

Time as Ek-stasis and Trace of the Other

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How can we know and speak about time *as* time? Does time as such exist? Is time a *thing*? From its inception philosophical thought has been driven by the conceptual and experiential riddle of time. The attempts to master it have generated impressive conceptual constructions. Is it still meaningful to try to articulate something like a philosophical account of time? Is time not already dispersed into a multitude of *constructions* of time? From comparative anthropology we are familiar with the many different ways in which humanity has sought to master time through calendars and chronometers.¹ Merely broaching the task of a general theory of time seems to accept a questionable metaphysical premise. Yet there is a “Time” to which we continue to refer as an index when speaking of its different modes of representation, construction, and articulation, and to which standard scientific and political discourse is still unreflectively committed. Posited in this way, it requires continual scrutiny.

Here, I will rehearse briefly the two basic ways in which time has been understood philosophically – as measureable movement, and as consciousness of past, present, and future – represented by Aristotle and Augustine. My discussion stresses the critical potential of the Augustinian legacy, especially for a culture so obsessed with technical mastery over time as ours, and how it was taken up and developed in phenomenology, from Husserl to Derrida via Heidegger. Through the phenomenological attempts to describe fundamental time consciousness, Time or Temporality emerges instead as an original *ek-statis*, as dislocation and dispersion, and as synonymous with the event of meaning. Following the radicalized phenomenological analysis of time

leads us beyond an understanding of subjectivity as interiority, toward the phenomenon of an intersubjective bond between the living and the dead, and to the constitution of tradition as both active memory and social coercion.

The historical account partly follows that of Paul Ricoeur in his magnum opus *Time and Narrative* (1985).² His account pays great homage to phenomenology, Husserl, and, in particular, Heidegger. His ultimate conclusion is still that the phenomenological account of time leads to an aporia, a dead-end of time, between the subjective and the objective, between the individual and the cosmic, which needs repairing or healing through a theory of narrative imagination.³ Unlike Ricoeur, the present essay emphasizes the inherent discrepancy of time, what might even be called an original and unbridgeable “chasm” or “wound” of time.

The etymology of the word itself, *time*, *tid*, *zeit*, *temps*, *tiempo*, is considered by linguists to originate from the Indo-European root *di*, relating to “partition” (Sanskrit *dayate*, Greek *daiomai*). In recalling this origin of the word, we can sense the gesture by means of which we circumscribe and delineate a period and a sequence. When referring to time – any specific time – we reach for a shape and a contour, a horizon around what takes place. It is noteworthy in this respect that in the Homeric vocabulary the standard Greek term for time – *chronos* – is not used in the abstract sense of time as such, but only ever to denote a passage or sequence of events. For example, in the beginning of the *Iliad* when Odysseus takes the lead among the tired Achaeans, he urges them on with the words: “courage my friends, hold out for a time [*epi chronon*]” (Il B 299). By gesturing toward “time” he refers here to a phase of life to come. It is in the magnificent declaration of Anaximander (c. 600 BCE) that the world is described as happening “according to the assessment of Time [*kata ten tou chronou*]”.⁴ Here, at the outset of Western philosophy, the ancient divinity of *Chronos* (who in Orphic mythology is the son of Gaia and the father of Zeus) is transformed into a non-anthropomorphic and general cosmic *order* of things.

When Aristotle in his *Physics* addresses the problem of movement, he develops a sequence of concepts, the tenacity of which can be measured by the extent to which we still use them, when referring to

“potentiality” (*dynamis*), “actuality” (*energeia*), “fulfillment” or “realization” (*entelecheia*), etc. It is also in Aristotle’s *Physics* that we find the earliest attempt to define time itself, as the “measure (or number, *aritmos*) of motion”.⁵ The purpose of this whole vocabulary is not primarily to come to terms with time as such, but to handle *movement* and *change*, the event of things becoming different from what they are and yet somehow remaining the same. It is the logic of this ongoing transformation of being in general and the question of agency and causation in particular that occupies his attention. For the Greek philosophers, the question of passage and change, and the logical dilemmas to which it gave rise, such as the paradoxes of Zeno, was an urgent challenge. But no Greek philosopher seems to have explored the problem of the *experience* of time in the sense of temporal awareness of the arc of time and the passing of time.

The paradigmatic example of such an attempt is to be found in Augustine’s *Confessions*, written half a millennium later. Here Augustine takes on the metaphysical challenge of thinking time from the viewpoint of how it is experienced. He notes that we usually refer to time by observation of the changing face of nature. But time is neither the objective measure of movement nor the outer framework of change. Augustine instead focuses on the *experience of time* as the sense of past, present, and future, and on how things such as a “before” and an “after” are possible.⁶ When we contemplate changes that have taken place, in nature as well as in human life, we are inclined to say that “time passes” or that “time flows” or even that “time flies”, using metaphors of bodily movement in space in order to capture the general dimension of a specific event or passage. But what is really taking place is physical change.

All so-called registering of time is performed by correlating one change in nature to another periodically recurring change, such as the circular movement of heavenly bodies or rhythmically moving human artifacts (clocks). Modern physics has established an objective, observer-neutral framework for determining and measuring the movement of bodies, what Newton referred to as an “absolute time” and defined in his *Principia* as “the absolute true and mathematical time that passes equably without reference to anything external”. But this framework also betrays its constructed and relative nature since its reference

to “passing” and “equably” already implies another posited framework within which it supposedly takes place. There seems to be no way to define an objective time of nature without implying yet another framework.

The extraordinary level of precision with which time is today “measured” should not deflect us from seeing the general condition of what it means to measure time: namely to relate the movement of one natural phenomenon to that of another periodical movement. For humanity in the era of Augustine cosmic processes such as the movement of the sun, the earth, and the moon remained the index. More recently, techno-science has correlated its desire for continuity and mastery of change with atomic frequency, the so-called “atomic time” that follows the “caesium standard” based on the emission rate of caesium 133. Yet, for all its remarkable ingenuity this technology in itself does not really bring us closer to the phenomenon of time. It merely increases radically the precision with which movement can be registered and mastered for technical purposes.

The Augustinian perplexity vis-à-vis the being of time thus remains valid also in the age of modern physics and its sophisticated chronometers. To say that an hour or a year has passed is to have noted a repeated natural movement. Even though we are naturally inclined to say that whatever happens to us happens *in* time, we should realize that in fact it does not happen anywhere else than where it happens. The great temporal framework – Time – within which things are supposedly enacted is a nature-relative cultural construction. How long does it take for the earth to rotate once upon its axis? The correct answer, “one day,” is ultimately tautological, since it means that it takes the world one rotation upon its axis in order to rotate once upon its axis.

In order to understand Time in this cosmic sense, there is no need to look deeper into nature, as if there were a more fundamental hidden true periodicity behind the relative chronometers and calendars of humans. The temporal organization of life arises from the need to determine what happens in relation to a fixed measure, and to harmonize social existence with stable and recurring events in nature. The fascinating recent discovery by biologists of what appear to be natural, congenital temporal rhythms (often correlated to the movement of

the moon) in living creatures as simple as oysters does not contradict this; it just shows that the living partly move with and are attracted by non-living matter.⁷ Time, in the cosmological sense of a universal order of things, is a socially motivated cultural construction by means of which, and using various technical means, all great civilizations have sought to adapt themselves culturally to observed regularities in nature.

In his continued search for the nature of time, Augustine turns to contemplate not the measure, but the very act and possibility of measuring. He asks how and where something like a measuring of time takes place. And to this question he responds: "it seems to me that time is nothing else but a stretching out [*distentio*] in length; but of what, I know not, and I marvel, if it be not of the very mind [*animi*]"⁸ Time is a stretching of the soul, for were it not for this inner extension or intentionality, the individual moments would be but individual moments, without any coherence, order, or sequence. Time in the sense of past, present, and future is nowhere to be found in nature, for in nature we find only change. It is in and through the activity of the human intellect that something like time emerges. Thus Augustine in the third century arrives at the remarkable conclusion that Time is a creation of human intellect.

When Edmund Husserl turns his phenomenological analysis upon the problem of time in his seminal 1905 lectures on "inner time consciousness", he not only recalls Augustine but goes so far as to say that "no one has reached further than Augustine, not even in recent times".⁹ The extremely detailed account of the structure of time consciousness which he then develops is based on the fundamental Augustinian presupposition, that the phenomenon of time is best understood through a self-reflexive exploration of intentional acts of human subjectivity. At the center of this act-analysis of time and temporality stands the intentional stretch of "retention" and "pro-tention", the acts by means of which the experience of a stretch and continuity of time is constituted. The atom of time, the now, is established through this double intentionality, which reaches back and projects forward, so as to shape a dynamic present. Through these phenomenological analyses of the intentionality of time-consciousness, Husserl claims to have reached beyond so called "objective time" to the original source of the temporal as such.

Husserl's manuscripts on inner time-consciousness were edited by Edith Stein and Martin Heidegger, and published in 1928. The previous year, Heidegger had published *Being and Time*, which analyzes the ancient Aristotelian metaphysical question of the meaning of being in terms of time or, more specifically, in terms of the temporality of human existence and understanding. Heidegger's central thesis is that throughout its history, being has been posited and understood unreflectively according to temporal schema, namely, in terms of the *present*, or the *now*. In order to explore critically the meaning of being, we therefore need to reopen the question of time: what time is and, ultimately, how time itself *temporalizes*.

Heidegger does not refer to Augustine in *Being and Time*. However, the Augustinian legacy can also be clearly identified in his case from a lecture given in 1924 on "The Concept of Time".¹⁰ In this lecture, he starts from the contemporary situation in physics in which time appears as a precise unit of measurement. He then asks on what this measuring is grounded. By way of answer he returns to Augustine and the idea that measurement originates in the human soul. Unlike Augustine, however, and unlike both Kant and Husserl, Heidegger does not want to confine this measuring or stretch of time to a human *interiority*, whether in a psychological or metaphysical sense. Instead, interiority and exteriority should be seen as two faces of a more original temporalizing movement, what in *Being and Time* he presents as original "ek-static temporality" [*Zeitlichkeit*] or "primordial outside of itself".¹¹

Human existence does not exist *in* time. Rather, in and through its existence, it "temporalizes" [*zeitigt*]. Thus it opens itself up to the primary phenomenon of time that is the *future*, which is constantly released through its existence, as an anticipation of a not yet in a transcending and self-transcending movement. What we speak of as past or history is also, ultimately, just such a projection toward a future, in the form of a coming back to a possibility through a futural anticipation. In one of the densest formulations in *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes: "Having-been arises from the future, in such a way that the future that has-been (or better 'is in the process of having-been') releases the present from itself. This unified phenomenon of the future that makes present in the process of having-been is what we call *temporality*."¹²

The ultimate sense and reality of this “temporality” recedes toward a shady ontological middle-ground for which speculative reason lacks adequate concepts. Heidegger tries to avoid the traps of previous metaphysical explorations of time by not referring to this fundamental level as “movement” or “flow”, as do both Husserl and Bergson. All such metaphors of time implicitly recall a further exterior framework in which it supposedly takes place. It is for this reason that he speaks instead of how time “temporalizes”, *die Zeit zeitigt*. One consequence is that one should not say that time *is* anything at all, or, in other words, that it belongs to the realm of *being* in a material or physical sense. Rather, time is what gives and enables being, out of which being comes to be. In *Being and Time*, the ontological locus of this phenomenon is human existence or *Dasein*. But Heidegger subsequently tries to dissociate it more clearly from “subjectivity” and to suggest instead a more neutral ground, what he was to refer to from the mid-thirties on as the “event” [*Ereignis*].¹³

In relation to this supposedly original, constitutive, and existential temporality, that which we normally call chronological or cosmological time emerges as a conditioned phenomenon. It is a temporal structure that rests on a shared horizon of common concerns and commitments, within which it emerges as a technical means of managing life. From the viewpoint of existential phenomenological analysis, the great cosmic wheel of chronological Time is a derivative construction in relation to temporality as an original projective domain. On the basis of Heidegger’s account, the various technologies of time can thus be given a philosophical interpretation in terms of how they are generated from within this basic existential predicament.

To many subsequent readers, including those sympathetic to the general thrust of Heidegger’s existential ontology, there is still something problematic about the aspiration to “ground” the phenomenon of time in existential temporality. In an early essay on the problem of time in *Being and Time*, Jacques Derrida argued that it is impossible to secure a foundational level of temporalizing.¹⁴ For temporality itself, in its very mode of occurrence, does not constitute an underlying stratum of experience that is available to ontological description. Rather, it is the differential occurrence of a signifying procedure, the event of making sense. For this reason, he questions Heidegger’s recourse to a

strict separation between a supposedly “vulgar” and a more original or “authentic” temporality. Derrida agrees with Heidegger that the conventional concept of time is metaphysically naïve. But he does not see the possibility of returning to a more authentic concept of time, for, as he writes, “time in general belongs to metaphysical conceptuality”.¹⁵

The criticism articulated by Paul Ricoeur twenty years later in *Time and Narrative* moves in a parallel direction. While recognizing the seminal contributions of Husserl and Heidegger to the development of a modern philosophy of time, he still refers to the phenomenology of time as ultimately a “failure”. By this he means the inability of a phenomenology of time-consciousness to bridge the gap between the existential and the cosmic sense of time. The existential-phenomenological account of time-consciousness therefore needs to be complemented with a theory of narrative time, of how time is recounted, for which Ricoeur found support in the work of Koselleck and Hayden White, among others.

The failure of Heidegger’s approach in Ricoeur’s eyes had to do with what he sensed was the disappearance of cosmological, objective time in his analysis. In relation to the immensity of the universe, the development of biological life, and the evolution of cultures, the existence of an individual subject is certainly miniscule. But turning back to cosmic Time as an objective correlate, far from solving the problem, merely emphasizes the stakes for phenomenological analysis. Despite being a faithful scholar and reader of phenomenology, Ricoeur is too quick to interpret the Heideggerian approach as a form of transcendental subjectivism, an attempt to *ground* time in the life of the subject. The challenge posed by the existential-ontological approach instead lies in the attempt to think time as an “ek-static event”, something located neither in the subject nor in nature, but constituting instead a kind of crack, fissure, or even wound in the self-identical through which it transcends itself in the direction of otherness, exposing itself to the arrival of the new, as promise or as threat, and as the trace of another.

In a text published after the completion of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur himself notes that the primary historical phenomenon with the help of which a historical space and a historical narrative are

constructed is not the objective cosmic order, but the *trace*, understood as the indication of a “then” and, more specifically, of a “who and then”.¹⁶ It is on the basis of material remains of life in gradual decomposition, that the arc of time and history are first sensed as potential narratives of a once-having-been, in which we encounter ourselves from the outside, so to speak, as inhabitants of a story that we never occupied from the start but into whose passage we can fit our lives.

It is important to see what is at stake here. While we should be aware of how we are constantly building narratives by interpreting traces as testimonies from a life no longer there, we should not allow this to result in subjectivistic hubris, as if the evolving universe was a construction of the human mind. Nor should we fall prey to the objectivist illusion of an existing Temporal Order. The challenge for a phenomenological and philosophical account of time is not to provide one homogenous theory of time in order to escape conceptual entrapment. More importantly, we should try to grasp the opening within temporality itself, what we could perhaps call “the exit-character” of time, as an always already beyond itself. This is what Heidegger sought to convey when speaking of temporality as “ek-static”, and what Derrida also pointed at when designating time as original *differance*.

Time becomes the name, then, for an opening from within itself, constituting both stretch and sequence. To speak of it as “original” is ambiguous since “origin” signals something stable and foundational. In this respect, Derrida’s early criticism of Heidegger was appropriate. Still, his critique could be described as following the trajectory of Heidegger’s own philosophical aspirations. The “original” phenomenon of time is not a stable ground upon which to build a system. On the contrary, it is something unmanageable and pre-chronological. Time is not temporal; time is what temporalizes.

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In his survey of the various ways in which the human race has conceptualized and symbolized time, Anthony Aveni describes a decorated 30,000-year-old bone tablet found in the Dordogne valley.

This withered piece of bone bearing scratches from a sharp object is believed by some archeologists to be the first known human calendar.¹⁷ The pattern carved on it could be a random effect of its having been used as some sort of tool, but it could also be a representation of the phases of the moon. We will never know with certainty what the purpose of this artifact was, but in all its ambiguity it invites a reflection upon the nature of temporal.

As a cultural artifact, it is a trace of human life once lived. As such, it opens a temporal “space” or “distance” which can be *measured* by being correlated to a fixed chronology of periodic movement (such as the earth’s rotation around the sun). As a remnant of a past, something dead yet indicative of a life once lived, the tablet exemplifies the possibility of constructing historical time on the basis of a material trace. The present absence of a life no longer there is then projected as a possible meaning through the future-oriented temporality of the interpreter. If the object is indeed some sort of “calendar”, it also marks the first known instance of a cross-cultural desire to “mark the time”, to follow and master in and through symbols and technology the rhythmic movements and changes in nature, and thereby to give shape to the finite and ek-static happening of time itself.

Notes

1. See, for example, Anton Aveni’s *Empires of Time. Calendars, Clocks, and Cultures* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2002). The book makes a comparative survey of different methods of time-keeping and time-measurement across all the great civilizations.

2. *Temps et récit* was published in three separate volumes between 1982 and 1985 (Paris: Seuil), in English translation as *Time and Narrative* by K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988).

3. Ibid, see in particular volume III, which contains an extensive discussion of the phenomenology of time-consciousness.

4. *The Presocratic Philosophers*, ed. G. S. Kirk et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 107f.

5. *Physics*, 219b.

6. See Augustine, *Confessions* (Cambridge: Loeb Library, Harvard University Press, 1912), Book 11.

7. For a good summary of these new findings, see Aveni, *Empires of Time*, s. 13f.

8. Augustine, *Confessions*, 269.

9. *Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewußtseins* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1928), p. 2. In English translation by J. Churchill, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1964).

10. This lecture to a group of theologians in Marburg was published posthumously as *Der Begriff der Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1989).

11. *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1927/86), p. 329. In English translation by J. Stambaugh as *Being and Time* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), with original pagination in the margin.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 326.

13. An important text here is the late essay “Zeit und Sein” from 1962, published in *Zur Sache des Denkens* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1969), in which he also elaborates critically upon his own earlier attempts. The thinking of the event, or Ereignis, is initiated much earlier, however, in the posthumously published *Beiträge zur Philosophie (vom Ereignis)*, in Gesamtausgabe 65 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1989).

14. “Ousia et grammé – Note sur une note de Sein und Zeit”, in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit), 31–78, in English translation by A. Bass “Ousia and grammé. Note on a Note from Being and Time”, in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982).

15. “Ousia and grammé”, 63.

16. Paul Ricoeur, “Le temps raconté”, in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, vol 89 (1984), p. 436–452. For the revival of the concept of the “trace” in French phenomenology, the work of Levinas was seminal, in particular his article “La trace”, in *Humanisme de l'autre Homme* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1972), to which Ricoeur also refers.

17. *Empires of Time*, p. 58f. In discussing the bone tablet, Aveni relies on an analysis by A. Marschack, in his *The Roots of Civilization* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972).