IELTS Reading Passage: "The Acceleration of Time"

Across much of the developed world, there is a growing sense that time itself has accelerated — that life unfolds at a pace exceeding our capacity to absorb it. Yet, paradoxically, the fundamental physics of time remains constant. The perception of temporal speed, psychologists suggest, may have less to do with the passage of seconds than with the architecture of attention and memory.

The notion that subjective time contracts as one grows older was first articulated by the French thinker Paul Janet in the nineteenth century. His "proportional theory" proposed that the psychological length of a year diminishes because it constitutes a progressively smaller fraction of one's life. To a ten-year-old, a year is a vast landscape; to a septuagenarian, it is a flicker. Janet's hypothesis has endured with remarkable resilience, though subsequent neuroscientific findings imply that proportionality is only one among several determinants of temporal experience. Emotional salience, cognitive novelty, and attentional focus appear equally potent in modulating how long — or brief — a period feels in retrospect.

In contemporary digital culture, individuals are exposed to an incessant cascade of stimuli: messages, headlines, alerts, and images that solicit attention without necessarily engaging it. The result, according to cognitive theorists, is a paradoxical impoverishment of memory. Days dense with micro-events leave few enduring traces, memory collapses under informational redundancy. Therefore, when we look back, we find the texture of time smoothed — the year feels shorter not because it contained less, but because it left less behind. Childhood, by contrast, appears endless precisely because its moments were novel enough to be remembered.

The neurochemical dimension of this phenomenon remains contested. Dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with motivation and reward, is thought to play a mediating role. Repeated exposure to minor rewards — social notifications, algorithmic feedback — sustains intermittent spikes of dopamine that distort our perception of novelty. The brain, habituated to rapid cycles of anticipation and gratification, ceases to register ordinary events as distinct. In this sense, technology does not so much accelerate time as flatten it — compressing experience into a uniform stream of low-intensity stimulation.

Sociologists, however, caution against technological determinism. The complaint of "not having enough time" long predates the digital age. The industrial revolution, with its factory whistles and train schedules, restructured human existence around mechanical regularity. What once flowed according to daylight and season became subordinated to the clock. The sensation of temporal scarcity may thus represent a structural feature of modernity itself, periodically reframed but never resolved. In that light, smartphones are merely the latest instruments of an old anxiety.

Cultural psychologists add another layer to the debate. Temporal perception, they argue, is culturally encoded. Societies emphasizing relational harmony and communal well-being tend to experience time as expansive; their members describe days as "full" rather than "fast." In contrast, performance-oriented cultures, where self-worth is measured by productivity, tend to fragment time into quantifiable

segments, perpetuating the sense that there is always too little of it. The elasticity of time, therefore, may reflect the values through which a society organizes meaning.

Philosophers have long resisted the reduction of time to measurement. Henri Bergson's concept of *la durée* distinguished between chronological time — the mechanical ticking of clocks — and lived time, the qualitative continuity of consciousness. He maintained that authentic living requires immersion in this inner flow rather than submission to external schedules. To count time, in Bergson's view, is already to lose it.

Contemporary movements in mindfulness and slow living appear to echo Bergson's intuition, albeit in secular form. By training attention on the immediacy of the present — on breath, texture, and sensory detail — practitioners attempt to restore density to experience. Preliminary studies suggest that such practices may indeed elongate the subjective present, though whether they genuinely alter time perception or merely heighten awareness of it remains a matter of interpretation. The challenge, perhaps, is not to make time move more slowly, but to inhabit it more fully.

Questions (True / False / Not Given)

1. Paul Janet's theory explains that older individuals perceive time as slower than younger ones.
2. Modern research has entirely invalidated Janet's proportional explanation.
3. Cognitive scientists believe that frequent minor digital events can make time feel shorter in retrospect.
4. Dopamine is said to increase the brain's ability to recognize new experiences.
5. The text suggests that industrialization first introduced the feeling of time scarcity.
6. The passage claims that time anxiety did not exist before the modern digital era.
7. Certain cultures may experience time as more abundant when they emphasize social connection.
8. Productivity-driven societies tend to perceive time as fragmented and insufficient.
9. Bergson viewed measurable, clock-based time as the most authentic form of temporal experience.
10. Mindfulness definitively slows down people's perception of time.