The Problem With the Technology of Time: Understanding the Ethics of Erazim Kohak’s Concept of Authentic Time Through An Analysis of the Motion Picture Cast Away

We live in a world obsessed with time. That being said, what does the fact that I continuously turn to my watch and my calendar to tell me the current time and date say about the way I live my life? Besides making sure that I am not late for appointments and guaranteeing that I do not hold my classes over too long, what value do these technological tools have for us as human beings? These are important questions that are raised in Erazim Kohak’s The Embers and the Stars. In that text, Kohak contrasts natural time [including “temporality in the rhythm of the seasons and of human life,” (Kohak, 16)] with our obsession with time as a modern construct of our society. While Kohak does not deny that clocks serve a special and important purpose in our society, he is concerned that we lose sight of the processes of life that give time ontological significance.

Time as it is found in nature and the time of the clock present two distinct ways in which we can view time, and they are certainly not alien to philosophical discussion. Even within the last hundred years we find the distinction between vulgar and authentic time in a wide array of locations, ranging from the philosophical writing of Martin Heidegger to the concept of mindful meditation as found in Jon Kabat-Zinn’s Wherever You Go There You Are. We can also find this contrast/conflict in the motion picture Cast Away. In Cast Away we find ourselves wrapped up in the experiences of Chuck Noland, played by Tom Hanks. Chuck is an employee for Federal Express whose life and view of time undergoes a significant shift after his airplane crashes into the Pacific Ocean, leaving him marooned on a deserted island. This story transcends its entertainment value by portraying Kohak’s two conceptions of time. Before the plane crash Chuck’s world is obsessed with the passing of time as seconds, minutes, and hours as they appear on the hands of a clock. For example, when Chuck is pressured near the beginning of the movie to make sure that the FedEx packages over which he is responsible get to the airport at a particular time, he reminds his staff that “time rules over us without mercy.” This scene is dominated by a large digital clock over Chuck’s shoulder that counts down the seconds to the exact moment when the packages are due. The transformation that Chuck makes while alone on the island represents Kohak’s second view of time, which moves beyond the watch by placing time within the larger context of our natural surroundings. As Chuck is making preparations for his final attempt to leave the island, he uses a solar calendar to plan when the seasons will bring a shift in the winds, easing his escape. At this point, it is no longer the clock that is his master, but time itself.

In this paper I will examine the two conceptions of time that Kohak addresses in The Embers and the Stars. I will also address the ways in which Cast Away informs and serves as an example of Kohak’s study of the moral sense of nature. In carrying out this study, I will pay particular attention
to the role that time plays in creating this sense of nature, both for Kohak and for Chuck Nolan.

To comprehend Kohak’s conception of authentic time, it would perhaps be easiest to begin with the inauthentic view of time in terms of the clock that we are more familiar with. Kohak points out that the clock is an important tool in our modern society, both for our social gatherings as well as for our scientific endeavors, including complex undertakings such as a trip to the moon. According to Kohak, however, we should remember that the clock is a tool created for special purposes and does not represent the ontological significance that is found in the authentic conception of time. In cases involving meetings or moon-shots, he agrees that the clock works as:

\[\text{an ideal time-construct, visualized as a uniform sequence of consecutively numbered moments providing an arbitrary but common reference, [it] serves the special purpose at hand . . . effectively. It does not, to be sure, articulate any experience: nowhere does such a time line exist in nature . . . [it is] a construct imposed upon nature’s rhythm, subordinating and ordering it, (Kohak, 16).}\]

We lose track of the true nature of time. This problem arises when we come to believe that the clock’s subordination and ordering of nature takes on ontological value. In doing so, we forget that the time of the clock is secondary to the primordial, natural, and authentic time that existed before the clock. An example is found in one of our most occurring questions. When someone is asked ‘what time is it,’ the question is nearly always answered by referencing a wrist-watch or a clock on the wall, as if these mechanisms somehow capture time itself. While clocks are certainly far from merely arbitrary markers of the passage of time, we tend to forget that the conception of the 24 hour day is meant to model the natural cycles of time from one sunrise to another, that the months of the calendar are based on the phases of our moon, and that our years are based on the passing of the seasons. While it may be true that 24 hours make up a day and that twelve months make a year with regard to our Western calendar, these truths represent a “superficial truth which hides the depth of truth” found in the cycles of authentic time, (Kohak, 198).

According to Kohak, the central problem that arises in over-asserting the value of the clock is our loss of the natural sense of time. He asserts that this problematic comes to the surface when we are faced with painful practical decisions, and he offers the medical technology of “life-support” as example of this phenomenon. When we have the ability to extend the hours and days of a particular life (if by extending life in the case of patients who have ceased exhibiting brain-wave function we mean the continued beating of the heart and breathing of the lungs because of “life-saving technology”), it becomes difficult to understand when the right time to die is. According to Kohak one is capable of coming to understand a right time to die “only in the matrix of natural time, the rhythm of human life and the cycle of the seasons,” (Kohak, 17). When faced with a clock, an infinite series of numbers representing uniform moments in a continuum, “a right time becomes wholly unintelligible. Here time cannot be ‘right,’” (Kohak, 17).

For Chuck Noland, understanding the meaning of his life is not easy, for life is something that he is constantly trying to fit in around the demands of the clock. He reminds the FedEx employees he is responsible for training that the clock is something that they must never forget. “We never turn our back on it. And we never ever allow ourselves the sin of losing track of time.” Before the crash, Chuck not only preaches these words, but lives them as well. The clock dominates his life, and he remarks to his trainees that “we live or we die by the clock.”
His obsession with the clock not only dominates Chuck’s work-life, but that mindset also can be found in his relations with his loved ones. As he is driving to the airport hanger to board the plane that would change his life, he tells the guy at the gate that he will be ready to board the plane in a minute. He then carefully corrects himself: “actually two minutes, two more minutes.” Inside those two minutes Chuck plans to exchange Christmas gifts with his girlfriend, Kelly, because he will be gone over Christmas, as well as ask her to marry him (he gives her the box containing the ring, but there is not enough time for a decision).

Ironically, the two minutes spent exchanging presents foreshadow Chuck’s future experience of time. Kelly gives Chuck an antique pocket watch used by her grandfather on the Southern Pacific railroad. The watch includes a picture of Kelly, and Chuck proclaims that the watch will always be set to Memphis time (where he and Kelly live). This watch, however, would become one of the casualties of the plane crash, as the water would break the watch’s working mechanisms. The watch becomes much more meaningful to Chuck because the picture it contains inspires Chuck to keep living, to keep finding a way to get back to the woman that he loves. The watch ceases to be a marker of time and becomes for Chuck a marker of what was truly important in his life prior to the crash -- Kelly.

Immediately after the plane crash, Chuck still tries to hold to his work ethic, collecting the packages that wash up on his deserted island. Soon after, however, the body of one of the pilots washes up, and Chuck is faced with the experience of death as well as the realization that he too is at nature’s mercy. He buries the pilot, marking his grave with his name and his birth and death years (Albert Miller 1950-1995). This symbolizes the first step on Chuck’s part to understanding authentic time. Chuck understands the pilot’s life and death not in terms of minutes or second, but in terms of years -- seeing his life in a much broader context. The next day he decides to open most of the FedEx packages that he had been collecting, deciding that life may be more important than the sanctity of those parcels. One of those packages contains a birthday card, which states that “the most beautiful thing in the world is, of course, the world itself.”

It is the world itself that will shape the way Chuck comes to understand time. After four years he decides to make an attempt to get off the island. He creates a sun calendar in his cave to mark the passage of time, but this marker is not a marker concerned with minutes and seconds, but with the passage of the seasons. Chuck decides that the right time to mount an escape will come with the changing of the seasons in a month and a half, in March and April. That time offers the best chance for high tides and offshore breezes he thinks will best allow his hand-made raft to escape the island. As he is completing that raft, the right time draws near, and Chuck announces to Wilson (the volleyball that has become his friend on the island) that there is not much time -- “but we live and we die by time.” This is a marked difference from his statement near the start of the movie when he remarked that they live and die by the clock. Here it is not the clock that controls Chuck’s destiny, but time itself. Days later, as he is working on the raft, Chuck remarks to Wilson that they still have time to finish the raft. This determination is not made by considering a watch or even by looking at his solar calendar, but is instead made by observing that the wind was still blowing in from the west. It is the shift in the seasonal winds that mark the time to escape the island, not a mark in an appointment day-planner.

Chuck’s shifting sense of time mirrors Kohak’s call for authentic living that is in accord with the
processes of nature. According to Kohak, the cycles of nature’s time are seen in the passing of the seasons as well as in the cycles of the day. He remarks; “I go about my tasks, I sense the cycle of the day from dusk to dusk, each moment distinctive . . . The plants know and honor the seasons of the day. So do the creatures of the forest, and so, too, do humans when they break free of forgetting,” (77). Chuck, stranded on the island and removed from the technological wonders of modern society, was in a position in which he could not forget nature. For Kohak, nature and the stages of life: 

though personal, are not in the least arbitrary. Primordially, human experience simply is not a sequence of discrete events which need to be ordered by a clock and a calendar or by free association within a stream of consciousness à la Proust or Joyce. It is, rather, set within the matrix of nature’s rhythm which establishes personal yet nonarbitrary reference points: when I have rested, when I grow weary, when the shadows lengthen, (16).

While the movie only hints at how Chuck lived the rest of his life after his return from the island, we can imagine that he held a new appreciation for life and its processes, and this is in part hinted at by Chuck’s not wearing a wrist-watch in the closing scenes of the movie. Liberated from the domination of the clock, Chuck is now free to, as Kohak says, encounter a moment “not simply as a transition between a before and an after but as the miracle of eternity ingressing into time,” (85). Chuck’s words to his best friend upon his return from the island echo Kohak’s remarks when he states that his concern was to stay alive and keep breathing, for “Tomorrow the sun will rise, who knows what the tide may bring?”

It should be pointed out that Augustine disagrees with the assertion that time can be understood by reference to the movement of the tides, the sun, or the moon, because he argues that if those cycles ceased to move time would still continue to pass. For him, an understanding of time grounded in nature is no more authentic than the time of the clock. A possible response to Augustine might begin by pointing out that what is important about authentic time is not that it somehow captures the objective and final essence of time itself, but that, instead, it allows humanity a more authentic way of understanding the meaning that time’s passing has for our lives. According to Kohak, turning our backs to our clocks allows humans the opportunity “to suspend effort, to let be and listen, letting nature speak,” (Kohak, 6). By letting nature speak, we also allow ourselves the opportunity to understand our own natural existence.

For Kohak, Chuck’s return to a more natural understanding of time, including the cycles of the day and the seasons, has ramifications that stretch far beyond our world of clocks, allowing Chuck to understand his existence in the larger context of nature itself. It is nature, according to Kohak, that contains an ethical lesson from which we all can learn. Kohak points out,

As our social world disintegrates around us, we need not some new and fanciful doctrine of the right and the good, but a rediscovery of the lost clarity of insight . . . What the dusk reveals is not some new morality but rather the deep truth of the ageless moral insight of humanity, (Kohak, 78-9).

It is this ageless truth that I believe Kohak would argue Chuck Nolan finds during his years on that deserted island. When one stops seeing time as the passing of a second hand around a dial and
begins to place time within the processes of nature, he or she can “cherish time and look to eternity within it,” (218). According to Kohak, respect and understanding of these natural processes lends itself to a respect and understanding of the order of creation. Instead of living in an inauthentic world of make-believe in which we believe that a clock tells time itself, Kohak believes that an authentic understanding of time is one way in which we as humans can “live in truth,” (80). For Kohak the proper goal for philosophers should be an articulation of the meaning of our being; in essence an understanding of human truth.

That human truth is grounded in the ways in which we live our lives, and our lives, all too often, are controlled by an artificial device of our own creation. For Kohak, freeing ourselves from the absolute domination of the technology of clocks will allow us to live the life of truth, in tune with the processes of our planet and the natural world that it contains. Cast Away serves as an example and a learning tool, illustrating these two related yet vastly different ways of thinking about time.

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References


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