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## THE SEMANTICS OF CLOCKS

*The inexorable ticking of the clock may have had more to do with the weakening of God's supremacy than all the treatises produced by the philosophers of the Enlightenment . . . . Perhaps Moses should have included another Commandment: Thou shalt not make mechanical representations of time.*

— Neil Postman [1985, pp. 11–12]

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Clocks?

Yes, because they participate in their subject matter, and participation — at least so I will argue — is an important semantical phenomenon.

To start with, clocks are about time; they represent it.<sup>1</sup> Not only that, clocks themselves are temporal, as anyone knows who, wondering whether a watch is still working, has paused for a second or two, to see whether the second hand moves. In some sense everything is temporal, from the price of gold to the most passive rock, manifesting such properties as fluctuating wildly or being inert. But the temporal nature of clocks is essential to their semantic interpretation, more than for other time representations, such as calendars. The point is just the obvious one. As time goes by, we require a certain strict coördination. The time that a clock represents, at any given moment, is supposed to be the time that it is, at that moment. A clock should indicate 12 o'clock just in case it *is* 12 o'clock.

But that's not all. The time that a clock represents, at a given moment, is also a function of that moment, the very moment it is meant to represent. I.e., suppose that a clock does indicate 12 o'clock at noon. The time that it indicates a moment later will differ by an amount that is not only proportional to, but also dependent on, the intervening passage of time. It doesn't take God or angels to keep the clock coördinated; it does it on its own. This is where participation takes hold.

As well as representing the current time, clocks have to identify its “location” in the complex but familiar cycle of hours, minutes, etc. They have to measure it, that is, in terms of a predetermined set of temporal units, and they measure it by participating in it. And yet the connection between their participation and their content isn’t absolute — clocks, after all, can be wrong. How it is that clocks can participate and still be wrong is something we will have to explain.

For clocks, participation involves being dynamic: constantly changing state, in virtue of internal temporal properties, in order to maintain the right semantic stance. This dynamic aspect is a substantial, additional, constraint. A passive disk inscribed with ‘NOW’ would have both temporal properties mentioned above (being about time, and having the time of interpretation relevant to content) and would even maintain perfect coördination. A rendering of this word in blinking lights, mounted on an chrome pedestal, might even deserve a place on California’s Venice Boardwalk. But even though it would be the first time piece in history to be absolutely accurate, such a contraption wouldn’t count as a genuine chronometer.

We humans participate in the subject matter of our thoughts, too, when we think about where to look for our glasses, notice that we’re repeating ourselves, or pause to ask why a conversant is reacting strangely. Why? What is this participation? It’s hard to say exactly, especially because we can’t get outside it, but a sidelong glance suggests a thick and constant interaction between the contents of our thoughts, on the one hand, and both prior and subsequent non-representational activity, on the other, such as walking around, shutting up, or pouring a drink.

Take the glasses example. Suppose, after first noticing their absence, I get up and look on my dresser, asking myself “Are they here?” My asking the question will be a consequence of my wonder, but so will my (non-representational) standing in front of the dresser. Furthermore, the two are related; the word ‘here’ will depend for its interpretation on where I am standing. And who knows, to drive the example backwards in time, what caused the initial wonder — eye strain, perhaps, or maybe an explicit comment. The point is that the representational and non-representational states of participatory systems are inexorably intertwined — they even rest on the same physical substrate. We can put it even more strongly: the physical states that realise our thoughts are caused by non-representational conditions, and engender non-represen-