

# CHILDREN HAVE TIME, ADULTS HAVE WATCHES<sup>i</sup>

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## 1. What's (the) time?

When I first watched this movie only one question came to my mind: what's time? A question worthwhile to try to answer. Hence I am very grateful to the organisers of this conference to allow me to present the first key note that will be a philosophical inspired reflection on “CHANGING TIMES: IMPACTS OF TIME ON FAMILY LIFE”.

I am indeed inclined to know what time is, whether it exists, and if so, how and what it does to people, to adults and parents in regard to themselves and to their children. Also the question whether mankind is determined by time or is able to influence time seems quite interesting.

We would easily agree on the existence of a table or a chair. But on the existence and the qualities of numbers, coincidence or contingency, people's characteristics or time, the debate is far more extensive. When we shift towards immaterial or abstract entities and capacities, we cannot invoke our sensory perception in order to arrive at objectified or even inter-subjective proof and argumentation of their existence. Exactly for this reason, it seems interesting to conduct a simple but generalistic investigation of which I hope it will not disappoint you. When it gives you enough reason for discussion later on I would be very pleased with the result of this modest research. After all, I assume that by the end of my investigation, I will have gathered a minimum of documentation for further reflecting on the theme of the conference.

This rather brief observation is thus my focus. Children and their parents, children and adults differ not only in age, but also in their ontological positions. Parents give birth to their offspring. They offer them life. But how? Parents are by average twenty years older and take care of their children for several, even many years after birth. Children are at least twelve to forty years younger and in many cases they grow up sharing a dwelling with their parents'. They are raised by their parents, their procreators or by other adults. What does this all mean for their relationship and for them?

Where did I conduct my research? In my personal cabinet.... my cabinet in the old Italian meaning of the word – gabinetto: in my small, secluded study. It holds books, objects (often souvenirs), a photo of the great leap forward, of a dance performance on Bach's music and several biographic images. But above all, it is a collection of meaningful objects and words, ordered in books as sources of inspiration. Among these books my life expectations linger, which I prefer to blend with words I read, in order to rewrite them. I consider this rewriting as a variation on the medieval reproduction of texts in scriptoria. Albeit an activity geared more towards copying erratically than reproducing exactly of the already achieved deepest insights of others. My cabinet is situated in Ghent, Flanders, Belgium. All this as a specification of my point of view, which is mainly Eurocentric and genealogically masculin. A broader f.e. more international approach of the same basic material would certainly reveal a lot more and different insights than the ones that will be presented.

## 2. The cosmological time

Can we assume that the universe is an ordered entirety with multiple dimensions including time? It seems to be so. The universe is visually perceivable. The Hubble telescope – which happens to be 25 years of age – sent us magnificent images of the 'cosmos'. Observing the images confirms and thus reinforces the presumption of the existence of the universe as an astronomical order with a temporal dimension. If one wants to learn more about this, they should read the very interesting book by Stephen Hawking and

Leonard Mlodinov 'A Briefer History of Time', which was bought by 1 out of 750 people, which is more than 9.333.333 copies. Doesn't this number bear witness of our fascination with the universe and time?

But why do I still speak in conditional terms? Because cosmological time is still subjected to many scientific question marks. They are related to astrophysical patterns, invented 200 years ago, which do not necessarily fit into each other. Illustrations of this are: 1) the incompatibility of the general theory of relativity which strives for the uttermost certainty and the quantum mechanics with its basal principle of uncertainty, but likewise 2) the extent of the universe and the question whether it expands and continues to do so. However Earth is finite in size, this is not certain for the universe. In other words, whether the cosmological time has a beginning and an end is still uncertain.

The incompleteness of our knowledge about the universe underpins the epistemological problem of the correspondence of our ideas and the matter itself. Because of this theoretical problem we were forced to renounce the reassuring expectation that the idea of something (for example time) can fully correspond to what it is. We have to assume that the world, ourselves, and thus also time, exists partly as human constructions, fed by human observation and human imagination.

As such it appears that the *way* mankind sees the universe, also determines *what* it sees, and thus determines the universe. Ideas also establish matter. But as such, it is also said that matter is *present*, and this in itself is sufficient to assume that it *exists*. Mankind together with numerous creatures live on Earth which is part of our solar system and thus of a greater body of matter, the universe. Mankind can thus observe and translate phenomena into scientific laws, but only because it is a thinking being. Also in cosmology the dimension of time is explicitly present. Without the axis of time, the universe cannot be imagined. A small example:

How do we describe the position of Earth in the known part of the universe? The distance between Earth and the Moon is approximately 1,3 light-seconds. The distance between Earth and the Sun is 8,3 light-minutes. The nearest star besides our sun is at 4,22 light-years distance. The centre of the galaxy is 28 000 light-years away. The diameter of the Milky Way is approximately 100 000 light-years. Without the time-space dimension of light-years, there are no proportions in the universe, or there is no universe in our comprehension of it.

Then may we not conclude that "time is external and internal"? External: all material is part of the universe with a temporal dimension also as the result of our intersubjective observations. Internal: every human being has its own lifetime and therefore its own individual experience of its time. An experience and reflection that can be communicated.

An example of how people consider the universe differently, is the amusing anecdote known as '*Turtles all the way down*'. "The origins of the turtle story are uncertain. It has been recorded since the mid 19th century, and may possibly date to the 18th. One recent version appears in Stephen Hawking's popular history of time.

A well-known scientist (some say it was Bertrand Russell) once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the centre of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: "What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise." The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, "What is the tortoise standing on?" "You're very clever, young man, very clever," said the old lady. "But it's turtles all the way down!"<sup>ii</sup>

The Earth being carried by turtles? Of course this is a childishly naive representation – but also a representation like any other. Certain mathematical representations of cosmic developments that take the shape of an asymptote show a spiral shaped support line which might be a recognisable representation of a future development. Images inspire to ideas and thus support the expansion of knowledge. Knowledge that by its own nature acknowledges with a high probability rate the existence of

time as a cosmic dimension. Because we are capable to construct a cosmos and to communicate about it, we exist. And this leads us to the...

### 3. The chronological time

Chronos (ancient Greek: Χρόνος) is a figure from Greek mythology. He descends from the primary deity Chaos and is usually depicted as an old man with a long grey beard. The main aspects we derive from Chronos, are: measured, linear and continuous time. By measuring and conceptualizing the phenomenon of time, as we can observe by day and night rhythm, the seasons and aging of all living creatures, we uncover it as a human construction, originated from its fascination for time and its tendency to control it. Man is fascinated by the cosmos and time and tries to grasp it.

At the basis of measured time, we have the second. Although it is a global convention, it remains an increasingly scientifically sophisticated agreement. Since 1967, the renowned Efeemeriden-second was replaced by the Atomic Second. And although ever since scientists use an ingenious atomic system for the determination of exactly 1 second, it does not perfectly match a fraction of the rotation of the earth on its own axis. “As the rate of rotation of the Earth constantly changes, it is necessary to occasionally add (or theoretically to subtract) a second during the year to ensure that the atomic timescale Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) stays in synchronization with nature” - another example of the gap between measurement (representation) and reality. A well-known but no less funny example of this is the correction of the calendar by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582 as a reform of the Julian calendar.

By the Julian reckoning, the solar year counted 365 days and 6 hours; the intercalation of a “leap day” every four years was intended to maintain correspondence between the calendar and the seasons. A slight inaccuracy in the measurement (the solar year comprising more precisely 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes, 45.25 seconds) caused the calendar dates of the seasons to regress almost one day per century. Therefore, the Gregorian<sup>iii</sup> calendar obscures eleven days, from October 4th, 1582 until December 14th, 1582.

Can we turn this into a time-wildcard? In their lifetime, anyone has the right to claim 11 Gregorian days when it suits him or her. That is literally time disappearing through your fingers. This property of time – in Latin called *Tempus Fugit*– is a universal experience. It inspired Broodthaers to make the following piece of art.

*Broodthaers project pour un texte.*

The idea of an inexorable ticking clock, which divides our lives from birth until death into tiny seconds, is particularly persistent. Christian Marclay has worked for years on a film that lasts 24 hours and consists of thousands of shots from other movies. These are only fragments in which time, exactly the same time as that to which the film is shown, plays an essential role. That's why this film clarifies the fact that chronological time is a construction of the mind, of society, a summation of seconds as an apparent exactness, infiltrating every aspect of our daily life and customs.

*Cf. Marclay, The Clock from 12.05 to 12.08*

The chronological time has become an inexorable construction, implying the idea that time has a logical course of equal moments of life-time, with equal amounts of energy, attention, aging, some sort of arithmetic sequence of equal moments of increasing energy, and later of decreasing energy... Probably this idea stems from the practicing repetition, which is at the basis of nearly all human skills, of any kind. Childhood is characterized by a precise monitoring of scripts and an implementation of the associated exercises. McCormack, an American psychologist and researcher defines this as follows “This type of representation is intrinsically non-perspectival: it represents the locations of a sequence of events relative to each other.” Children expect the script (of nature) will be followed. “their expectation about what is

going to happen next will be shaped by where they are in the unfolding of the script.” In the daily exercise that lies at the basis of all life, a form of chronic narrowing of consciousness takes place. Thus man exists in circular often closed patterns exercising and exercising. Let me introduce to you our grandson.

*Cf. Julius eats a sandwich*

Therefore, it should not be surprising when the chronic execution of what comprises peoples’ daily life, is a source of fatigue. The chronic fatigue syndrome is an overwhelmingly convincing proof of this. Chronic (as in chronic fatigue syndrome): time as the repetition of the same can be very exhausting. Time cannot be seen as a sum of minutes-of-energy that can be spend equally. Failure of the mind: time is equal to energy and it is a mathematical series. The machine falters, the rhythm changes and fatigue takes over inevitably.

## 4. The lifetime

How old do people become and what is a human eternity? This too is a very difficult question. Methusaleh, the Old Testament patriarch whose life span as recorded in Genesis (5:27), was 969 years; he has survived in legend and tradition as the longest-lived human. Genesis tells nothing about Methusaleh beyond sparse genealogical details: he was the great-great-great-great-grandson of Seth, the child of Adam and Eve begotten more than a century after Cain. He was the father of Lamech and the grandfather of Noah. By the Biblical account he came of hardy stock: all his forebears lived for between 895 and 962 years except for his father, Enoch, who lived to be 365. Thus this mythical story suggest that the idea of becoming very old is as old as man himself?

By the way, the Methusaleh you see here is a tree of 4,841 year old living in California. A Flemish saying goes "Only trees never meet each other". In this case not even a correct saying because Methusaleh stands with several others in a little hidden wood in California. They obviously found each other, and now they have to be protected.

It is hard to believe that people will ever reach the age of 969 years although the average life-span of mankind is the last 200 years rising. What kind of events were at the basis of this evolution?

*Cf. Hans Rosling – Ted Talks,*

Again we are confronted with a version of the world as a construct, with man as an interactive and malleable creature. Life expectancy of mankind is very different, depending on where and when you live and the living circumstances : in Europe (85), US (83) , China (77), Africa (60 to 50). This difference should be proclaimed as a Cosmo-political problem, don’t you agree?

A challenge also to the temporal consciousness. Our ecological responsibility is being extended significantly. Six generations of family members that may know each other live for two centuries and can therefore be held co-responsible for the world they pass on to each other. But what triggers co-responsibility? Knowing and loving your own family maybe? Meet the Vanhees

If I am lucky I will still be alive when Julia will be born. Between the birthday of Jules 1893 and of Julia 2038 there are 145 years. Suppose she will live for 55 years there is a span of more than 200 years in 6 generations.

This enlargement of our life expectation puts our patience to the test, which is however a fading skill or attitude. Is it not again the Giant Turtles that can help us to experience the expression ‘Festina Lente’?

Giant turtles or tortoise live for about 200 years and are the universal symbols of royal slowness. Festina Lente or make haste slowly is their parole. It is even an exercise in having patience to look at these turtles when they move.

Patience (and potable water) is becoming a great and endangered resource. The word itself reveals why this is not so obvious: the word means literally "quality of suffering." Because it is etymologically related to Patientia-which in Latin means "endurance, submission". Michel Serres<sup>iv</sup> showed us rightly so that due to the strong increase in life expectancy from 40 to 85 years, also our sense of time will be profoundly altered. That changes a lot in the relationships between people. He calls this "Hominescence". Two people promising to stay together in marriage in 1800 made a promise for 20 years. Nowadays their promise counts for 60 years. Women can give birth until they are 40 or older, parents have more time to divorce and to form new families, people have more chances to change themselves and assume new habits and learn new skills. This field of learning to live in community is becoming more and more complex but maybe also more and more improbable.

For example when parents have a child with trisomy 21. The life expectancy of trisomy 21 patients (named mongolism, as physical appearances resemble that of Mongolian peoples) has improved drastically in the recent decennia and is now up to 55 years, in contrary to 9 years in 1929. Not less than 14% of trisomy 21 individuals will become 60 years old. Hence, their parents have the risk of not outliving their children, which creates existential fear, briefly stated as: who will take care of my child when I am no longer here?

Therefore, the 21<sup>st</sup> century's challenge will exist of becoming familiar with, and to practice a manifold of different sorts of patience.

1. For instance, in the case of living with people that suffer from conditions referring to acedia or sloth, one of the seven head sins in Catholicism, meaning all forms of spiritual or physical lethargy belonging to the demon of noonday. It can take the form of listlessness, dispersion of thoughts, or being inattentively immersed in useless activity. Our contemporary psychiatry and psychology are not so well acquainted with the passion of despondency. Most contemporary mental health professionals would diagnose a despondent person as having depression. And that's is a problematic simplification.
2. Or in the case of living with people that suffer from slowness of the mind, of the body, of comprehension, all kinds of mental retardation and developmental slowness.
3. Quite some therapeutic activities or recovery from illness or loss of people is demanding time, a lot of (non-productive) and recovery time. Let's not forget that 20% of western children need support or help because they suffer from conditions that can be classified as external of internal behavioural problems as ASS, ADHD, CD...

## 5. Sociological time

Belgians/Flemings spend their time mostly collectively and socially regulated. This is the main conclusion of research on this topic. "Weekdays can be distinguished clearly from weekends and also the day itself is subdivided into clearly distinguishable time slots with a specific activity pattern [...] The normal working hours structure the weekday. Even those who are not active follow the dominant rhythm of the working society." Also watching television, being socially active, sleeping and eating follow a fixed and collective pattern. Sunday or Saturday maintains a specific and relaxing character, nonetheless somehow secularly in correspondence with our society." Despite the alleged rise of the individualisation, individual time spending still sticks to social (natural; eating, sleeping, caring, working) and possibly also to biological standards, what may also be attributed to our inner biological clock. The often announced diversity of a society that never sleeps, is clearly still out of the question. Only working and schooling time are age-related; schooling time is nearly reduced to 1 hour a week and even lower from the age of 30 on. The

sexes are opposite and unequally dividing their time and young mothers tend to be (stay) the victims of our time.

Although these are conclusions concerning time spending of the Flemings, they are probably representative for quite some Central-Europeans. Inhabitants of this part of the world develop a dominant collective living rhythm, in which roughly the most important forms of time spending also seem to be standardized. Very few people develop other rhythms or spend their time in a divergent manner. Without a doubt, this collective behavior comprises an egocentric individualism which is competitive by nature and which leaves very little space for altruism and self-sacrifice. We're together in being too busy, in having less time for each other, and we are being consumed by the constant connectivity with our work and others. But still we spend almost all of our time collectively. One has to produce a tremendous effort in order to spend some time alone. It is not an accident that our contemporary discourse is full of standardizing and standardized statements from the point of view of the organization of society. Maybe we should exercise more loneliness and solitary forms of spending time? But would that make us happy? What makes us, Belgians happy?

So what about time and happiness? Time spending is one of the main issues. The main question is do you have enough free time to spend for yourself? Time pressure (between the age of 25 and 50) causes a 'midlife dip' and diminishes the feeling of being happy. In that case don't try to change drastically your working schedule. The chance that it stresses you more than the timepressure is great. Each individual has to search for a personal equilibrium between working, free, familytime and I like to add solitary time.

## 6. Family time

The latin word *familias*<sup>v</sup> rarely appears in the sense of “parents with their children,” for which *domus* (see domestic (adj.)) was used. *Famulus* include *famula* “serving woman, maid,” *famulitas* “servitude,” *familiaris* “of one's household, private,” and *familiaritas* “close friendship”. Therefore I suggest to enlarge and specify the definition of family to any group of persons closely related by friendship and love, living together whether they are connected by blood, marriage, children or not.

Where does family time stand for?

- Quality time for all the members and perspectives which is not so easy because children are speedboats and grandparents are rowing boats. A lot of young people in speedboats try to accelerate time in order to change things. Older people on the contrary often prefer to status quo or even the restoration of the past.
- Reservoirs of time, especially grandparents and mothers are always offering time
- One of the places where the acceleration of time, the hyper time and the fear of missing out are neutralized.
- The place of training of habits and feelings, of skills and talents
- Family time is often also ritualized time.

The family is indeed the context in which habits are taught and learnt through rites and rhythm. Some moments are being declared 'holy', such as eating together. But this could also be a visit to the museum or cinema. Free Sundays are seen as lazy Sundays, it is the marked and marking time. The rituals as well as the habits can be very unique to a family. Part of the rituals, are a set of planned activities that have each time the same course. Sometimes also the non-planning can be part of the rhythm of living together. Bed rituals are very important for children. Often it is about a moment in time, but at the same time it brings an easeful regularity into the life of children.

These photographs show young people smoking. When I was young a lot of us learned to smoke from the age of 10. The same with drinking alcohol and eating sugar, watching TV or screens, communicating violently.... In family life the difference in between healthy and unhealthy or permitted and non-permitted

can be very vague. Hence the many examples of child abuse with lifelong consequences for the children. In Flanders “intra-familial” or domestic violence is by far the most frequent when children are the victims.

But it is also the place where children and parents learn to play.

Miloš Tomić is an artist from Belgrade, born in 1976. He finished graduate studies of animation in Prague, at Famu, in the class of Petar Skala. Was a guest student in Madrid and Berlin. He is an interesting artist who creates music in a playful way in the ordinary. Observe the playful dialogue he conducts with his son. “I don't know to play but it is my unfulfilled wish, so I will do my best to "communicate" with some instrument or object every day in order to make some kind of music, through relaxing and making noise, searching for melodies.” Observe the playful dialogue he conducts with his son.

## 7. Existential time

The time of coming to light, to arise, to begin, of being born, of the *statu nascendi* (Hanna Arendt) of making choices about life: profession, partner, children, creativity, retirement,

And how to deal with our peculiarities? What are these? The next lady offers an exquisite example of how to live and deal with one's existential peculiarities.

Temple Grandin is an autistic woman who overcame the limitations imposed on her by her condition (ASS) to become a prof. and an expert in the field of animal husbandry. She developed an interest in cattle early in life while spending time at her Aunt and Uncle's ranch. She did not speak until age four and had difficulty right through high school, mostly in dealing with people. Her mother was very supportive as were some of her teachers. She is noted for creating her 'hug box' or the squeeze machine, widely recognized today as a way of relieving stress in autistic children. Today, she is a professor at Colorado State University and well-known speaker on autism and animal handling.

We also watched a fine example of inner time, so called duration.

It is Henri Bergson who developed the notion of duration in the philosophical sense. A simple definition refers to the inner time and especially the subjective human sense of time passing, as well within as outside. What is duration within us ? A qualitative multiplicity, with no likeness to number; an organic evolution which is yet not an increasing quantity. What duration is there existing outside us? The present only, or, if we prefer the expression, simultaneity. Thus in consciousness we find states which succeed, without being distinguished from one another; and in space simultaneities which, without succeeding, are distinguished from one another. As described, the subject gives meaning to the duration. No-one can deny this act. No-one can deny the subject the responsibility to feel when the moment has arrived to be itself. And this brings us to Kairos.

Kairos, again a Greek God, is pictured naked and bald, with exception of a lock of hair on his forehead. It signifies that one can seize a chance when one sees it coming beforehand, but once it has passed, there's no way to bring it back. Like [Hermes](#) he is often pictured with wings on his feet, because the opportunity passes fast. Kairos is actually the 'right' moment, it is the intuition of the right moments in life to make choices, to act, to speak, to create or on the contrary not to.

*Cf. David Claerbout, Belgian artist*

Kindergarten Antonio Sant'Elia, 1932' is the last in a series of five, in which the element wind among the leaves is played out against a still life. A picture of the opening of a new kindergarten named [Antonio Sant'Elia](#) in Como 1932. We see the children play in a functional garden (created by architect Giuseppe Terragni) and two young trees. The light is cold and the sun seems to hang low, which creates shadows and a cold impression. The image of the children floats between a spontaneous snapshot and a staged photograph. The movement of the young trees at same time freeze the image and melt further in motion, whereby it never chooses a certain direction.

### *After all*

What did I notice watching this movie time after time?

Time belongs in our mind to the cosmic matter and therefore exists in every one of us. The anthropocentric and ratiocentric constructed reality is mainly based on the life span of generations, more precisely 6 in more than 200 years, that are able to know each other. In the last 200 years, time has been perceived more and more as a chronological entity, as a countdown to the next deadline, which is tomorrow. That is why we rush from one exercise and script to another and risk to become behavioural automated. Sociological studies confirm this. We have a strong tendency to collectivism. Individualism is embedded in socially and collective behaviour. Although mankind has lots of opportunities and responsibilities to make choices, that include its own subjective preferences and personal existential reflections. Mankind is after all a thinking and reflective species. In his ability to reflect on its own nature, past and future, it is a species that can reach for freedom. Time is one of the existential and ontological dimensions, that ask for reflection and forces us to make choices. Because it reveals a lot of different perspectives and possibilities for spending it, it can be seen as one of the main levers or triggers of existence.

Thank you very much for your attention,

Berlin, 23 rd June 2015  
Jean Pierre Vanhee

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<sup>i</sup> Many thanks to Philip Stenssens Elsie Verbist and Inge Gelaude, who helped me substantially with the text and the ppt

<sup>ii</sup> —Hawking, 1988[1]”

<sup>iii</sup> Although this regression had amounted to 14 days by Pope Gregory’s time, he based his reform on restoration of the vernal equinox, then falling on March 11, to the date (March 21) it had in ad 325, the time of the Council of Nicaea, and not on the date of the equinox at the time of the birth of Christ, when it fell on March 25. The change was effected by advancing the calendar 10 days after Oct. 4, 1582, the day following being reckoned as October 15.)

<sup>iv</sup> French philosopher, 1930 Agen

<sup>v</sup> [http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=family&searchmode=none](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=family&searchmode=none)