

Temporality and Human Experience: Intersections between Dōgen and Kant

Robert J. Sherman
Columbia College, MO

“Life is borne along by the passage of time, hardly to be kept even a moment.”

– Dōgen

It has often been said that “time flies.” This expression seems aptly understood as a claim that, when we lose track of time, time has somehow slipped passed us. Moreover, it might be said that there is an air of objective validity to such a claim; after all, many of us can report having had such an experience. Such as these experiences are there is revealed something fascinating about our phenomenal claim of time’s flight.

By way of a synthesis using Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and Dōgen Zenji’s *Shōbōgenzō* I will sketch an argument that *time is not the kind of thing that flies, but that it is mind that flies*. This sketch will reveal that both Kant and Dōgen’s seemingly disparate projects offer some very similar and complimentary insights into time and our encounter with it. From Kant, we will be able to understand where the notion of time’s flight arises; from Dōgen, we will find that there is something more to time than mere flight and that our cognitive process may well mislead our understanding of the nature of things. The resulting synthesis demonstrates that cognition produces the notion of time’s movement and thus how this process interferes with our understanding of things.

I will begin with some highlights of these disparate projects that support a claim that synthesis is viable. Secondly, I will address the common sense phrase that states something is *in* time. I will assert that this statement is not quite as precise as we might think, as both Kant and Dōgen indicate. Third, I will address the notion that time and being are inextricably intertwined I will then address Kant’s explication of time as *quanta continua*, or continuous magnitudes, and Dōgen’s assertion that time is “taking place.” Finally, I will offer a response to the potential objection that Kant and Dōgen view time in contrasting ways, such that these views irreparably disrupt any possible synthesis.

Kant and Dōgen

Kant and Dōgen frame their respective projects as responses to previous epistemological and metaphysical claims, both setting out to realign the thinking of their predecessors. These men take up arguments rejecting idealism and particular forms of dualism; i.e., mind-body and impermanence-permanence. The view that synthesis is viable is demonstrated by manifold similarities between the projects. Both make quite clear the distinction between the nature of objects and our perceptions of those objects (as *noumena* distinct from *phenomena*). Both assert that time and space ground our experiences, making them inseparable from being; both hold that the phenomenal experience of time is encountered through change, alteration, or mutability and movement of objects.

In their own ways, both express time (like space) as a substratum, as things appear to be situated within it. Kant places time within the context of mind, derived as durational from our encounter with motion and change. Kant never claims that time is strictly in our heads, but *our use of it* is: time is an *a priori* inner sense, a pure intuition, grounding all possibility of experience. Time is persistent, a substratum underlying all appearances as grounds for objects of possible experience.¹

What is of interest for Dōgen is not the *in, at, or how long* of time, but rather the *taking place* of time, the way in which things are— non-static, non-persistent, and mutable.² Dōgen says time is being, understood correlatively: being is also time. Dōgen sees time bound up in being in such a way that to separate them would be false dualism. All being is impermanent and non-abiding, so time, as a substratum, is not extended in such a way that anything could ever persist in it. Furthermore, he says that to understand time only as *flow*, is merely partial and derivative, because time is not to be taken as static or lifeless, or even strictly persistent.³

¹ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

² M. Abe, *A Study of Dōgen: His Philosophy and Religion*. (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 69-105.

³ J. Stambaugh, *Impermanence is Buddha-Nature: Dōgen's Understanding of Temporality*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989).

The *Being In* of Time

Our language is often filled with imprecise expressions; consider that both of these philosophers speak of objects as *being in* time. Objects are not *in* time, per se. We might think of these expressions much in the way we think of the imprecise nature of the expression “I am *in* bed.” One is not *in* bed as much as she is *on* a bed; we understand that the expression merely implies the relationship of bed to her person. In a similar way, objects are not precisely *in* time; time is rather a substratum in which all possible experiences can occur. Time and being are inseparable, interconnected. Therefore, what is expressed is a necessary, albeit relative temporal relation between objects and time.

Dōgen makes clear that time is not extended such that anything could ever reside *in* it, because no-thing persists in any unchanging way, such as time’s having extension would allow. Kant treats time as the ordering principle grounding all possible experience. In this way, encounters with objects are ordered temporally (and spatially) by way of synthesis – thus not precisely *in* time, but ordered according to successive intuition. Such statements indicate that objects are not precisely *in* time— but if this is so, then the question of interrelation must be explored.

Time Entangled

While Kant and Dōgen express the relationship between being and time in different ways, they agree on two important points: first, that time is inextricable from being, and second, that if time were substantial it would be beyond our ability to know anything of it, as a thing-in-itself.

Kant is concerned with human experience, and therefore speaks of time only insofar as it grounds the possibility of experience, as an *a priori* inner intuition or ordering principle. “Time is therefore given *a priori*. In it alone is all actuality of appearance possible. The latter could all disappear, but time itself (as the universal condition of their possibility) cannot be removed.”⁴ As Kant clearly states, “Time is not discursive [...], but a pure form of sensible intuition.”⁵ Time in itself, from Kant’s perspective, would not provide

⁴ *Critique*, Op. Cit., p. 178.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

any phenomenal experience absent objects of perception. Furthermore, Kant states, “[F]or time itself does not alter, but only something that is within time.”⁶

Kant views time as indirectly experienced and as the immovable pole that provides intelligibility to a world in flux. He does claim that our encounter with time comes by way of appearances and their alteration; hence, time is not a predicate of objects.⁷ Kant never denies that time is necessarily real, although he alludes to time as substance.

Dōgen, in contrast, views time (like being) as concrete. He states that whatever happens or exists does not do so *in time*, but rather *is* time. In *Uji*, he states that “so-called time of being means time is already being; all being is time,” and that “time, just as it is, is being, and being is all time.”⁸ Dōgen is not making claims of identity between time and being; rather, he establishing an inextricable relation them. Abe writes, “Their common denominator is mutability, or impermanence. For Dōgen all beings without exception are impermanent[.]”⁹ One translation of *Uji* offers this explanation of the necessary relationship between being and time:

There must be time in oneself. Since oneself exists, time cannot leave. If time is not the appearances of going and coming, the time of climbing a mountain is the immediate present of being time. If time preserves the appearances of going and coming, there is in oneself the immediate present of being time – this is being time.¹⁰

From Dōgen’s perspective, to separate existence and time would be false dualism: time is being, time is existence, and being is existence. Abe encapsulates Dōgen’s thought when he writes, “[t]here is no time apart from the mutability of being or appearance-disappearance of things in the universe.”¹¹ For Dōgen, then, “[t]ime is the taking place of all being ... it is the way they are – neither static, nor persistent.”¹² In this way he fosters the inextricable relationship of being-time without dualism.

⁶ Ibid., p. 184.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 178-84.

⁸ Z. Dōgen, “Uji,” *Shōbōgenzō: Zen Essays by Dōgen*. Tr. Thomas Cleary. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991): 102-9.

⁹ Abe, Op. Cit., p. 70.

¹⁰ Dōgen, Op. Cit., p. 105.

¹¹ Abe, Op. Cit., p. 70.

¹² Ibid.

Just as both Kant and Dōgen agree that time is inextricable from being, they also agree that we can never know the thing-in-itself, which entails that we are unable to know the substance of time. Kant expresses his understanding of *ding-an-sich* thus: “Nature is the existence of things, so far as it is determined according to universal laws. Should nature signify the existence of things in themselves, we could never cognize it either *a priori* or *a posteriori*” and “the object in itself always remains unknown.”¹³

Examples of Dōgen’s understanding of things-in-themselves can be found in many fascicles, including the *Immo* and *Hosshō*:

The descriptions by which things are defined, and even the experience of things, depends on the mind, and are not the supposed things in themselves. Thus that nature of things in themselves is said to be inconceivable, beyond description, or “empty.”¹⁴

[T]he product of the mind is not things in themselves but the subjective description. It is this description which separates subject and object and interferes with pure awareness of being as such.¹⁵

Things-in-themselves are beyond perception and description. Dōgen’s position, like Kant’s, is that our phenomenal encounters with things in the world are products of the mind and never encounters with things-in-themselves. Unlike Kant, however, Dōgen conceives of time as something more than intuition and his concern is with the *taking place* of time. For both Kant and Dōgen *being is becoming*, an ever changing existence. Therefore, that which exists is always changing, moving, or altering (i.e., mind is always-already synthesizing). In this way, both projects establish a necessary interconnection between being and time.

Flow of Time

With the interrelated nature of time and being established, the question of time’s flow can be explored. From this exploration we will see that Kant’s conception of time aids

¹³ I. Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Translator P. Carus, revised by J. Ellington. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001): 35-46.

¹⁴ Z. Dōgen, “Hosshō,” in Cleary, pp. 36-42.

¹⁵ Z. Dōgen, “Immo,” in Cleary, pp. 47-56.

in our understanding of the notion that “time flies” by explaining our experience of it as linear. Through Dōgen we can grasp that this conception misses something important, as a linear view of time is incomplete. For time to “fly” would mean that a temporal stream is forever rushing past us; in Dōgen’s assessment, while this is experientially true, it is an ontologically misleading account.

Kant’s presentation of magnitudes as *quanta continua* in the Analogies leads us to understand that through our cognitive process, where appearances in time and space are concerned we cannot help but perceive flow:¹⁶

The property of magnitudes on account of which no part of them is the smallest (no part is simple) is called their continuity. Space and time are *quanta continua*, because no part of them can be given except as enclosed between boundaries (points and instants), thus only in such a way that this part is again a space or a time.¹⁷

Magnitudes of this sort can also be called flowing, since the synthesis (of the productive imagination) in their generation is a progress in time, the continuity of which is customarily designated by the expression “flowing” (“elapsing”). All appearances whatsoever are accordingly continuous magnitudes, either in their intuition, as extensive magnitudes, or in their mere perception (sensation and thus reality), as intensive ones.¹⁸

Time is thus described as an infinite magnitude that is infinitely divisible, such that “[d]ifferent times are only parts of one and the same time.”¹⁹ Time, for Kant, is divided into instants and points synthesized into a whole; in this way, time is, at least intuitionally, continuous. As Kant writes, “[d]ifferent times are not simultaneous, but successive,” and further, “all change is only the division of time.”²⁰ Flow, or change (alteration), transition and movement are synthesized from instants or points, or “times of time,” the results of which present the notion of a flow. Flow, then, is the synthetic product of the productive imagination, or mind.²¹

¹⁶ *Critique*, Op. Cit., pp. 290-2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 179 and footnote, p. 299.

²¹ In fact, it could be argued that the notion that life *becomes* death is achieved through this synthetic process.

Do not think that time merely flies away. Do not see flying away as the only function of time. If time merely flies away, you would be separate from time.²²

On Dōgen's account, the everyday understanding of time is not entirely invalid, but to understand time as merely durational, as a flow, is inaccurate— time is more than this. As he writes in *Uji*, "Only recognizing it as coming and going, no skin bag has seen through it as being time of abiding in position."²³ The problem, says Dōgen, is that if we perceive only the flow of time (and clearly our proclivity is to do just that), then we focus on our experience of time as continuous to the exclusion of its nature as also discontinuous. Each moment in a perceived flow is in fact complete in itself, containing relative to itself past, present and future.²⁴ This is a particular aspect that Kant does not address.

Kant explanation of the synthetic process of time cognition does not give us a full picture of time; as such, it misleads us to think that time is nothing more than a mere flowing. In Dōgen's view, appearances of transition are derived from the synthesis of the instant with another instant; remove the synthesis and the moment stands alone, totally complete. While two rather different perspectives of time as either continuous or discontinuous are apparent here, what is most important is how the common conception of time's flow is reached through our cognitive process.

Conclusion

I set out to sketch several key points of two projects, seeking the possibility of a synthesis that might shed light on claims that time flies. It might be said that Kant alone adequately answers the question, but when we bring Dōgen into the conversation we discover that our conception of time, as flight, is only part of the picture. Upon further examination we see the possibility that there is much more to time than meets the mind's eye. In fact, we discover that our conceptual framework blinds us, blocking our realization of the completeness of any given moment.

²² Z. Dōgen, "Uji," *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dogen's Shobo Genzo*, Ed. Kazuaki Tanahashi, (Boston: Shambhala, 2012): p. 106.

²³ Dōgen, *Op. Cit*, p. 102-9.

²⁴ Dōgen's conception of time's flow is derived from the Ten Mysteries of Kegon Buddhism. It is not necessary to explicate his understanding here, as it is not central to the premise that it is different from Kant.

From Dōgen’s perspective time is discontinuous— each moment is complete, it is a whole, containing an entirety past, present and future relative to itself. From Kant’s point of view, time is continuous— each moment is carved from a whole and synthesized, producing a continuous stream of experienced time and making intelligible a world in constant flux.

On the basis of this disparity one might object to the proposed synthesis of Kant and Dōgen. However, it is important to keep in perspective that Kant’s project focuses on the individual cognitive process of experiencing time, not on the nature of time in itself. As inner intuition, his view of time’s continuity is sensible, yet in light of the inextricable connection between being and time it still seems to lack something important. By synthesizing Dōgen’s view of temporality with Kant’s, a potentially broader understanding of time arises.

As Dōgen explains in one of his most potent images, we are inclined to believe that the shore is racing along beside or away from us as we travel on the water, and while this is certainly an accurate account of our experience, it leaves out an essential truth: it is we are moving. Dōgen would say that “discontinuous” and “continuous” are merely two views of the same thing, namely, of time as phenomena experienced through the conceptual filter of the mind. While Kant does not specifically state it, he does imply that time is vastly more than mere flow, infinite in multiple dimensions and inextricably intertwined with being, which leaves room for further dialogue between Kant and Dōgen on the manifold nature of time.