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JAMESON ON MAKING HISTORY APPEAR

The difficulty of thinking *about* time is a consequence of the problem of objectifying time. I propose to introduce this problem by examining Fredric Jameson's approach to it in his remarkable essay, "The Valences of History."[1] Initially, I will summarize what I think is the methodological problem in thinking time, and then I will critically discuss Bergson's attempt at resolving this problem in relation to Kant, Heidegger, and Ricoeur. Finally, I will present Jameson's novel recasting of the problem and consider some of its ramifications.

THE METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEM

The attempt to think time poses a methodological problem because time is no ordinary object or phenomenon. The philosophical theorizing of time is split between the metaphysical and phenomenological approaches. Metaphysics asks: What is time? Phenomenology asks: How do we experience time?

Aristotle is the paradigmatic exemplar of the metaphysical approach. Despite or perhaps because of it, he construes time as a physical phenomenon: time is "the number of movement in respect of before and after."[2] Time is defined in terms of the more fundamental notions of number, movement, and sequence ("before/after"). It is often objected that "before/after" is a temporal distinction, so that Aristotle's definition begs the question. But "before/after" can be taken to mean "earlier than" or "later than," which are determinations of order that apply to synchronic structures, so that the notion of atemporal sequencing is perfectly intelligible.

Still, the metaphysical approach faces two problems: What data are we to take as preeminently temporal – physical, biological, historical and/or psychological? If time is the number of motion, does this mean that motionlessness is equivalent to timelessness? But surely motionlessness itself is conceived as a state during which time passes. Does this mean time's passing is irreducible to objective measure? If we cannot determine which data qualify as intrinsically temporal, then we cannot determine which phenomenon should provide the starting point for our metaphysical investigation into the nature of time. Moreover, if metaphysics asks what *kind* of thing time is, this investigation may misfire from the start precisely insofar as time cannot be conceived as any kind of *thing*.

The most common objection to the objective definition of time is that it cannot adequately account for our experience of the *passing* of time – a phenomenon that seems to be independent of every objective measure. This difficulty is famously formulated by Augustine:

> What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not: yet I say boldly that I know, that if nothing passed away, time past were not; and if nothing were coming, a time to come were not; and if nothing were, time present were not. Those two times then, past and to come, how are they, seeing the past now is not, and that to come is not yet? But the present, should it always be present, and never pass into time past, verily it should not be time, but eternity. If time present (if it is to be time) only cometh into existence, because it passeth into time past, how can we say that either this is, whose cause of being is, that it shall not be; so, namely, that we cannot truly say that time is, but because it is tending not to be?[3]

Time is ontologically anomalous. If we think of the present as what *is*, its positive consistency is riven by two negations, both of which are internal to it: the present that it is *not* yet and the present that it *has been*. The consistency of the actual present is punctured by both these absent presences, on which it turns out to be dependent. Thus Augustine was driven to think what is not yet and what has been as constitutive of what is actually present; such that the present exists as the distension encompassing the anticipation of what is not yet as well as the retention of what is no longer. The distended present of consciousness exists as the differential articulation of past and future presents. This is, of course, a view that anticipates Husserl's account of the living present as structured by the interplay of retention and protention, as well as Heidegger's account of ek-static temporalization.[4]

Taking this distension as its starting point, the phenomenological approach is more sensitive to the danger of reifying time. But it faces a fundamental problem; one which becomes apparent once we distinguish the three registers of time:

- Subjective: time as individual experience; phenomenological/existential
- Historical: time as collective experience; political/institutional/archaeological
- Objective: time as impersonal and non-experiential; physical/biological/geological/cosmological

The articulation of these three registers presents a problem for the phenomenological as well as the metaphysical approaches. If the subjective experience of time is our fundamental datum, how do we go about reconnecting it to historical and cosmological time? Can phenomenology avoid subjectivizing time? The subjectivization of time internalizes it to individual consciousness. Time's irreducibility is maintained at the cost of affirming the absolute primacy of subjectivity. This is the move made by Bergson, Husserl, and Heidegger, each in his own way. It only attains full methodological self-consciousness in Heidegger, for whom existential temporality is the source of and condition for historical and cosmological (i.e., world) time. Two problems then arise. First, how can the plurality of subjective times be rendered commensurate within a single, impersonal, historical time? Second, how can the boundary between personal and impersonal, experiential and non-experiential, be wholly inscribed within subjective time? We will return to these issues below. The important thing to note for now is how metaphysics and phenomenology conspire to sandwich history between subjective and objective time. It is this "sandwiching" of history that Jameson will challenge.

TIME AS FORMLESSNESS

Kant lends the methodological problem a decisive twist: "Time yields no shape."[5] For Kant, it is precisely because it is a form of intuition that time is devoid of conceptual form. In Platonic terms, time is *formlessness as such*. The problem of conceptualizing time is that of trying to give form to formlessness *as such*. Of course, formlessness as such is a paradoxical notion. Indeed, every attempt to formalize time is paradoxical. This is why time is the phenomenon that resists conceptual representation. Does this then mean it can be grasped as pure presentation? Here, it is important to mark the difference between the Kantian claim that time, as a form of intuition, is a necessary condition for the representability (i.e., cognizability) of objects and the claim that time is *intuited* formlessness. The claim that formlessness, as such, can be directly

1. Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London and New York: Verso, 2010), 475–612.
2. Aristotle, *Physics*, bk. 4, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 11: 220a, 24, 387.
3. Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. 11, §17, trans. E. B. Pusey (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1950), 287.
4. Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time, 1893–1917*, trans. J. Barnett Brough (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2008); Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).
5. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 163.

intuited is the temptation proper to any philosophy that thinks it can circumvent representation by retrieving the immediacy of time's self-presentation in terms of so-called "lived experience." Bergson is the pre-eminent advocate of this claim. It requires separating time from space. Space is quantity without quality, repetition *partes extra partes*. Time is quality devoid of any unit of measure, and hence quality without quantity:

> In a word, pure duration might well be nothing but a succession of qualitative changes which melt into and permeate one another, without precise outlines, without any tendency to externalize themselves in relation to one another, without any affiliation with number: it would be pure heterogeneity.[6]

In Bergson's account, the heterogeneity of duration cannot be aligned with difference in extensity (space) because it is *sensed*, not thought. It consists of *sensible*, rather than intelligible, differences. Thus it is acategorical. Bergson's favored example is the unfolding of a melody: any difference in the duration of any part of the melody alters the quality of the whole because the relation between part and whole changes unceasingly as a function of the difference between past and present. Thus difference in quality varies continually as a function of duration and cannot be tied to specifiable differences between discretely individuated states.

But this qualitative difference must be subjectively registered. To say that duration is "lived" (*vécue*) is to say that the subjectivity of duration is one with the subjectivity of sensation. Bergson wishes to dissociate differences in sensation from differences in the representation of sensation. But to do this, he must dissociate our ability to discriminate qualitative differences from our ability to perceive qualities as properties of *things* – that is to say, enduring substances.

Now, while the ability to discriminate sensory inputs is constitutive of sentience, the capacity to perceive something *as* something is a conceptual ability that marks the transit from sentience to sapience, and the difference between feeling and knowing. In this regard, the distinction between substance and attribute can be taken to be the reflexive formalization of the pre-reflexive discrimination between thing and property implicit in our practical comportment. For many philosophers – Kant and Hegel foremost among them – this conceptualization of sensory discrimination signals the ascent from sensation to perception, and marks a decisive step forward in our cognitive evolution. But for Bergson, conceptualization is metaphysically discredited by its utilitarian origins. The intellect selects, abstracts, and generalizes, but these operations are determined by the needs of the organism. Experience is perception, but because our perception is limited, our organs subtract, select, and isolate elements from the flux of sensation:

> If the senses and consciousness had an unlimited scope, if in the double direction of matter and mind the faculty of perceiving was indefinite, one would not need to conceive any more than to reason. Conceiving is a makeshift when perception is not granted us, and reasoning is done in order to fill up the gaps of perception or to extend its scope.[7]

If conception traduces the metamorphic movement of duration, this is because it is called upon to supplement the organic limitations of perception. Intellection fixes and abstracts, selects and subtracts. It arrests the flow of duration, carving it into discrete states to which it attributes determinate properties. It abstracts generic properties from these determinate states by subtracting their particular differences. Lastly, it uses these generic properties to establish relations of similarity and dissimilarity between states in terms of measurable changes in quality.

By way of contrast, Bergsonian intuition is nothing but pure perception, without selection or subtraction. Thus the reality of change can only be intuited, not conceived. But what qualities of duration does intuition reveal? Since these qualities are not attributable to recognizable things, how are we to say what they are qualities *of*? For Bergson, language (and symbolization, more generally) is precisely the medium of conceptual generality that substitutes the utilitarian representation of things for the presentation of duration (time) "as such." The conceptual specification of qualitative particularity remains constrained by the linguistic structure of categorization. But for Bergson it is precisely categorization that elides the absolute heterogeneity of duration's qualitative singularities. Yet the intentionality of perception – the perception of something *as* something, as *this*, not *that* – seems to require conceptual mediation.

By purging sensation of the intentionality of conception, Bergson rejects Kant's intrication of perception and judgment. Bergson absolutizes the heterogeneity of sensation to such an extent as to render its correlate indiscernible, since in denying the "of-ness" of sensation, he effectively (and deliberately) dissolves the distinction between sensing and sensed. But then the question remains: *what* is sensed, if any identification of the object of sensation is already its conceptual sequestration? The fusion of sensing and sensed in intuition is not the perception of sheer heterogeneity – formlessness, as such – but the substitution of conceptual indeterminacy for the phenomenon of formlessness. This is to say that Bergson has to use language to communicate language's congenital inability to capture the heterogeneity of a duration whose intrinsic features he can only indicate linguistically, which is to say conceptually. He has to resort to concepts to describe time's resistance to conceptual characterization.

FROM FIGURATION TO *PHAINESTHAI*

Pace Bergson, time is not self-presenting; it does not show itself directly. There is no absolutely immediate experience of time as such, unfiltered by concepts, once it is understood that time *is* mediation. Mediation is, of course, the fundamental category of dialectical thinking, and to say that time is mediation is to suggest that to think dialectically is to think temporally: this is Jameson's fundamental contribution to the problem of thinking time. But to understand how Jameson construes time as mediation, we have to understand in what sense he is a self-consciously dialectical thinker – one who eschews both the metaphysical reification of time and its phenomenological subjectivization. How can we mark this difference?

Kant taught us to distinguish the formally necessary properties of our representations of things from the necessary properties of things in themselves. Metaphysics is dogmatic to the extent that it mistakes the properties of representations for the properties of things. It

6. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. F. L. Pogson (New York: Harper, 1960), 104

7. Henri Bergson, "The Perception of Change," in *The Creative Mind*, trans. M. L. Andison (Totowa, NJ: Littlefield Adams and Co., 1975), 131.

assumes that things in themselves lend themselves to representation. Dialectical thinking proposes to move beyond both the dogmatic representation of the thing itself and the epistemic formalism of Kant's philosophy. It does so through the insight that what Kant characterized as the discrepancy between representation and thing is, in fact, *the thing itself*. But the thing itself is no longer a self-identical substance; it is rather a concatenation of differences: something that is not what it is, and is what it is not. Most importantly, for dialectics, the difference between what the thing is and what we take it to be is internal to the thing itself. If time is the ultimate source of differentiation, this means that dialectics thinks time as both the form and the content of the thing: it lets things appear in time while letting time show itself in things.

The problem, then, is to understand how time can resist encapsulation within prefabricated concepts without transcending conceptualization entirely. What is to be resisted is the theological gesture that would relegate time's formlessness to the realm of the utterly ineffable or infinitely other. Thus the challenge is to forge a form appropriate to the phenomenon of time as a new kind of phenomenon, such that time impregnates the knowing of time. This is to make formlessness appear. But to phenomenalize formlessness is not to stamp it with the seal of unity. Time is not one. As Jameson puts it: "Only in the intersection of multiple kinds of temporality can Time itself – if one can speak of such a thing – be made to appear."[8] The challenge is to think time's heterogeneity or, better, its radical inconsistency, without subjectivizing it in such a way that this inconsistency is relativized to the empirical multiplicity of subjectivities.

Jameson credits Heidegger with a decisive conceptual innovation as far as the thinking of time is concerned. Time is not a phenomenon, but the phenomenality of the phenomenon; it is not appearance, but the appearing of appearance, or *phainesthai*. Time as *phainesthai* shifts the register of analysis from the metaphysics of presence to the destruction of traditional ontology that overturns time's subordination to presence. But in Heidegger this overturning operates by invoking another type of transcendence, the transcendence of *Dasein*, as that being which is in each case *mine*. As Heidegger writes in his 1924 lecture *The Concept of Time*: "What is time became the question: Who is time? More closely: Are we ourselves time? Or closer still: Am I my time?"[9] Heidegger's overturning of the metaphysics of presence is carried out in the name of a metaphysics of propriety or "authenticity" (*eigentlichkeit*), which Jameson rejects precisely because it reinscribes the manifold of time, its formlessness, within the form of mineness or propriety. Thus, Jameson wants to expropriate *phainesthai* from the hermeneutics of propriety and use it to make formlessness appear.

This is the problem of *figuring* time. Figuration is non-representational form. In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur proposes a hermeneutic alternative to Heidegger's metaphysics of propriety, insisting that no pure phenomenology of time is possible.[10] For Ricoeur, time's appearing is not a datum of intuition (Bergson), nor a resoluteness towards death (Heidegger), but rather the result of a *narrative configuration*. Configuration is a form of narrative synthesis: "The configurating act presiding over emplotment is a judicative act,

involving a 'grasping together'."[11] This narrative configuration or "emplotment" has three aspects that Ricoeur appropriates from Aristotle's Poetics:

- *Peripeteia* – reversal
- *Anagnorisis* – recognition
- *Pathos* – suffering.

Literary narrative exemplifies the configuration of time as the co-imbrication of reversal, recognition, and suffering in a "dissonant concordance" freed from the implausible resolutions of teleological synthesis, whether metaphysical or dialectical. Ricoeur's humanist agenda is clear: narrative configuration gives shape to time beyond the fetishization of absolute heterogeneity (Bergson), but without reinstating historical teleology (*à la* Hegel and Marx). The problem for Jameson is that this configuration of time as "dissonant concordance" replaces the martial individualism of "being-towards-death" with intersubjective consensus and conciliatory pluralism. The "emplotment" of dissonance subordinates time to the form of intersubjectivity, which precludes catastrophic overturning, whose figures are the irreversible, the unrecognizable, and the intolerable. Yet catastrophe is precisely one of the figures in which history appears as the shattering of consensus and the violation of the personal by the impersonal. Jameson is quick to affirm the dialectical corollary, which distinguishes historical materialism from tragic pessimism: history also appears as liberation, as the emancipation of persons through impersonal institutions:

> In the phenomenon that interests us here, the sudden flash of history, we must somehow account for the evidence that History in that sense can be experienced either as a nightmare or as a sudden opening and possibility that is lived in enthusiasm. It is an alternation which suggests the existence of some deeper duality in thing itself: the way in which, for example, the appearing of History, its *phainesthai*, entails a new opening up of past and future alike, which can conceivably be marked antithetically: a somber past of violence and slaughter giving way to a new sense of collective production, or on the contrary a glimpse of promise in the past which is shut down by a closing of horizons in universal catastrophe. Better still, both dimensions can be experienced at one and the same time in an undecidable situation in which the reemergence of History is unrelated to its content and dependent above all on that form in which after a long reduction to the lowered visibility of the present, past and future once again open up in the full transparency of their distances.[12]

The indissociability of ruin and accomplishment, defeat and victory, beyond the reversals of narrative, is but one symptom of a deeper duality in the thing itself, a fission which resists judicative synthesis and exceeds narrative configuration, but reveals History as a totalization-in-process. This is a realization that Jameson attributes to Sartre: History itself only appears within history: "it is only on the occasion of certain of its events that History can be grasped as an Event in its own right."[13] Thus History is neither an all-encompassing continuity nor a punctual interruption, but the interpenetration of the two. More importantly for Jameson, it is not consciousness or narrative whose synthesizing acts make History appear. The synthesizing

8. Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 500.

9. Martin Heidegger, *The Concept of Time*, trans. W. McNeill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 22E.

10. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 83.

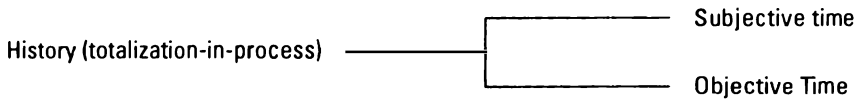
11. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, trans. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 61.

12. Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, 598.

13. Ibid., 592.

power that gives form to the formless multiplicity of temporalities, drawing them inexorably into its orbit, is not subjectivity, but Capital as the motor of globalization. Capital is the totalization-in-process of History as synthesis of subjective and objective time.

This allows Jameson to rearticulate our initial triad: subjective time, historical time, objective time. Jameson counters Ricoeur's idealist *phainesthai* with a materialist alternative in which it is the capitalist mode of production that makes both time and history appear. In our initial triad, historical time was sandwiched between subjectivity and objectivity such that the philosophy of history pitted metaphysicians, who subordinate historical change to natural becoming, against phenomenologists, who subordinate collective transformation to existential conversion. Jameson's great insight is that the difference between time and history must be made to appear within each term of the distinction. To think the difference between time and history is to *historicize time* and to *temporalize history*. History becomes the mediation-in-process through which both subjectivization and objectivization become possible. It mediates the transition from the pre-experiential to the experiential, from objectivity to subjectivity, just as it mediates the eruption of the impersonal into the personal, and the reinsertion of the personal within the impersonal:



However, as a Marxist, Jameson cannot remain content with identifying Capital as the motor of historical totalization. Capital is not the pilot of universal history, even if it is its engine. Because History is a totalization-in-process rather than an achieved totality, it is necessarily incomplete. Thus it implies its own other, both as what it is not and what it has never been. What is not and has never been is the reservoir of formlessness from which every figuration of time is drawn, but a formlessness devoid of potentiality since potentiality is already endowed with conceptual form. What is not, nor has ever been, is nowhere and nowhen. It is Utopia as the "absolute negation of that fully realized Absolute which our own system has attained."[14] Utopia can only be figured as the absolute other of systemic totality and totalizing event, substance, and subject: "the alternate world contiguous with ours, but without any connection or access to it."[15] This alternate world is already actual, rather than merely possible, yet its causal disconnection from ours renders it inaccessible. And in a justly famous passage, Jameson concludes: "Then from time to time, like a diseased eyeball in which disturbing flashes of light are perceived, or like those baroque sunbursts in which rays from another world suddenly break into this one, we are reminded that Utopia exists and that other systems, other spaces, are still possible."[16]

ACTUALIZING THE IMPOSSIBLE

Three things are worthy of note here. First, Utopia, Jameson argues, "is not a representation, but an operation calculated to disclose the limits of our own imagination of the future, the lines beyond which we do not seem able to go in imagining changes in our own society and world (except in the direction of dystopia and catastrophe."[17] Utopia can only be figured as

the impossibility of what is currently representable, conceivable, or imaginable. But this impossibility is *actual*, says Jameson. Thus Jameson subjects Heidegger's ontologization of possibility as finite transcendence to a dialectical reversal: it is now the "existence", i.e., the nonobjective *actuality* of Utopia as conceptual impossibility that is the condition of (historical) *possibility* as such.

Second, actuality is indexically defined: the actual world is just *this* world, the spatiotemporal continuum we collectively inhabit that is cognitively accessible to us. But other worlds, although cognitively inaccessible to us, are equally actual; they are just not *ours*. In a probably unintended echo of David Lewis, Jameson recodes the actual/possible distinction as an epistemological difference, rather than an ontological difference. It is not a difference in being, but a difference in knowing.[18] More specifically, it is the difference between the conceivable and the inconceivable, which here stands as a cipher for the difference between the knowable and the unknowable. But if this impossibility merely marked the crack or fissure in what is currently conceivable, if it merely figured the impossibility proper to our system, it would remain a second-order representation: the representation of the unrepresentable. From a dialectical point of view, the crack or fissure must acquire a positive valence within our current conceptual system. What prevents the unrepresentable from becoming hypostasized as a transcendent *thing* is the very act of conceiving it as a fissure for us, which condenses into an obligation for us to *do* something. This condensation proceeds through the work of conceiving the inconceivable; an effort that turns it into a *reason* for the practical transformation of what is.

This brings us to our third and final point. It is the causal disconnection between contiguous actual worlds that renders them mutually inaccessible. But the evocation of "flashes of light" registering in a "diseased" and presumably unseeing eye seems to imply some sort of transmissibility across disconnected worlds. Is this transmission due to some unknown kind of causation? Is transit across worlds a matter of forging new kinds of causal connection, both in theory and in practice? And if so, does this entail that "possibility" is to be understood in terms of these new forms of causal interaction across spatiotemporally disjoint systems?

14. Ibid., 612.

15. Ibid., 612.

16. Ibid., 612.

17. Ibid., 413.

18. "Our actual world is only one world among others. We call it alone actual not because it differs in kind from all the rest, but because it is the world we inhabit. The inhabitants of other worlds may truly call their own worlds actual, if they mean by 'actual' what we do, for the meaning we give to 'actual' is such that it refers at any world *i* to that world *i* itself. 'Actual' is indexical, like 'I', or 'here', or 'now'. It depends for its reference on the circumstances of utterance, to wit the world where the utterance is located." David Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), 85–86.