

Article 1: Time

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Date of Submission: 21-01-2026

Date of Acceptance: 31-01-2026

Everything around us comes and goes: emotions, successes, failures, friends, foes, dreams, memories. But within the warping and flickering fabric of the universe remains a single constant, etched into it forever: time.

As early as the prehistoric ages, humans, meaning-creating machines, having an inherent obsession for labelling and measuring in an attempt to make sense of the complex world around them, started measuring time. At first, natural cyclic events regarding the motion of the sun, moon and stars were observed to keep time. Then, seasonal winds and rains, the flooding of rivers, and the flowering of trees and plants were noted for the further division of a year into tinier chunks. Various innovations from the early sun dial, to the Egyptian water clock, to the hourglass, were developed.

However, time, from the very start an enigma riddled with mystery and secrets, forced even the likes of Plato and Aristotle to ponder. “Does time exist independently?”, the question arose, “Or does it arise as a by-product of change?” Imagine sitting in a room, with no furniture, no windows, just you and yourself. Would you be able to tell an hour from a day, a day from a week? It would require impossible skill, as there would be no change to act as a reference to measure time against.

Fast-forward 1600-1700 years later, and we have the invention of the mechanical clock. As centuries continued to tick by, advancements in science and more precise clocks meant time was taken for granted: 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 4 weeks a month, 12 months a year, and 90 or so years later, it wouldn’t really matter to us anyways. Now, once again, under the increasingly analytical and philosophical lens of the modern world, time has once again become a conundrum.

The great Einstein said, “The distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.” Is it possible that all these moments are happening at the same time, but our limited human minds can only comprehend them sequentially? Rather than a river we are continually flowing though, could time be a vast sea we are floating in, blissfully unaware of its stillness and depth? Let’s select a portion of Einstein’s statement, “the distinction between past, present, and future”. We are convinced that time occurs in progression because our memories create a past, and our imagination, a future. Imagination isn’t reality, and how can we rely on memory, knowing how easily it can be distorted? Without memories or imagination, that is, a past or future, life would just be one, solitary, eternal moment.

Except it can’t be, seeing that we all inevitably die. Perhaps human mortality is the only indication of the existence of time. Perhaps that is the purpose of time, to ensure that we live every moment of our being with full intent. Perhaps the concept of time itself stems from mortality, and the fear of fading away from the earth without having created something meaningful during our lifetimes.

The plethora of inquiries doesn’t end here. Have you ever noticed how different time feels when we experience different things? When we are having fun, it flies by, but when we are bored, it’s like someone slammed a huge red STOP button on our lives. When we are asleep, hours disappear in the literal blink of an eye, and when we are left alone with our thoughts, ten minutes can take hours to end. A near death experience can freeze time, allowing one’s entire life to flash before their eyes, whereas when you are “in the zone”, deeply engaged in activity, hours slip away from your grasp. Therefore, is time definite, to be measured in units like length or mass are, or is it merely perception? And here, I leave you with one final question: If the future doesn’t exist yet, how can we move into it? If the future already exists, does that mean we don’t have any control of our destiny?

It is truly strange that a concept so intangible and incompletely understood governs our lives in such a big way.

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