Prolegomena to a New Theory of Time

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Quite by chance, or so it seemed, two particular books recently lay side by side on my desk. One was Plato's Republic and the other, the multiply authored I Ching. I was enormously struck by this coincidence as they seemed to represent a disagreement of great import on which I had already taken sides. For Plato, time and change lead down the slippery slope to chaos, and intelligibility begins with the elimination of the temporal. While the I Ching, the book of changes, teaches us to recognise intelligible patterns of change, and that time is a condition for these patterns and not a threat to them.

The recognition that change can be intelligibly structured, results, I would argue, from the absence of an enormous burden that Western philosophy has had to carry—the task of discovering necessary truths. To the extent that time is the source of changing circumstances it poses a threat to necessity. And it is no accident that in one of the most self-conscious and dedicated attempts to rescue time from the intellectual wilderness—I refer to the writing of Hegel—it can only return in the form of necessity. The more it is recognised that there is a middle ground of intelligibility between necessary truth and bare contingent facts about the world, the more plausible becomes the project of providing some sort of account of temporal structure and the less this phrase will provoke howls of mental anguish.

Whatever hopes, desires and expectations the title of this paper
might lead one to entertain, what we are in fact offering here is a framework for a theory of intelligible temporal structure, and many traditional problems about time will not be directly touched upon at all. Let us begin with some points of orientation and clarification. We take it that whatever is true of time is first true of the temporal, that the adjective 'temporal' qualifies in particular relations, and that complexes of relations may be called structures. We follow the Heidegger of *Being and Time* in supposing that temporality, fundamentally, is rooted in the ecstatic condition of human existence, so that, for example, the idea of infinite time is derivative from the finitude of human time. Because we consider Husserl's work on time to be limited by the problematic of consciousness, it is Heidegger's formulation that we would like to be able to adopt. But for the purposes of an analytical study it seems to us that Husserl's analytical terminology is much the richer. We could resolve this dilemma if we were to find a suitable analytical vocabulary that did not commit us to a subject only problematically in-the-world. We are not the first to suppose that language itself can supply such a vocabulary.

What we claim is that the visible and reflectively discoverable structures of language evidence a wide range of general temporal structures; that in language, the structures of time are writ large. Language we claim is an exemplary and a privileged temporally ordered phenomenon. We do not suppose, as it might sometimes seem, that without structure there is no time. No doubt time can appear in such primitive forms as simple duration, as desire, as flux. What we object to is using these phenomena as paradigms, for they are simply not representative. We claim that language is an *exemplary* phenomenon. The temporally informing features we will discuss are not restricted to language, and a number of our examples will illustrate this.

The use of language as a site for excavation—and by language here we mean speech, writing and interior discourse—has important advantages over a study of the structures of time-consciousness: (1) the structures of signification—intentional structures—that language makes possible are infinitely more complex than would be available to a being without a language. The 'objectified intentionalities' of a natural language not only massively expand the possibilities of consciousness, but are more readily accessible for analysis. To the extent that temporal structure is intelligible it is ultimately and in the broadest sense, an intentional phenomenon. So a study of temporal structure that did not take into account the possibilities that language opens up would be importantly defective. (2) Taking language as our object frees us to consider temporal structures without the doctrine of