

# Timeless and Akâl

## Comparative Study of Western and Indian Concepts

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**The Western view:** Time is the single most pervasive component of our experience and the most fundamental concept in our physical theories. For these reasons time has received intensive attention from philosophy. Reflection on our ordinary-tensed language of time has led many to posit a relation of metaphysical importance between time and existence.

McTaggart (1934) distinguished between those aspects of time that could be characterized using "timeless" temporal relations (such as one event being *after* another), called by him the B-series, and those aspects of time that were expressed in tenses discourse, called by him the A-series. It was McTaggart's contention that only the A-series captured the essence of temporality, but that since this essence was self-contradictory, time was "unreal".

An important response to such ideas argues that there is no ultimate distinction in "reality" between the present as contrasted with the past and future, or between the present and past as contrasted with the future. This approach admits that *past* and *future* do not "exist", of course, if "exist" is being used in its tensed form, but finds in that only an interesting feature of natural language (having tensed-verb forms but no parallel structure for *spatial* location) and not anything of metaphysical importance.

The radical differences between time, as it appears in our physical theory, and time as it appears in our immediate experience, show important and difficult problems concerning the relation of the time of "theory" to the time of "our immediate *awareness*".

One Tradition starts from the time of our immediate experience and suggests that the time of nature is, in some way or another, a construct dependent on the time of conscious awareness. A seminal version of this approach is the treatment of time in Kant (1781/7). Time is, along with space, one of the structuring principles of all experience, called by Kant, a **pure intuition**. As such it is a feature in the phenomenal world (things as they appear) and not of "things-in-themselves" (*noumena*). Both outer experience of physical objects and inner experience of psychological states are framed in the format of the temporal intuitive structure. Behind the temporal psychological self is the transcendental self, that which unifies all our experience with its implicit "I think". "Non-temporal", the transcendental self is the ground of the temporal structuring of physical and psychological experience.

The rejection of an *absolute* time as objectively given is a philosophical event that can be traced in the history of philosophy in many versions. To take an example from Western philosophy, one may refer to a highly important analysis of the problem of time, viz that of Kant. In his famous "*Critique of Pure Reason*", Kant focuses on the idea of time as a "form" of inner sense, that is, of the intuition of ourselves and of our *inner* state. He expressly states that "time is not something

which exists of itself, or which inheres in things as an objective determination...." Kant's interpretation of time discloses a novel conceptual model. He summarizes his position thus :-

"What we are maintaining is, therefore, the empirical reality of time, that is, its objective validity in respect of all objects which allow of ever being given to our senses, ..... On the other hand, we deny to time all claim to absolute reality; that is to say, we deny that it belongs to things absolutely, as their condition or property, independently of any reference to the form of our sensible intuition; properties that belong to things in themselves can never be given to us through the senses. This, then, is what constitutes the transcendental ideality of time".<sup>1</sup>

A philosophical appraisal of such key-expressions as "**the world has a beginning**", and "**the world is an appearance**" – examples stemming from the Christian and the Vedantic theological formulations – is valuable in this connection. It is to be noted that the two terms "beginning" and "appearance", although derived from conventional language, obtain technical significance in the respective theological frameworks. These terms perform a symbolic function, i.e. aim at expressing the theological insight, which is a paradox to discursive thinking.

The Biblical or Christian expression, that the world has a beginning, has a natural reference to the problem of time. The following lines enables us to understand it better:

"Since the beginning is an existence which is preceded by a time in which the world was not, i.e. an empty time". These lines quoted from the first antimony formulated by Kant in his "*Critique of Pure Reason*",<sup>2</sup> are illuminating in a two-fold way. Firstly, it indicates the meaning of the conception of "beginning" and what it entails with reference to time in a philosophical analysis. But, again, it also helps at once to clearly distinguish the theological meaning of "beginning" as can be found in the profound reflections of Saint Augustine in "*The Confessions*". He comments on the text of Genesis :- "In the Beginning thou madest the heaven and earth" (BK XI. Ch.IX)<sup>3</sup>.

He writes, "*at no time then hadst Thou not made any thing, because time itself Thou madest*". (BK.XI. Ch.XI V. P-262). The theological significance lies in grasping that there is no question of any preceding empty time with reference to which beginning" is to be understood. ".....before heaven and earth there was no time....." (BK.XI. Ch.XIII.).

St. Augustine's reflection very clearly puts it into focus that "In the Beginning thou madest the heaven and earth...." (BK.XI. Ch.IX) does not signify a beginning in time. He writes:- "At no time then hadest thou not made anything, because time itself Thou maddest. And no times are co-eternal with Thee, because Thou abidest, but if they abode, they should not be times" (BK.VI. Ch. XIV. P.262). Thus, the problem of time acquires a new dimension when considered in the perspective of the idea of being as timeless.

The idealist tradition is continued in Husserl's phenomenological account of the ground and nature of our experience of time (1928). Here, emphasis is placed on what the necessary features of such experience must be like in order that we experience things as past, present and future, and have the sense that we do of time as passage.

In Heidegger's pragmatist-phenomenology, time as it functions in human activity is the ground of time altogether. Heidegger's fundamental conception developed in "*Being and Time*" (1927) is that time is basically given as a temporal spread or field, and not as a sequence of disjunct Now's. Not a present Now, then another present Now, and another, etc. etc., but the whole spread- and an *indefinitely finite* spread at that – of future – present – past (where the hyphenization of these three terms is intended to signify the holding together of future-present-past as a unifying synthesis.)

This basic temporality fits into Heidegger's general interpretation of human existence as "Ek-sistenz", literally the standing beyond oneself. Accordingly, Heidegger calls this basic temporality "ek-Static" temporality, for in experiencing the present, we already stand beyond it. This view of time was already implicit in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, although Kant was not able to bring it clearly to light. Heidegger, in fact, claims that he is really reading his view out of Kant's first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Heidegger's view of time as the opening into futurity, and therefore into possibility, brings forward what might be called a "positive" side of time. **In doing so, he has redeemed time from the denigration that the tradition, most notably in Platonism, has passed upon time as a kind of metaphysical slag at the bottom of existence which we must purge off in order to arrive at the Idea, the essence, the timeless.**

One begins with time as it appears in our experienced world of the fixed past, the present of action and the future of projected intentions. The time of nature and science, the time of the "present-at-hand", is only derivative from the primordial time of experience as decision and action. In these (external, transcendental) idealist accounts of time, the time of past, present and future is taken as central.

Contrasted with such approaches is that of the physicalist – naturalist, to whom the time of the physical world is basic and the time of human experience supervenient at best. In these accounts, it is the "timeless" temporal relations of the B-series that are usually taken as fundamental. Time as experience is usually thought of in something in the vein of a secondary quality.

**Akâl – Transcending Time: The Indian & Sikh Tradition:** In the *Maitmyopanisad*, Brakman has been described at once as "*Kâla*" and "*Akâla*".<sup>4</sup> Time is itself an aspect of Brahman, time (*Kâla*) and the timeless (*Akâla*)<sup>5</sup>. "From time all beings grow, from time they advance to growth; In time they obtain rest, i.e., they disappear. Time is 'formed' and formless too."<sup>6</sup>

The expression "Akâl", in the sense of Timeless and Immortal, is central and integral to Sikh tradition and thinking. The term is extensively used in Dasam-Granth hymns, especially by the Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, who captions one of his poetic compositions *Akal Ustati*, i.e. "In Praise of the Timeless". Guru Nanak's use of *Akal* is noted in the *Mul-mantra* itself. In the *Maru raag* quotations, *Kal* and *Akal* have been clearly used by the Fifth Guru, Guru Arjun.

The meaning of "*Akal*" in this context is "timeless". "Non-temporal", "deathless", "not governed by temporal process", or "not subject to birth, decay and death". This appears to be negative coining, in each case. **But the intent is affirmative. Akal is deathless or non-temporal implies everlasting reality, eternal Being, or transcendent spirit; it further implies Eternity, Being**

**or Essence. The linguistic form may be negative, but the semantic implication is unmistakably affirmative.**

The author of *Jaap Sahib*<sup>7</sup> in the Dasam Granth has depicted the Supreme Reality as *Akal* with its innumerable manifestations. It is the same Reality that was given the epithet of *Sat/i* in the Guru Granth Sahib. "*Sat/(i)*" is the primordial name of the eternal Being.<sup>8</sup> Sikhism has chosen *Sat/(i)* and *Akal*, in order to signify what it regards as the Eternal Spirit, beyond the pale of time, temporality or cosmic process.

**Guru Gobind Singh's *bani* is a repository of concepts and terms, especially of the epithets relating to "time". Besides, *Kal* and *Akal*, he uses *Maha Kal* (macro-time) and *Sarb-kal* (all-time) to indicate a Being above and beyond the eventful time of the universe. For him, *Kal* itself is a dimension of *Akal*, the only difference being the process that characterizes temporal events, and the eternity of *Akal*. Every occurrence or event has beginning and end, each event is a link in the on-going process of Time. The Cosmic drama, or the wondrous show of the world, is all a creation of Time. The power of Time controls the worldly events; the only unity independent of time is Time itself, and that is *Akal*, the Timeless. That is why God is both Time and Timeless in Guru Gobind Singh's *bani*. The aspect of Time is the immanent aspect, the presence of Spiritual Essence in each worldly occurrence. It is the "personality" of the Supreme, the "*Cit*" or consciousness of "*Sat-Cit-Ananda*". The other, transcendent aspect, is the Eternal, the Beyond, the Inexpressible, the Fathomless, *Nirgun Brahman*, assigned the name *Akal*.**

**Spiritual Principle:** The *Akal* of Sikhism is not a fixed, unmoving substance, but the spiritual principle of the entire Cosmic existence. The phenomenal world emanates from Spirit, and the Spirit permeates the world. According to *Gurbani*, the Formless Being keeps on *creating* the phenomenal world. He creates and recreates and carries on with his creative activity. *Akal* of the Sikh conception is not consciousness pure and simple, blank and void, but is *creative* Spirit, as the expression "*Karta Purakh*" implies. In other words, creativity is the core of *Akal*. And it is creativity that shows up in the dimension of *Kal*. Acting through Time, the "Timeless" creates beings of the world. It does not seem possible to conceive of creativity without conceiving temporality or time. It is through creativity that the "Timeless" transforms itself from *Nirgun* (absolute transcendent unmanifest) to *Sagun* (immanent and manifest), from the "*aphur*" state into "*Saphur*" state, from the procreation essence into cosmic existence.

**Reservoir of Creative Energy:** The creativity of *Akal* is not confined to the "timeless" the temporal aspects of the Supreme. Through its *Sagun* facet, the *Nirgun* assumes the character of the Divine, of the good gracious God. From "it" the ultimate becomes "He" – the person with whom communication is sought and established. From "*Akal*". He becomes "*Sri-Akal*". The Sikh slogan and popular form of greeting "*Sat/i Sri Akal*" succinctly conveys the idea of Timeless Being that is the singular Eternal Reality. The phrase combines the concept of "*Sat*" and "*Akal*", implying that the Eternal and the Timeless are one:- *Sat* itself is the Everlasting Lord. Thus, the creative essence turns the metaphysical Being into active principle of the world into conscious power involved in the cosmic process. Humanity draws its creativity and creative energy from the Divine reservoir of creativity.

The Impersonal appears through all persons. The Timeless encompasses all the temporal beings emanating from his Essence. He transcends the human world, yet is He the compassionate. His timeless essence permeates the temporal existence. Now, we are to analyze, very briefly, the concept of "timeless", in the light of Advaita Vedanta.

"The world is an appearance" – despite the large spread of vedantic thought – is still an expression liable to misinterpretation. In the Advaita Vedanta framework of thinking, to account for the total dependence of the world on Brahman, the Being *par excellence*, conceptually specified as unconcealed in all three times, i.e., "timeless", is precisely the function of the doctrine of *Maya*. The temporal and the "timeless", do not have the same ontological status.

In order to evaluate the Advaita expression of the world as 'appearance' one has to take into accounts the Advaita theological terminology. Let us point out, only briefly, that "the world is an appearance" is not an empirical judgment on the world. It is not an empirical illusion, it is transcendental, pointing to the reality of being as "timeless", as self-existent. It is to be noted that Sankara is not propounding a subjective idealism through the pronouncement of the world as appearance. He has vehemently criticized the subjective idealism of the Vijñanavada school of Buddhism in his commentary on the *Brahma-Sutra*, 2/2/28-29. The conception of the transcendental appearance of the world has, in his thought, a foundation on epistemological realism. It is not questioning the empirical reality of the world. "The world is an appearance" is a theological symbolism, the function is revelatory.



#### References

1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Kemp-Smith, London, 1970, P-78.
2. Ibid. p.397.
3. St. Augustine, *The confessions*, Translated by E.B.Pusey, New York, 1957.
4. *Maitriyopanisad*, VI.14.
5. Ibid, VI. 15.
6. Ibid, VI, 14.
7. *Jaap Sahib* is the first composition in the *Dasam Granth* (The holy book of the Tenth Guru accorded a place of reverence next only to Sri Guru Granth Sahib, by the Sikh Community).
8. *SGGS: Maru Raag*: P-1083.