought abilities of a developing humanity" (Elias, 1994, p. 3f). That way, Elias openly attacks the idea of an a priori given time and combines it with the development of civilization. In the matter of a civilizing

process, time has to be developed out of several different factors so that it reaches today's stage and conception.

Immanuel Kant is often criticized that he never left Königsberg and therefore lacks the experience of being in contact with other cultural thoughts and societies (Elias would never speak of 'societies' as such, he would prefer to use the term 'communities', as every 'society' exists out of individual persons, who form a community). So Kant imposes his construction of thoughts on everyone and everything else and takes this as a *pars pro toto* example that is unchangeable, without thinking of the possibility that his hypothesis can be proved valid or not in that way that every human has the same idea of what time is, in the same level of a synthesis, that Kant described as a constant remaining condition of all human experience (Elias, 1994, p. 31). Considering that Elias migrated several times (from Breslau, Germany, which is today's Wrocław, Poland, to France, then to Great Britain, then to Ghana and later on to the Netherlands) it can be taken for granted, that he got in touch with different cultural views and ideas, which also involve different conceptions and ideas of 'time'. Especially the period from 1963 to 1964 - when he stayed at the university in Legon, Ghana - should have given him a completely different view on 'time', as in African countries the dimension of time is perceived in a completely different manner. That way, we have to see, when we take a look at Kant's and Elias' definitions on 'time' that we also have to consider their social and cultural background. Elias brings in, that during Kant's time physics and engineering made huge developments and that this also referred to 'time'. Kant would have "discovered this term on himself as an unskilled form of his own and 'of the human as such' as recognition" (Elias, 1994, p. 31).

Lingual insufficiencies

When trying to describe what 'time' is, then of course a language has to be used. So every language has different ways to describe and express 'time' and Elias states, that the substantial version of the word tends to mislead, as the "convention to speak and think in reified terms, can make the recognition of correlations very difficult" (Elias, 1970, p. 73). That way, 'time' as a noun becomes more of a personification of something than a physical or social flow. As Elias' mother tongue was German (just like Kant's), he specifically mentions the lack of a word called 'zeiten' (Elias, 1994, p. 8) in that language. It would be an equivalent to the English term 'timing' and would address very clearly, that the meaning of looking at a clock or watch is nothing else, but synchronising two or more following positions (Elias, *ibid.*). Instead of one clear word for that, German offers several expressions like "die Zeit messen" (to measure time), "die Zeit bestimmen" (to set time) or even "die Zeit totschiagen" (to kill time). Especially the last expression shows the problem how insufficient languages can be, as for describing time

and its nature. How can you kill something that will still exist afterwards in your perception? If I am not mistaken, then it is only possible to kill something that won't exist anymore after the act of mortality, so that it is not alive anymore. That way lingual customs just show over and over again, that 'time' is a myth, that exists in a way and can be measured and set by people, but can't be apprehended by the human's senses (Elias, *ibid.*). Elias criticizes Kant here in that way, that he states that it is possible to discuss about the idiosyncratic essence of time over centuries and be the master of mystery, when there is no secret or mystery at all (Elias, 1994, p. 9). For Elias, time is a matter of synchronisation of activities compared to each other or to a certain solid point that it can be measured from and languages are insufficiently equipped with verbs to describe that, so that the essence of time has become a substantive.

Social Time vs. Physical Time

While Kant does not discern between different forms of 'time', Elias introduces a new perspective on time: the difference between 'social time' and 'physical time'. These two terms need to be examined a little bit closer, as both form a synthesis in the way the term 'time' is commonly understood.

Going back to early civilizations, it was the duty of priests and other wise men (there were less women in these positions, as ancient societies were masculine dominated) to set the exact times (plural is intended here) for planting, harvesting and holding celebrations for diverse gods. They observed the course of the sun and the stars and decided by their positioning when the best time would be for all the activities. They set the time in an active way, while the people, who were told by the priests what to do when, were setting the time passively. A calendar developed out of this interaction which, according to Elias, was also an arbitrary construction (Elias, 1994, p. 66). The different time units, like 'year', 'month', 'hour' or 'minute' are standard intervals, which are related to a prior and following position of a changing unit (Elias, *ibid.*). Kant never thought about this development of how 'time' is categorized, he only looked at it from a metaphysic and transcendental point of view. That time units are a necessity for understanding what time is, he left out completely. The problem with these time units is, that somehow they are arbitrary set. It's always a relation to something that defines such a unit. A year is the period the earth needs to circulate around the sun once, a day is that period of 'time' that the earth needs to rotate around its own axis once. I assume, that for the simplicity of it, in the early days of mankind a day was defined as the span between sunrise and the following sunrise. That would explain, why the ancient Romans started counting the hours from 6:00 o'clock (now our time) in the morning on. The following 60 minutes were called "first hour". Now this brought up the problem that during the summer the sun rose earlier, while during

winter the sun rose later than the standard time was set. Still the initial hour of the day was defined as “first hour”. I don't want to go further into the details of calendar calculations, but this example shows, that ‘time’ is also a matter of relations, when it comes to declaring and defining what a year or a day is. The early calendar systems of Egypt used the solar year, while the Romans used the lunar year and the discrepancies between these two systems are very significant, as with the sun and the moon they both have a different reference object.

When we take a closer look at the medieval ages and renaissance, then we notice that through Galilei's experiments on the motion of bodies with having the balls dropped from The Leaning Tower of Pisa the phrase of ‘having measured the time’ turns up for the first time (see Galilei in Elias, 1994, p. 84). Prior to Galilei, other physicists and mathematicians had described the relation of mass and distances and time, but they all focussed on speed and velocity and not on time as such. That way, according to Elias, time was split in two different types: a physical and a social time. In a physical way, time “appears as an aspect of the ‘physical nature’, as one of the unchangeable variants, that physicists measure and which play their role in mathematical equilibrations, which are thought as symbolic representatives of nature's ‘laws’” (Elias, 1994, p. 93). So when we take into consideration, that clocks existed during Kant's lifetime already, then I still find it strange that he never mentions something like a physical time. Clocks and nowadays also wrist-watches are nothing but representatives of a physical time, in which a second as its unit is defined the following way: “the duration of 9 192 631 770 periods of the radiation corresponding to the transition between the two hyperfine levels of the ground state of the caesium 133 atom” (BIPM, 1967). Elias defines clocks as an integrative part of a social order, which can't function without them, as social time is a regulator, a modus of human experience, of social events and happenings (Elias, 1994, p. 93). I assume everybody had some experience already how time can regulate social contacts and events, especially when someone was late for an important date or appointment and had to face the consequences of being late. That way physical and social time set up a synthesis, where both interact with each other in human communities. Physicists always define time by velocity and speed though, but the question is: what happens if there is no velocity and no speed? Is time standing still as well? Kant explains it that way, that time is a matter of an internal sense, so that even when everything seems to have come to a standstill, time as such is still progressing. The human experience is telling the individual, that there is a past, present and future, even if any motion around the human has slowed down completely (see Kant, B 47 and B 53). Elias on the other hand says that if everything has come to a standstill you can't speak of time anymore (Elias, 1994, p. 40). So for me the problem lies in the notion of what time is. Even when everything has come to a standstill, the human being recognises that time goes on. When standing inside a room without any motion around, time progresses. It might come to a subjective feeling that time has come to a standstill, but as the earth continues circulating around its own axis and the sun at the same time, physical

time in the relation system of the earth and sun progresses. It's probably this progress that Kant has considered as given a priori. Elias on the other side states that it takes several years to learn what time really is. Children take up to 9 years to learn to understand the complicated mechanisms of time related to their representatives, the clocks and watches. He also finds it amazing that once this process has ended, people tend to forget how complex it was to learn the mechanisms of 'time' (Elias, 1994, p. 120). So time is a process that has to be learned to understand what it means in a society or community and how it regulates the various actions and events. That is what Elias understands under 'social time', the regulation of civil processes. An enquiry of time should not distinguish between 'human' and 'nature', but it should more or less consider it as a whole and assemble it to a 'human in nature' complex (Elias, 1994, p. XV).

On the myth of the "inside world"

As previously mentioned, Kant considers 'time' as a matter of the internal sense, while 'space' is a matter of the external sense. All phenomena which appear to be external, are in space, but they are noticed by the human's senses and therefore they are subjects of our senses and so they "are in time and stand necessarily in relations of time" (Kant, B51). Additionally he mentions, that time "is therefore merely a subjective condition of our (human) intuition [...] and in itself, independently of the mind or subject, is nothing" (Kant, B52). So according to Kant, an a priori given subject, like time and space – let us remain with the topic of 'time' only – can be sensed by the human. Space can definitely be seen or when being in a closed room, also be touched (that is when space is limited to a room with four walls, this kind of space ends with the walls and they can be touched and felt). But 'time' can't be touched or felt, but changes can be noticed, changes that happen within 'time' and therefore time is considered to be real, it's not only an imagination of a process. But every human has a different idea about time and therefore 'time' is not an object, it is a matter of an internal experience, probably also of an internal imagination, and therefore if the sensory awareness is taken away from it, the term of 'time' disappears as well (see Kant, B53f).

Elias criticizes this recognition of Kant that way, that he and his followers consider 'time' as a matter of an arrangement of events in order to follow after each, other, and that this arrangement is internalized in a human as part of its reason, "as an unchangeable attribute of human consciousness or of human existence" (Elias, 1994, p. 101). So the internalization of such arrangements is considered as a kind of "inside world" (*Innenwelt*), which is seen as a strict division from the "outside world" (*Außenwelt*) and a quasi-spatial gap between these two worlds is considered as an individual and collective fantasy at the same time by Elias (Elias, 1994, p. 102). "External" objects (space) would project their image into the humans, whose knowledge

would be the result of this projection, while the humans would project the specific forms of experience of their “internal” intellectual character, ‘spirit’, unchangeable understanding or whatsoever on objects of the outside world. (Elias, 1994, S. 104). ‘Time’ as one of these internal categories would also be projected on objects then. The essence remains dubious, as on what objects time would be projected on. May it be clocks or the course of the sun? Clocks are nothing but representatives of time, but they are not THE time. They can represent physical time, they can represent social time, but they can’t tell what the essence of time really is. The same goes for the course of the sun or the moon. In ancient Egypt the course of the sun was used to determine a year and priests and stargazers set the time for sowing, harvesting and festivities. This is definitely not a matter of an internal sense. These activities definitely do not come from an “inner world”, but they are arranged in a certain order and this order is determined by the course of a related object, may it be the sun or the moon or whatever else.

The symbol of time, time as a symbol

In physics “time” is very often symbolised by a line, the so called timeline or time bar. It starts at a certain point, an arbitrarily set point zero, and continues moving or flowing in one direction. This might be a possible way to pack “time” in some figure, but still it is not “the time”. It’s all based on Newton’s idea of a continuous flowing one directed time and leaves out Einstein’s ideas about the relativity of time completely. Kant also considers time as some kind of line and he states that you can’t think of a line, without drawing it in your imagination (Kant, B 154). So this timeline is some kind of picture of time, a symbol. A symbol can be any kind of sign or action that is uploaded with a special meaning and this meaning has to be uploaded over and over again, otherwise the symbol loses its original content and meaning. With that loss, the symbolic form gets lost and the sign is becoming empty (see Theis, 2008). What makes the human different from animals is that the humans have developed a system of signs and symbols, which can be transported over long distances and even generations, while animals have quite a transfixed system of signs (see Elias, 1991).

When we go back now to the timeline and try to take Einstein’s Theory of Relativity in consideration with trying to draw a line that symbolizes time, then we have a line that keeps constantly changing. Depending on the system we are a part of, the time line and the events that come along on it, keep changing, moving and the “speed” of time differs. This all is a matter of the system we’re a part of and the view in our system from other systems. Kant of course could not know about this, but he states that “time passes not, but in it passes the existence of the changeable. To time, therefore, which is itself unchangeable und permanent, corresponds that which in the phenomenon is unchangeable in existence, that is, substance, and it is only by that

the succession and coexistence of phenomena can be determined in regard of time” (Kant, B 183). So Kant also sees that events can happen at the same time or after each other and when they are not on my time line, then I can still experience them, either directly (e.g. by watching a course through a window, but not being a part of it) or indirectly (e.g. by knowing that at the same time I am far away from it, a course takes place. It's just that I am divided from it by some space).

When Elias speaks of “time”, he states that “‘time’ refers to certain aspects of the continuous flow of events, in the middle of which the humans live and of which they are a part of” (Elias, 1994, p. 40). So without the human being, the essence of time would not exist. The continuous flow of events is essential when speaking about time. As mentioned above, without any motion, without any flow of events, a complete standstill would cause that “time” would not exist either. For Elias the synchronisation of events, the continuous flow of events is an important essence of when trying to explain what time is. He introduces a 5th dimension to the universe, the dimension of symbols. The first three dimensions are limited by space, the fourth dimension (what physicists consider as “time”) is the dimension of events, which follow each other and which are noticed by the humans in time and space, without taking the symbolic character of time into consideration. In this way, the 4th dimension would fulfil the requirements of “time” in a physical, natural way. The 5th dimension, the dimension of symbols, puts the humans in its centre; the humans, who notice the ongoing events in space and time, are the observers of the other four dimensions, which are some kind of orientation guides for them. That way, Elias sees time as a symbol as is multifunctional, a communicative symbol and a character of orientation. The orientation character of time is quite obvious and anyone who has ever been late to an important appointment has already experienced it. That way orientation can also be quite rigid, as it determines quite exactly at what time what events will take place. There are communities, which have a more lenient treatment of time than others. When asking “at what time are we going to meet tomorrow?”, the answer is more likely to sound “in the afternoon” than “at three o'clock”. This example also shows the communicative character of time as a symbol. “Afternoon” stands for a whole time span, it symbolises that period when the sun had crossed the zenith and very slowly starts to set in the West. As a point on the time line, it is not very exact. For being more exact in setting points of time, humans have developed representatives of time: clocks and watches. In the process of civilization, societies tend to change from a more lenient usage to a more rigid one.

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