

# Wittgenstein on Time (1929–1933)

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G.E. Moore had a charming way of expressing his being puzzled by, or confused about, things Wittgenstein said in his lectures. In two of these lectures that Wittgenstein gave in the academic year 1932–33 he addressed the topic of time. According to Moore’s report, on both occasions Wittgenstein made use of a distinction Moore did not manage to make full sense of. Here I shall quote the relevant part of Moore’s own words; he wrote:

[Wittgenstein] made a distinction, as to the meaning of which I am not clear, between what he called “memory-time” and what he called “information-time”, saying that in the former there is only earlier and later, not past and future, [...]. (PhOcc, 110)<sup>1</sup>

Moore then goes on to say that Wittgenstein mentioned a second point, viz., that “it has sense to say that I remember that which in ‘information-time’ is future”. This second point I shall return to. But before doing so, I shall try to gain a clearer understanding of the distinction employed by Wittgenstein independently of that point. This attempt will involve looking at other sources besides Moore’s report. According to the latter, Wittgenstein made further use of his distinction in discussing Russell’s well-known hypothesis. Russell had claimed that remembering things is no guarantee that the remembered things actually did happen in the past. The reason he gives is that it is conceivable that the whole world came into being five minutes ago, including all those acts of remembering that have induced us to believe that the world was very much older. As is to be expected, Moore points out that this way of stating Russell’s claim involves a mistake, as the word “remember” is used correctly only if the state of affairs that a person is said to remember has actually taken place. Moore adds that in his view Wittgenstein misunderstood the real import of Russell’s hypothesis, but here I shall disregard this part of his discussion. The only portion of his account relevant to my project is that in the course of his discussion of Russell’s hypothesis Wittgenstein uses his notion of memory-time and emphasises that it con-

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1 For abbreviations see References at the end of this paper.

stitutes a certain order of events approaching a point we have the right to call “now”. This order, Wittgenstein claimed according to Moore, is such that it makes no sense to say of a given event that it “occurred after the present in memory-time” (PhOcc, 112).

When Moore prepared the version of his report of Wittgenstein’s lectures which was then published in 1954 and 1955 he had nothing to rely on but his own notes taken when attending those lectures. Interestingly enough, he would have had another source at his disposal had he not given it to the heirs of Wittgenstein’s literary Nachlass shortly after the latter’s death. I am alluding to TS 209, better known under the title of its published version *Philosophische Bemerkungen*, or *Philosophical Remarks*. This typescript had actually been in Moore’s possession since 1930, when Wittgenstein left it with him. It is likely that both men forgot about its existence, so it became a source of information about the ideas Wittgenstein developed after his return to Cambridge at the beginning of 1929 only after it was made available in its printed form in 1964. So for ten years Moore’s account was the only one to be had of those ideas of Wittgenstein’s, and it remained the only one of the lectures he reported on until in 1979 and 1980 the lecture notes taken by Alice Ambrose, John King and Desmond Lee were published and made it possible to compare their impressions of those lectures with Moore’s description. As it happens, only the notes taken by Ambrose are relevant to our topic. Another important source has been available since 1967, when Brian McGuinness brought out Waismann’s records of Wittgenstein’s conversations with Schlick and Waismann himself. And around the same time the microfilm of Wittgenstein’s manuscripts was published. Nowadays, these manuscripts are of course easily accessible to users of the Bergen edition; and most of the material that interests me here can also be found in the published volumes of the *Wiener Ausgabe*.

So let us look at the evidence and see whether it is possible to gather more information about the distinction between memory-time and information-time of which Moore confessed that he did not succeed in getting clear about its meaning. The first natural thing to do is to look at the only other extant report of the lectures Wittgenstein gave in 1932–33. That is Alice Ambrose’s report from which I quote the following extract according to which Wittgenstein said:

We have here two independent orders of events. (1) the order of events in our memory. Call this memory time. (2) the order in which information

is got by asking different people, 5—4—3 o'clock. Call this information time. In information time there will be past and future with respect to a particular day. And in memory time, with respect to an event, there will also be past and future. (Ambrose, 15)

Ambrose proceeds to mention what Wittgenstein said about the meaningfulness of claiming that one remembers a future event in information-time. But for the time being I shall refrain from going into that as it seems more urgent to compare this account with that given by Moore and take stock of agreements and disagreements between them. Both authors use the same terminology and say that Wittgenstein distinguished between memory-time and information-time. Ambrose gives a slightly fuller account of information-time, but then she goes on to say something that fails to be in accord with Moore's report. While Moore's Wittgenstein said that in memory-time there can be neither past nor future but only earlier and later, Ambrose's Wittgenstein claimed that in memory-time too there is past and future. On the other hand, Ambrose takes care to stress that in memory-time the point of reference is a given *event*, whereas in information-time the point of reference is a particular *day* (which perhaps may be rephrased by speaking more generally of a precise date, specifying day and hour in numerical terms).<sup>2</sup>

Thus we have arrived at our first question. Is it possible to reconcile these two reports? Or does this disagreement in wording amount to a serious conflict between two irreconcilable claims? If so, we shall have to conclude that at most one of our two informants has given us a reliable report of what Wittgenstein said on that occasion.

Before getting down to a discussion of this question, I want to look at additional parts of the evidence. Unsurprisingly, doing so will lead to a second question. I think it is a sound maxim to check up on claims made by Wittgenstein according to people's lecture notes by comparing them with what can be found in his writings. This sort of examination will often involve looking at his manuscripts, and such an investigation can be particularly useful if we know the exact dates of lectures and manuscript entries. Unfortunately, the time we are talking about is a period from which we have next to no manuscripts written by Wittgenstein. The simple explanation of

2 A further disagreement seems to be this, that Ambrose does not mention what Moore reports on Wittgenstein's use of his distinction in the process of dealing with Russell's hypothesis, in particular with respect to the role of "now".

this fact is that between early summer 1932 and sometime in autumn 1933 Wittgenstein was busy revising earlier material and ordering it in view of producing a typescript he could then work on to give a well-articulated account of his views. This way he succeeded in producing what is known as the “Big Typescript”—a huge collection of remarks he was dissatisfied with and straightaway proceeded to rewrite, first by scribbling into the margins and on the backs of its pages, then by giving it a new shape in his manuscripts. The last stage of this process of revision was published by Rush Rhees under the title *Philosophische Grammatik*, or *Philosophical Grammar*. As regards our topic, the important point is that all the material we can draw on to compare Moore’s and Ambrose’s accounts with is earlier, and in many cases a good deal earlier, than their notes. Still, it may seem good news that the distinction mentioned by Moore and Ambrose can be found in other sources as well. At first glance, the only difference appears to be that in his manuscripts as well as in his conversations with Schlick and Waismann Wittgenstein uses a different kind of terminology. A particularly succinct account is given in the course of a conversation that took place in Schlick’s house on Christmas day 1929. There Wittgenstein said that the word

‘time’ has two different meanings, (a) the time of memory, (b) the time of physics. Where there are different verifications there are also different meanings. If I can verify a temporal specification—e.g. such and such was earlier than so and so—only by means of memory, ‘time’ must have a different meaning from the case where I can verify such a specification by other means, e.g. by reading a document, or by asking someone, and so forth. (WWK, 53)

There is a fair number of parallel passages in Wittgenstein’s manuscripts of that year and in those written in the subsequent two years or so. And as far as I can see, in all these passages Wittgenstein speaks of memory-time on the one hand and physical time, or the time of physics, on the other. We know that, in spite of all the facilities making the Bergen electronic edition such a marvellous instrument of Wittgenstein studies, it is always dicey to make and try to establish negative claims. But to my mind, it seems fairly safe to say that the term “information-time” (or a German equivalent of that term) that Wittgenstein used in those lectures reported by Moore and Ambrose does not occur anywhere in Wittgenstein’s writings between 1929 and 1932. Now, one may wonder if this is of the slightest importance. Maybe it

is not. But the fact remains that over a period of three years Wittgenstein kept referring to his distinction between memory-time and physical time, and he kept doing so by using these words. And all of a sudden, in a lecture given just a few months after his last manuscript reference to *Gedächtniszeit* and *physikalische Zeit*—that is, memory-time and physical time—he talks about memory-time and *information-time*. And if Moore's report is correct, he used the latter expression more than once. Is this shift significant? And if it is, what may its significance be?

That, as you will have guessed by now, is my second question. And in my discussion of this question I shall follow a word of advice expressed by Jaakko Hintikka in his article on “Wittgenstein on Being and Time” (Hintikka 1996, 242–274). Hintikka says that it is profitable to see Wittgenstein's observations on time against the background of certain general contrasts explicitly or implicitly exploited by him to render his remarks more plausible than they would otherwise appear. Among the contrasts Hintikka himself relies on are that between *perspectival* and *public* modes of identification as well as that between *phenomenological* and *physicalistic* frameworks or systems. Reference to these contrasts allows Hintikka to give a panoramic account of the development, not only of Wittgenstein's notion, or notions, of time, but also of more comprehensive ideas pertaining to questions of object-identification and ontology. Of course, my questions are much less wide-ranging than those raised by Hintikka, even though their direction is probably similar to his. At any rate, I shall bring in a few additional contrasts that may usefully be seen as related to the contrasts pointed out by him.

The first of these contrasts is a metaphorical one. And the metaphor is a very important one in Wittgenstein's writings of the time between 1929 and 1932. He often compares different kinds of states of affairs—that is, states of affairs belonging to what he calls different domains or spaces—to two different kinds of images. One kind of image is what you find on a film-strip that can be run through a projector to produce a corresponding, but different kind of, image on the screen. The image you find on the film-strip has neighbours, in the sense that there are other clearly identifiable pictures preceding and succeeding it on the strip. On the other hand, there is a sense in which the image on the screen has *no* neighbours. In the sense in which this image is there and seen, no other image is there and seen.

One point of introducing this analogy is that it gives us a vivid way of drawing a distinction between different kinds of facts: between the facts of

immediate experience and the facts of physics. Thus Wittgenstein writes:

If I compare the facts of immediate experience to images on the screen and the facts of physics to images on the film-strip, then on the film-strip there is a present image, and there are past and future images too; on the screen, however, there is nothing but the present.<sup>3</sup>

What is characteristic about this analogy, Wittgenstein says, is that here the future is seen as preformed. In the world of physics it is possible to say “Something will happen, only I don’t know what”. But the qualification “in the world of physics” makes it clear that the range of application of this notion of preformation is *restricted* to this world; it does not apply to the picture on the screen, that is, to the world of immediate experience.

Another point made by means of this analogy is connected with Wittgenstein’s way of illuminating certain ideas connected with solipsism. This, of course, is an extremely difficult concept, and its understanding depends on how you read the *Tractatus* and on the extent to which you think the views informing that work are germane to Wittgenstein’s writings around 1930. But however that may be, Wittgenstein says that a solipsistic way of looking at things can become intelligible if one sees that, just as in a number of contexts one can do without the word ‘I’, so there are modes of talking about present experience that can or ought to dispense with the word ‘present’. Such uses of the word cancel out, as it were, as soon as one sees that no other word may be substituted for the word ‘present’. One way of saying this is that the word cannot mean something that is *in* a space but must mean something that is constitutive of a space (PhB, 85). Another way of expressing this idea is by employing the analogy of the film. This is what Wittgenstein does in the following passage:

The present which is here being talked of is not the picture on the film-strip which is just now behind the lens of the projector—in contrast to the pictures coming before or after this one and that have already, or not yet, been there. No, it is the image on the screen which has illegitimately been called present, since ‘present’ is in this case not used to distinguish something from past or future things. For this reason, the word ‘present’ is a meaningless epithet. (PhB, 86)

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3 PhB, 83. Translations are my own.

The analogy with images on the film-strip, on the one hand, and images on the screen, on the other, has further uses in Wittgenstein's writings of the time around 1930. An important connection is that with his ideas on verification, and I shall briefly discuss this. But first I want to mention another contrast, viz. the contrast between very general statements of fact concerning a reality that could have been otherwise and statements, or (as one should perhaps say) pseudo-statements, that look similar but are of a completely different kind as there is no conceivable state of affairs that might correspond to them or their negation. In December 1929 Wittgenstein notes down an observation that is repeated in *Philosophical Remarks* and in which he explains its meaning by way of example. He says that the fact that I have only one single body is instructive, and things could have been otherwise. And the same is, according to Wittgenstein, true of the fact that every time I am awake I see through my *eyes* and the fact that under normal circumstances my sensations do not extend beyond my body. Then he goes on to mention something of which he says that it fails to belong to this category, even though it looks very much like a further item on that list, viz. the statement, or pseudo-statement, that I cannot remember the future. This, Wittgenstein writes, does not mean anything; what it tries to gesture at is inconceivable, and the same applies to its opposite (PhB, 86).

There are interesting connections between this passage and what Wittgenstein says about sense and nonsense in the *Tractatus*, on the one hand, and in his later writings, on the other. But here I merely want to point out that in this remark Wittgenstein clearly subsumes the idea of remembering the future under the heading of what makes no sense and may hence be called inconceivable. In a later passage, drafted in May 1932, he makes a less sweeping claim. There he says that memory time is like the visual field in not being part of comprehensive time (Wittgenstein uses and at the same time queries the expression "*große Zeit*"). Rather, it is "the specific order of events or situations in memory. For example, in this time there is no future".<sup>4</sup> So this is a different and in one respect a less general claim: while he does maintain that when talking about memory-time a future cannot be spoken of, he does not assert that in a domain outside memory-time—call it physical or information-time—it is strictly speaking senseless to say that I can remember the future.

4 19.5.1932, Band IX = MS 113, 240, TS 213 (= BT [“Big Typescript”]), 521. References to Wittgenstein's manuscripts (MS) and typescripts (TS) are given in accordance with von Wright 1969 (1993).

Maybe we should take a hint from this remark and qualify Wittgenstein's earlier claim about the senselessness of saying that one can remember the future in such a way that it is restricted to memory-time. But that would involve going far beyond his actual words and imputing a distinction he was not thinking of when he wrote down his remark. However that may be, perhaps we can use these last two passages to hazard a partial answer to my first question. That question concerned the comparative reliability of Moore's and Ambrose's account. And as regards this question, it seems that Moore by saying that in memory-time there is neither past nor future but only earlier and later comes much closer to Wittgenstein's thought than Ambrose. For she says that, with respect to an event, even in memory-time it is possible to speak of past and future. The passage quoted last was written in May 1932, i.e. just a few months before he gave the lecture reported by Moore and Ambrose, and that passage is very clear about excluding all talk about a future from statements about memory-time. So it is good evidence indeed for thinking that Ambrose got Wittgenstein wrong when she said he thought the words "past" and "future" were applicable to memory-time too.

On the other hand, both Moore and Ambrose describe Wittgenstein as saying that in information-time sense can be made of the idea of remembering the future, even if no statement to this effect will ever prove true. If we can rely on this account—and there seems to be no reason to cast doubt on it—we shall do well to conclude that Wittgenstein's early remark to the effect that claims about remembering the future make no sense does not accord with his considered later view.

Another contrast that is relevant to our considerations is that between propositions that can really be verified and those that cannot. At the time we are talking about, Wittgenstein was trying to work out a complex theory of verification comprising both semantic aspects, as we might want to say, and epistemological aspects. He draws a distinction between what he calls "hypotheses" and other kinds of sentence. And he says that hypotheses are laws for the construction of further sentences. While it is impossible to carry out a full verification of an hypothesis, it may be possible to verify more specifically framed propositions. These would be propositions formed in accordance with the relevant hypothesis but more specific and suited to being verified in a particular situation. It is in this sense that Wittgenstein says that what is verified are facets of hypotheses (BT, 120). In other contexts he uses a different metaphor and speaks of a "cut" (*Schnitt*) (BT, 117), or perhaps a "section", made through the whole of an hypothesis or its rep-



resentation. And then it would be this “cut” or “section” that corresponds to a proposition that could be verified. Verification, however, is something that can take place only in the present (PhB, 81), and this is the present of immediate experience—of the image on the screen—and not the present of a physical system. And if I understand it correctly, this present is what in one passage Wittgenstein calls the end point (or starting point) of a half line representing memory-time. It represents, as he says, that specific order of events or situations in which these events or situations are given in memory (BT, 521). Another analogy used by Wittgenstein to illustrate this idea is his talking about memory as a *source* of time, and it is clear that he means that time of which the present immediate experience is a sort of limit—only that it is not a limit of the kind you could indicate in terms of a physical system.

There are more things that Wittgenstein says about memory-time and verification, and some of these things involve yet further contrasts characteristic of Wittgenstein’s way of thinking in the early 1930ies. One of these contrasts is that between external and internal relations. But I think we have reached a point of contrast saturation.

There is just one additional passage that I want to refer to before returning to my initial question whether Wittgenstein’s choice of the term “information-time” instead of “physical time” could be regarded as significant. In the passage I mean Wittgenstein writes that of course the difference between memory-time and physical time is a logical one. That is, the two orders might well be given different labels. The only reason why both orders are called “time” is that there is a certain grammatical kinship between them, an affinity of the same kind as that between cardinal and rational numbers; between visual space, tactile space and physical space; between colour tones and tone colours (*Farbtönen* and *Klangfarben*) etc. etc. (BT, 521, cf. Band VIII = MS 112, 216)

Now, I think this is a very characteristic statement of Wittgenstein’s way of thinking in the early 1930ies. He was very much inclined to distinguish between all kinds of logical or grammatical “spaces”, pointing out analogies and disanalogies between them, and stressing that what could be said of the members of one space could not meaningfully be said of the members of another space. This was emphasised by Russell in what seems to me a wonderfully perceptive letter to Moore. There he writes that Wittgenstein

uses the words 'space' and 'grammar' in peculiar senses, which are more or less connected with each other. He holds that if it is significant to say 'This is red', it cannot be significant to say 'This is loud'. There is one 'space' of colours and another 'space' of sounds. These 'spaces' are apparently given a priori [...]. Mistakes of grammar result from confusing 'spaces'. (Russell to Moore, 5 May, 1930, Russell 1968, 198)

Like many other things that Russell said this is a bit of a caricature, but it does capture the spirit of Wittgenstein's reasoning during that period. In my view, getting away from this mode of thinking in terms of different spaces and the compatibility or incompatibility of their properties is a particularly important mark characteristic of the development of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Getting away from this mode of thinking was a slow process, and it is surely difficult to be precise about dates and the extent of the relevant changes. But it seems likely that by the end of 1932 he was moving in a direction in which it seemed less natural to him to refer to all those logical spaces and the presumed borderlines between them.

This is the context where I should look for an answer to my first question. The game of asking for and receiving information is a much more variegated activity and a much less predetermined system than physics and its applications. So talking about information-time rather than physical time could be taken as a move in the direction towards the motley of language-games we all know and love in the form it is presented in *Philosophical Investigations* and other writings by the later Wittgenstein. In particular, it could be taken as a move away from the somewhat mechanical opposition between physical and memory-time. And we know for sure that after physical time was dropped from Wittgenstein's manuscripts it did not take him long to drop memory-time as well.

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