Time Lag: Motifs for a Phenomenology of the Experience of Time

BERNARD WALDENFELS
Ruhr-Universität Bochum

The time lag in question here may be understood in two ways: as a shift in time itself, and as a corresponding shift in signification. The following considerations begin with a general orientation as to the ordering of time; then they cross over to specific phenomenal fields in which time unfolds its effect.1

1. Logos of Time

The logos of time is to be understood as the way we think time, talk about it, represent it and present it, and all of this with reference to an experience of time that like all phenomena is to be brought “to utter its own meaning.”2

The oldest discourse on time is found in μῆνος. Chronos is known as a god who devours his own children, a god older than Zeus. Here time is portrayed as a power that in coming to be and passing away, in aging, manifests itself as a deterioration and disintegration of forces. Some of this lives on in poetry: “Make haste Chronos! Out of the rattling trot!”—in Goethe Chronos is apostrophized as coachman and entreated in his distant proximity. In Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway it is Big Ben’s chime that scans the course of the day within the novel.3 Or finally Octavio Paz in his Piedra del Sol: “mientras el tiempo cierra su abanico [while time folds its fan shut].”4 The influences and consequences of time are older than the logos, which responds to the work of time, seeks to reclaim an order from this work.

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The classical ordering of time that has been determining our thinking for centuries develops particular coping strategies that work against time’s power. Three fundamental aspects of this may be distinguished.

(1) In the first place there is the attempt at a certain demythologization. Time appears no longer as a who or what presided over by a time-sovereign or an anonymous temporal power; rather time appears as a how, as mode, as schema. Time debuts in something or in someone, no longer under its own direction. On the one hand Aristotle composes the great prelude: he derives a physical time from cosmic kinesis. On the other hand there is Augustine, who develops a psychic time from the lived time of the soul. This psycho-physical duality reaches up to the present day. Time is cordoned off as long as the question “What is X?” or “Who am I?” does not eo ipso carry a temporal or spatial accent. What emerges in time is not something that temporalizes itself. In modern terms, identity does not mean in the same breath time identity, in the sense that today one is accustomed to speaking of place identity. Identity remains timeless in its very core.

(2) The mode of time is repeatedly subjected to binary schemata of order, such as outer and inner, φύσις and psyche, material and form.

(3) Time itself is thought as a member of an opposition. The most pregnant oppositions are those of time and space (following after one another in succession versus standing out from one another in extension), of time and eternity (flowing vs. standing, temporal flux vs. nunc stans). In this way the force of time is tamed: one is at the mercy of time as a human being, but not as a thinking being.

The classical ordering of time gradually gives way to a radical experience of time the consequence of which is that the logos turns into a “logos of the aesthetic world.” This leads to a transformation of the classical representation of time. (1) Time is henceforth more than an attribute of things or a way of experiencing the soul; it is also more than the form of intuition for a transcendental subject. Time is no longer reduced to a mere modality, since it has a decisive part in the formation, shaping, and realization of something (object), of someone (subject), and of meaning (orderings). These three moments, still divided between three worlds by Karl Popper, have their respective temporal ways of being. Temporality turns out to be a generator of identity. (2) Time no longer falls under binary schemata; it proves to be differing in the sense of a holding up, shift, or postponement. (3) Time frees itself from the opposition to timeless instances; it becomes entangled in itself in the form of a self-reference that leads to a self-doubling and self-duplication. Thus Husserl remarks at the beginning of his time lectures, “that the perception of a temporal object has itself temporality, that perception of duration presupposes duration of perception”; and Merleau-Ponty speaks in his late writings of a temporal “vortex.” Here emerges with