

The time of our lives: psychological disorders, time perception and clinical implications

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Time is a complicated subject

ENGLISH HERITAGE

JACOB
VON HOGFLUME

1864-1909

Inventor of time travel

lived here
in 2189

The time of our lives

In mindfulness practice, we focus on moment-by-moment experience

Time perception in humans

Disorders of time perception: past, future and present

Fantasies, memories and rumination

How Mindfulness practice makes a new relationship with Time

Time structures our human experience

The beat and rhythm of our lives

Common time is 70bpm: Moderato is the rhythm of the human heart

Every relational space is structured through Time, depth and mutuality (Cox 1976)

Language emerged to make possible relationships with larger groups over time and space

Experience over Time recalled in Memory = Self (John Locke)

Time is something we do

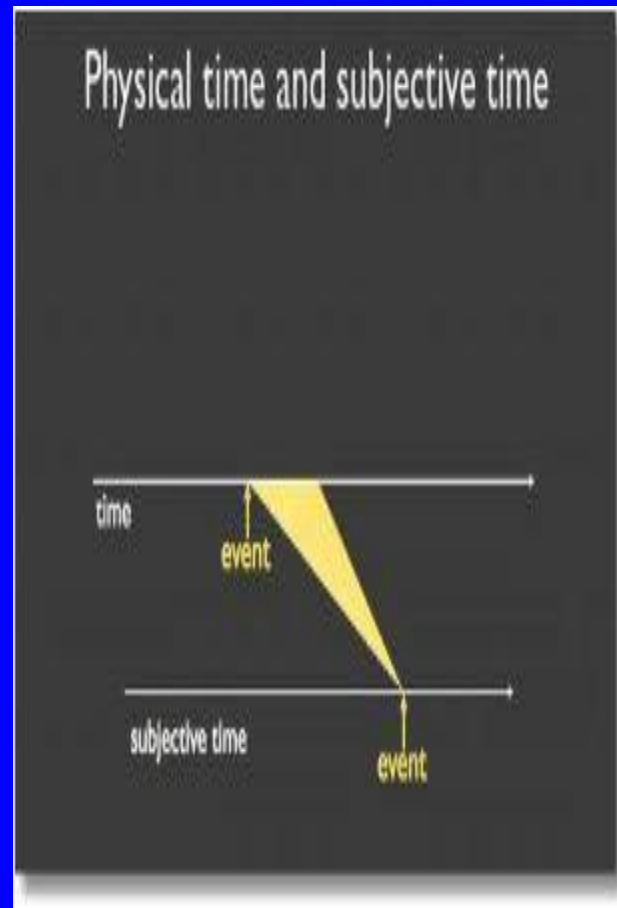
- St Augustine (AD 397-398)

In te, anime meus, tempora mea metior

It is in my mind that I measure my time

- David Eagleman (et al 2005): confirms St Augustine's thesis by exploring subjective experience of time

Eagleman's experiments



Metaphors of Time

- Time as a person: Father Time
- Time as a commodity: made and lost, saved, spent, wasted, keeping, held in reserve
- Time as something we engage with: counting, beating,
- Time as an enemy: Kronos is the destroyer of children
- Killing time



Different accounts of Time

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Chronos and Kairos

Chronos: Directional time that looks to the future; waiting for something to happen in the future

Eg: ‘Will he do it again?’

Kairos: the moment of definition, of an event in the present

‘The Present is where Time touches Eternity’ (Lewis 1942)

An example: In a group therapy session, a patient says to a therapist:

Are you here?

The past is not now and
the future is not yet

The present time
includes our memory,
our sight and our
expectations

Court of Appeal Jan 26 2012

The power to suspend time running

The neural basis of time perception (Meck)

- The supra-chiasmatic nucleus
- Connections between frontal cortex, basal ganglia and thalamus
- Cerebellar connections
- Connections with movement
- Perception of rhythm and beat: the interval between moments

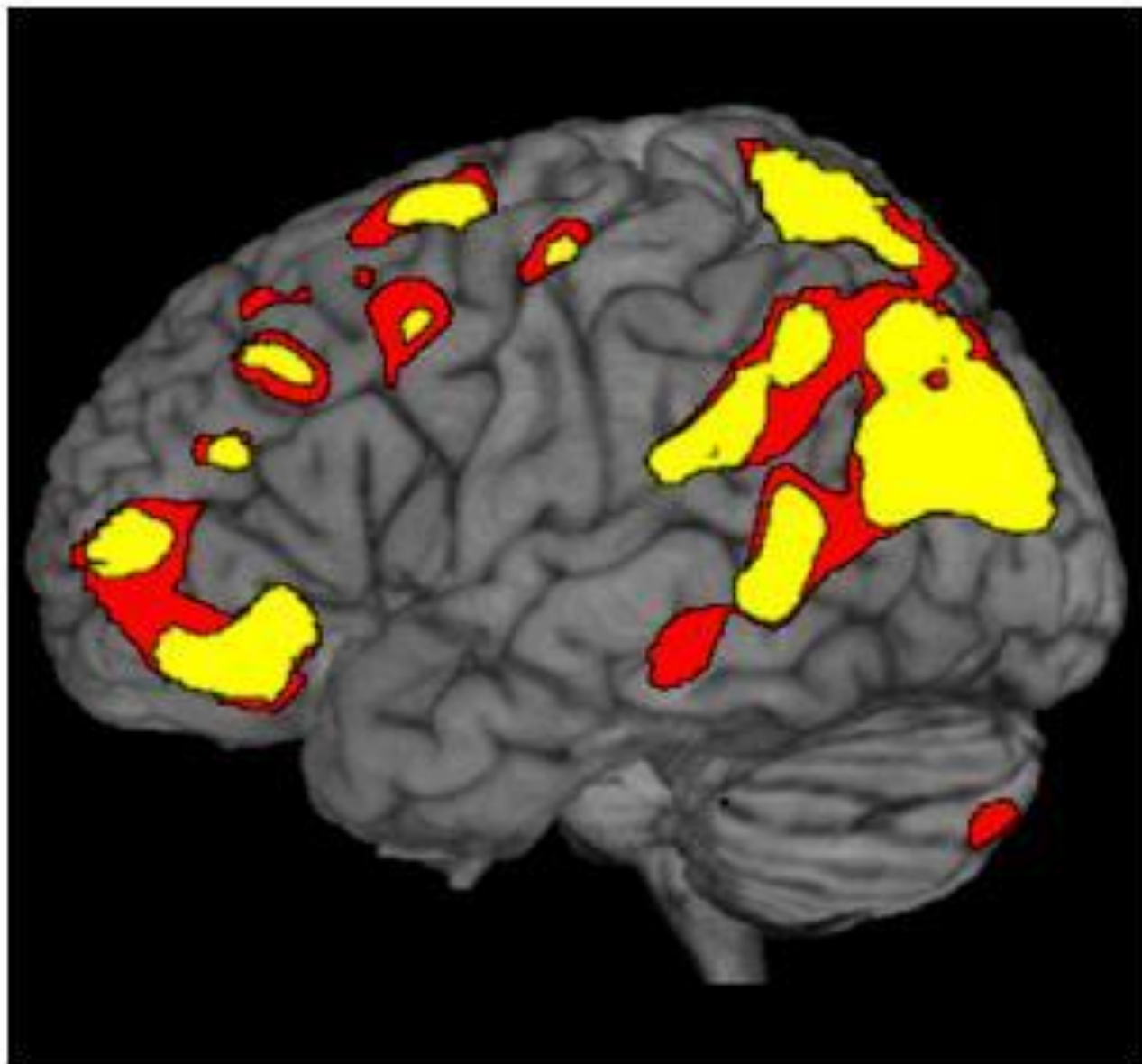


Fig. 1. Similarities in brain activity patterns for remembering and imagery are projected on a left cortical rendering view of the brain.



Time and mental disorders

- A close connection between philosophy and psychology
- Bergson, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty: the 'lived experience' in the body
- Thomas Fuchs: implicit and explicit Time
- Implicit: the stream that passes by unnoticed
- Explicit: the Now, No More, Not Yet

A link with self-experience

- The autobiographical and narrative self
- The ‘storied self’ (MacAdams)
- The ‘old me and the new me’
- Self-reflective function and mentalising

Not what thou art, or what thou hast been sees
God with his merciful eyes, *but what thou
wouldst be*

Disorders of Time Perception 1

Time Future: something bad is about to happen (GAD, phobias, health anxiety).

Time Past: something terrible has happened that can't or won't change (guilt, memory problems)

Time Present: Something bad is happening (PTSD, paranoid processes) OR 'stuckness' of thought stream (ruminations of grief/depression)

Disorders of Time Perception 2

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Fixed and inflexible narratives of the Self

Paranoid narratives

Fantasies of the future

Memories of the past

Delusions 'fix' Time and stop all possibility
of change

Disconnection from social Time

'The Time is out of joint'

Revealed in language

- This is the way I've always been
- It keeps happening all over again
- You always.... You never...
- I always.... I never...
- And then this always happens
- She/I/we just can't help it



Buddhist psychology

In Buddhist psychology: thoughts and feelings (including fantasies and memories) are all mental events

Mental events are perceptions of the mind in 'doing' mode

A more skilful way of engaging with the mind is developing awareness of mental activities

An awareness that is grounded in the embodied present

Staying in the present moment

- Being fully aware of all sensations and thoughts, right here, right now
- A different engagement with narratives of Time
- Seeing those narratives as events that ebb and flow in the mind stream
- Being present with them with kindly attention *but not identified with them*

Effects of mindfulness

- Alter reactivity of emotional brain systems
- Reducing avoidance and fear
- De-centering our Selves
- Altering relationship with distress
- Making space between identity and experience
- Compassion and connection

How could mindfulness alter Time perception ?

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Developing neural connectivity or changing reactivity in time perception circuits

By deepening moment by moment awareness, we alter the experience of ourselves in Space and Time

By liberation from fixed narratives of experience, we become Timeless

An aspect of equanimity



Once upon a Time.....

- Our *social* identity rests on our narrative of ourselves
- The narrative level is where we change
- Because all narratives are constructed in time
- Looking back, looking forward, where we are now

Time and Identity

- Altering our relationship with Time
- Altering our sense of identity: the way we construct our identities in narratives of the past (what I've done or been) or what we fear we may be
- Who am I *now*? (if now is the acceptable time)
- Who would you like to be?

Killing time

- How we all spend our time in a high secure care facility
- The residents and the professionals
- How do we engage with time?
- Tall tales and horror stories
- Redemptive stories: identity may be shattered by terrible, traumatic events

Spending Time in Therapy

Do patients in therapy 'spend their time' in treatment?

What are they meant to 'get' for the time 'spent'?

People say that they want to 'get' better in the future

EG: In the Homicide Group, Henry asks:

What will I know at the end?

Which begs the question

What do I know now?

What about the lived experience now?

Incoherent narratives

- May suggest unresolved loss or trauma
- Lapses of monitoring of reason or discourse
- *Verb-tense shifts*
- Odd associations or metaphors
- Frankly confused language
- Are they/aren't they confusion and contradictions

Lapses of narrative coherence

- ‘It’s doing my head in’
- (What brought you here?) A van
- I wanted to kill her, I didn’t want her to die
- This building is alarmed
- Who the f*** are you looking at? (said to self in mirror)

Random quotes 1

- I didn't kill anyone.. You can dig him up and ask him if you don't believe me
- P1 Did you see on the news about the man who killed his wife while he was asleep?
- P2 He'll be devastated when he wakes up
- It was like the world falling away

Random quotes 2

- My mum was part of my index offence. I nearly murdered her, then I killed my dad and I nearly killed my mum
- I killed my mum, my old dear
- *(in a discussion about visits)*
I killed my mother so obviously I don't see her

Random quotes 3

- [Jack, a psychotic member mutters to himself]
- (T1: *Jack, I can't hear what you are saying very well when it's a mutter*]
- Jack: I was thinking about the lady I killed and how I would like to say sorry... when I killed my mum I was mentally ill, but... there was no reason for me to kill the second lady

Random quotes 4

P1: I killed my sister... so obviously I won't be doing that again

P2: (a gentle enquiry) How many sisters have you got?

Remorse is not a singular emotion

I killed her, it was grim; can we move on?

In a recent group, Tim said

I feel I'm stuck in my previous age... the age I was when I did my offence.. Time's passing here and there are things I'm not doing.. I want to capture time with magazines and pictures to show what I was doing when I was here... What will it be like in 10 years time? Where will we be? What will I think on my deathbed about this time?'

Conclusion: Time as a therapeutic agent

- Time, depth and mutuality as parameters of *all therapeutic* encounters
- How do you structure your time?
- How best to use mindfulness practices in different settings and for different problems
- (inevitably) The need for more research

Two useful thoughts for therapists

Teach us to care, and not to care

Teach us to sit still

And the end and the beginning were always
there

Before the beginning, and after the end

And all is always now



Acknowledgments

Thanks to the men in the various groups who shared their material with me; to my co-therapists and supervisors for fruitful and rich discussions; and to Mike Jones in the photography department for the excellent photos of the hospital.

