

Time, Understanding, and Will

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In the passage from the Enneads devoted to discussing and defining the nature of time, it is written that first one must experience eternity, which, as everyone knows, is the model and archetype of time. This initial warning, which is especially serious because we trust in its sincerity, appears to wipe out all hope of finding common ground with its author.

Jorge Luis Borges, *History of Eternity*

So let us leave the Platonists to wander off down a blind alley.¹ Poor simpletons, they think they will find the secret of discourse about time in the link with eternity. Whereas I, who am powerless in the face of eternity, would prefer to ask: what link can be retained, in discourse about time, between past, present, and future? If there is some link, can the three kinds of time break free of their mutual bonds? Can predicting the future, a time that will be but has never existed before, be disconnected from what determines the future as a product of what already exists and what has already existed? Can the past be what it once was or will it always be what each age decides it should have been?

Put this way, these questions lead to never-ending discussions in which each argument seems to retain its validity. So may I take the liberty of imposing some limits on the questions based on a dual distinction: the difference between a theoretical question and a practical one, and the difference between the content and the form of thought.

When we formulate theoretical questions, our attention is not focused on *what-ought-to-be* or *what-has-to-be-done*, but on being itself. The intention is not to judge but to understand. When understanding occurs with a cognitive intent, the “for what” question is intrusive; this is not a question about understanding, but about the value of understanding. When Husserl invented *epochè*, he was simply asking us not to become allergic to theory in our hurry to form a judgement; judging needs to be put on hold to allow understanding to take place. Husserl’s *epochè* is similar to Freud’s ‘floating attention’. Knowing and inquiring is not the same as running up the flags to praise or criticize the content of the knowledge. Praising and criticizing, by taking up an attitude *vis-à-vis* the facts, means going beyond them, transcending those which are candidates to be approached by knowledge, because the attitude to the facts adopted does not arise from them, cannot be deduced from them, and is not caused by them.

On the other hand, when practical questions are put, what interests us is *what-ought-to-be* or *what-has-to-be-done*, and if being becomes our focus, it is to discover what to do with it and how to treat it; for instance, whether we should go along with it, use it, or ignore it, even questioning if it is worthy to know it. The practical approach is concerned with the value of things. Behind every practical question there is “yes or no”, approval or criticism.

There would be coincidence between theoretical and practical aspects only where what I want to be was in fact the case and what is coincided with what I aspire to, but this never happens except in Paradise. Our earthly life does not offer such luxuries. In dreams wishes come true, distances are telescoped, time stops, and for a moment we experience eternity. Borges tells the story of a long pleasurable day with his beloved spent in an imaginary Iceland and tries to persuade us, unsuccessfully, that this means being with her in Iceland, "at that precise moment" when he was absorbed in a nostalgia for the present.² Since that present is only nostalgia for the present, the only solution is the distinction between being and wishing.

We said that theoretical questions relate to being or understanding. As far as the past is concerned, it is a question of being able to *understand* what has been and can never be different from what it was. Is it possible to search the past without reference to the present, that is, without our yearning for Iceland determining what we can know of the past? Is there a real chance of knowing the past, or is it mere stories, fairy-tales and fantasies in which the present pretends to be the past?

With respect to the future, it is a question of whether it can be *approached*, that is, whether it is *predictable*, without its links to the present and the past. Is it possible to apprehend the realization of something that is only possible? The question does not concern the feasibility of the 'knowledge' of opposite possibilities that are still coexistent without being contradictory; it is not about possible worlds, because that does mean any prediction, but simply contradictory truths existing simultaneously. The question concerns the possibility of knowing whether certain non-recurrent and unique events will indeed occur. Or whether, by chance, only what recurs can be predicted, for instance knowing that it will rain because it has already rained.

As regards the past, my reply is that it may be understood provided it is freed from its connection with the present. But you must pay attention to what I am suggesting: *concentrating* on the present is a prior condition of returning to the past. And further, it does not mean freeing yourself from the interests and motives that make you concerned with historical issues. It is to do with the possibility of understanding past events that might be of interest *now*. In my view it is possible to assign a truth value to events, without this being conditioned by the values, desires, and motives of the present. I mean that the past, in theory, can be understood, but it is essential that the analysis be brought to bear on one's own values. Awareness of the past depends on the present being aware of itself.

Furthermore, as far as predicting the future is concerned, this cannot be disconnected from the past or the present. What is predicted, under cover of foretelling the future, is in fact only the past or the present. The assumption behind prediction is that the past comes back in the future.

So, in the context of theoretical knowledge, my answer is that the past can in principle be known and the future cannot. Let us go on to ideas about practical knowledge.

Practical knowledge is a synthesis of value and knowledge, a synthesis between the knowledge of facts and the application of values. By "application of values" I mean any attitude adopted towards what is given, and by "understanding of facts" I mean knowledge of those aspects of what is given that are relevant to the values to be applied. This distinction, projected on to the time dimension, means we can say that the past and the present are the conditions within which we act, the materials with which the future is

constructed, and thus that they determine those aspects of the synthesis that should be known in order to serve the values, insofar as the future will result from applying the values to the facts.

The present and the past, as raw material for constructing the future, represent understanding; that is, they will be processed by the understanding and controlled by the will. Whereas the future, as the required result of action, is the representative of the will; that is, it is what the will decrees it should be. The present and the past, as the condition for creating the future, are the essential aspect of action, that is to say the aspect that cannot differ from the *being-what* and the *being-how*. The future, as a necessary objective or ideal, is the expression of freedom; that is, the expression of what can differ from the *being-what* and the *being-how*. Freedom, understood in this way, is not awareness of necessity, as Spinoza and Hegel claimed, but the application of freedom to necessity, going beyond the facts from which freedom is constructed. In this interplay of connections between past and present on the one hand and future on the other, we can discern the future's dual relationship of dependence and freedom with past and present. As the consequence of freedom, the future is beyond the materials that construct it, and as a result that can be obtained from the present and the past, it remains subject to them. The future is obtained by mobilizing the two other time dimensions, but this is not a reason for deducing it from them or including it in them.

The practical synthesis between being and being-of-value will be explained using analysis of desiring behaviour in general and goal-directed behaviour in particular.

My conclusion in regard to the future's connection with the past is that the future is a result of the synthesis between understanding of the past and creative freedom, but they are both distinct from one another, though not separable. Freedom consists of the creation of possible worlds, subject to what it is already impossible to change.

The theoretical question

The great question in any historical investigation is whether the past can be researched regardless of the values held by the historian. Or is the analysis of the past in fact always a reflection of current intentions and values? In other words, can the past be freed from what may be the distorting connections provided by the analyst? If the past cannot be freed from being distorted, it would be impossible to distinguish between historians and, for instance, politicians. Because the latter, who apply themselves to the achievement of their aims, commonly misrepresent the truth, deliberately distort the past, when they aim to affect the future. For politicians the past is a source of inspiration, a huge repository of data produced by previous generations, from which they can extract material they need to achieve their ends. Whenever possible, they choose from the data available in the store that which best serves their purposes. Or else, when convincing data does not exist, they invent it through the power of their grandiose rhetoric, which is very good at dressing up facts.

Politicians reinvent history, whereas the analyst's job is to understand it. In order to understand the past independently of the present, they must neutralize their values, "free themselves from the present", since otherwise the results of their research will always confirm their hypotheses, which will never be verifiable. In order to neutralize their

values, analysts must know what part their present plays in the understanding of the past. Those who carry out research into past eras cannot erase their own, but must subject it to an analysis that will allow them, by becoming aware of what is close, to tackle research into what is distant. Awareness of the past depends on awareness of the present. I mean that we will understand Napoleon if we understand ourselves, even if understanding oneself is not yet the same as understanding Napoleon, because I need to know how to work out if what I say about Napoleon does or does not include my wishes relating to what I would like Napoleon to have been. So let us start by taking account of the necessary aspects of the present that we have to bear in mind in order to understand the past.

Historical understanding

The historian's present is strange: it is not always present; what is more, it has a tendency to be absent. When I think about Napoleon, generally my present is like an absence as far as my consciousness is concerned. Even if presence infiltrates, it is not like an absent person protesting and demanding to be present. It is as if, while I am absorbed, interested, drawn by what is filling my consciousness, I am erased, absent. Napoleon occupies my thoughts and I forget I am me thinking of him. When I am focused on something that happened in the past, I am so immersed in my thoughts that I am not aware of their form or manner. It does not matter whether the thought is concerned with real or imaginary entities, Napoleon or Don Quixote. The more I am there, the less I am in the here and now.

When does the present appear in this thinking about the past? It can surprise us at any moment. Indeed, it was always there. For example, when I ask myself questions about the decisions Napoleon did not make. By doing so, I am still thinking about Napoleon, but through a question relating to hypothetical, non-existent events that help me to understand him. Hypothetical questions that are part of *my* methodology are events invented by me with a view to understanding the great Corsican. Nevertheless, my methodology is not yet the object of my analysis, my attention is not yet focused on it. My methodology or any other aspect of my present will not appear until a change of register occurs. When, at what point, will we change direction and look at our present? At that precise moment we move away, tactically, from what we were looking for. This occurs when we reflect, when we direct *our thinking* towards Napoleon. And in reflecting, in thinking about thought, what do we have left of that figure? Is it simply reduced to images in the present? Where is what was? Is Napoleon not simply a figment of the present imagination?

These questions come into our mind during an initial moment of reflection, when the mind first discovers the inevitable presence of the past. Then, full of alarm, because it thinks the past is only a form of the present and nothing else, it concludes that the time's dimensions do not exist. This is the great terror St Augustine felt. In his intellectualised thinking he believed present time to be the only real time. He could only understand temporality by reducing it to the present. There is a present of past events, that is, memory; a present of present events, the present consideration of present events; and a present of future events, expectation.³ Augustine reduces time to the present because he does not take account of the content of temporal thought, the *what*, but asks himself: "When do I

think what I think?”, and this moves him away from past and future and places him in the present. So, prefiguring Descartes, instead of talking about the past, he referred to the memory we have of it now, and instead of talking about the future, he referred to present expectations of the future. Unintentionally he discovered an important aspect of time, that is, time thought about here and now.

Augustine was wrong to deny past and future the ‘right’ to be absent, that is, notions viewed from the perspective of their content. It would seem that, as he considered the matter, the real dimension of thought, thought as such rather than its content, what Descartes and Spinoza called the formal reality of thought, so confused Augustine that, when he asked himself “What do we think about?”, he thought the question related to who was thinking and when. He sacrificed content for form.

But somewhere this stickler for truth was right. Since they are connected to the present, brought to mind in the present, past and future are real and present. I mean that when I reflect, that is, when I think what I think, I discover another reality that is no less real, and maybe more real: I discover the mode in which I think about Napoleon, I discover the *reality* of my idea’s ideality. I discover the immanent reality that is thinking here and now about Napoleon, who lived previously and elsewhere. I discover that the idea I have of Napoleon is not Napoleon’s but only about Napoleon. I am not fighting on his battlefields but sitting comfortably in my armchair. Thus I discover the form of thought, the present reality of my idea. That my idea, as an idea, and not its eidetic content but what we might call its ‘real form’, is situated within my horizon. The real form relates to those aspects of the idea that, without yet being part of the content, will be crucial for thinking it in and through this form. Form is the context in which I read the text, the mode that lets me express my ideas on Napoleon. Form is not content but carries content (what semiologists apply the misnomer ‘signifier’ to), it is not a signified but carries the signified. Form becomes content, signified, only during the course of reflection. Thus I become aware that the *mode* of my thought about this historical figure is related to other aspects of my real life, to my whole culture, I discover my real being when faced with the eidetic being, in this case Napoleon.

What we treat as imaginary, eidetic (the content of the intended act), is the very thing we treat as real (the form). Real and imaginary are here one, a single entity. It is just that we are dealing with two *different* aspects of the same thing. When we sail off into the past or venture into the future, we are ourselves, here and now, setting out for who knows where. This, our being here and now, is the form. We cannot linger, we cannot live in the past or the future. Of course we can escape there, but we do so in imagination, and this imagination remains real, our own, in a present here and now. We would like to escape from the unforgiving present, but that is impossible, there is no solution but to remain in it daydreaming, imagining a past or future but anchored in the present. A frustrating and real search for time already lost to us, or the equally present enjoyment of an inaccessible future, a golden time that is all the more loved because it is not here. Our nature is to look back and forward, but when we go back or forward we still stay in the here and now. And it is not true that the present expands to become the past or future, but that we remain here irrevocably, locked in the prison of the only real time dimension we can never leave, but only at best ignore.

So it happens that going back in time or forward into the future at the same time takes on the meaning of a real movement drawing the other time dimensions towards the

present. Inexorably, going is the same as staying. And so past and future are present, lived experiences. Flight from the present, depending on the specific meaning it takes on each time, is a particular and different way of living the present.

The links are so close that connect what is for me unconscious (the real) with the conscious ideas making up the content of my thoughts. The eidetics of my thoughts has the real form of my being. Ideas are more than ideas, they overflow their content. Ideas have a reality. But this reality is not part of the idea's content. This is why these non-eidetic aspects rightly retain the name 'form', insofar as this term is for us the opposite of content. In our examples form is the present existence of the past.

Because he believed content is part of form, Augustine thought he was cancelling out past and future. But when they are considered in the light of the distinction between form and content, these time dimensions are connected right now with the present: *yet again* I refer to Napoleon, Emperor of the French, but as he is revealed to me now, that is, from a certain perspective. Without this distinction Augustine's formalism (not to speak of 'realism', since the term has been appropriated by the technical jargon of philosophy) leads to relativism.⁴ Relativism is the illusion of imagining that the observer's perspective, form, cancels out even the content studied through the lens: the object is confused with the lens, which seems to create its object.⁵

So what do we learn when we focus on the *way* by which we refer to the imaginary person or, which comes to the same thing, to the real person? We learn something about ourselves: our mode of relating to Napoleon is ours and not his. And what will happen if we do not focus on anything? What happens if, while thinking about Napoleon, we forget ourselves? We would fall into objectivism or subjectivism, which are two inventions of extremists. Into objectivism if we had seen as belonging to the object what belonged to the *relation* of the subject to the object, if we had attributed to the content, i.e. Napoleon, the form, that is, the relation of the subject. And into subjectivism if we had reduced the content to the form, which is what happened to Augustine; in that case there would be nothing left of the Napoleon certain aspects of whom can be verified. All that would be left is Napoleonic legends, that is, relations without objects.

On the other hand, if we retain the difference into the unity of form and content, we will discover that we apparently live in two worlds: an eidetic world and a real world. When thinking about Napoleon, I am in an eidetic world that goes beyond my horizon. But I am also in the real immanent world. It is me (immanence) thinking of him (transcendence). All transcendence is rooted in immanence.

Eidetic content and formal reality, the signified and what carries it, are not two separate worlds. If these worlds were separate, I could not live, now there, fighting at Waterloo, now here, sitting in my armchair. The truth is that I cannot be there, playing with the contents of my imagination, without being here; on the other hand I can quite well sit here without being there. Whether I was there or not, I would always be here.⁶

But it so happens that the *eidetic world* that sustains me, and in which I am immersed and absorbed, the transcendent Napoleon, and the *real world* where I sustain my ideas, cannot appear in my consciousness together. I am aware of either one or the other. My primary, original, unreflecting consciousness focuses on the eidetic world.

The real world is the focus of my reflection, if that is the case (since it does not have to be so). When I think of something, my primary unreflecting thought thinks of something, for instance the battle of Waterloo. When I think I am thinking, I find I am thinking of

Napoleon, that is, the context and not the text. The text – for example that fact that Napoleon did not conquer Russia – does not disappear, but melts into the background. Form and content are not two different worlds, but one single world. It is just that there are two aspects to that world of mine.

What is taking place when we think of the present in the present? In that case we would say there is temporal coincidence between form and content, between the reality and ideality of time. However, the fact that there is this temporal coincidence does not imply that form and content will mingle, but that they will both remain two aspects that can be distinguished and that coexist in the notion of time.

The present, as a real aspect of the notion of future and past, becomes a key to understanding both of them. This is a way of saying that historical research is possible only if subjects are aware of what they brings to the business of knowledge. Knowing the subject means knowing one's method of projecting, by which content is organized.

Prediction

It remains to be seen whether it is possible to separate future from past. The question relates to the basis for prediction. Can one know the new in general, i.e., that which has no antecedents? If so, we must then ask whether by any chance what is known in advance is the novel aspect within the new, in future events, or just the aspects that are not new. And if not, which is what I maintain, that is, that the truly new is not foreseeable, what I say is that it is impossible to enslave the future with the chains of the past. The future will always be an opening to the new, it will always be free of links to past and present.

However, human thought has always tried to find tactics for capturing the future. But alas, the more we play the jailer, the more elusive the future becomes. It refuses to be caught in the trap. I will not attempt to explain what this novelty consists of that cannot be caught, this freedom that future possesses. I will approach this freedom from a negative viewpoint, that is to say, the forms that human understanding has invented in order to reduce the new to the old, the future to the present or the past. But we must be forgiving, for these methods were not used consciously. Scientists think of the future only in order to find out what it consists of, what it will be, and what shape it will take. Do they by any chance think about how they think of the future? No. That would be reflection on the assumptions behind their thought. We shall see what the *form* of thought about the future is like. In other words, form will now become the content of our thought.

One of these tactics is to say that the new can be known in advance. But in this way, by bringing the future forward so that it becomes the present, we are contradicting our own terms. This would be like saying that the possible already is or exists. Following Bergson, we may say that our understanding cannot capture the new except as past always, that is, not *a priori* but *a posteriori*. We can capture only what is constant in the midst of change, including change as a constant, in other words, as cyclical. This is what happens when nomological relationships are established, as in the physical sciences where laws lay down constant relationships within change. Without relying on constant reference points, we would be unable to define laws. And when we formulate them, as for calculating probabilities, we simply dress up the old and pretend it is new.

The old, that which will not be again, but has been and is, that which is constant and does not move, that which has reached finally its end, has always helped to explain the variable. In classical thought the constant is represented by substances in their role as bearers of attributes, as the unmoving principle of change, as the principle of identity in difference. The function of substance is carried out by the genres and species that individuals, taken all together, tend to reproduce. Brunellus is a horse by the very fact that he reproduces in himself the species horse, that is, what all the singular horses trotting around all over the world have in common. Scientific thought, reacting against classical thought, changes register. In this case the constant is *function* or the relationship of change or movement. The constant has always been the fixed form of movement and the variable its content. Neither science nor classical thought is able to account theoretically for the future, in other words, to predict. Prediction is an extrapolation and interpolation of the old projected on to the future.

The basic, unconscious assumption underlying all scientific predictions is not knowledge of the new, but that “simply what at least existed once in the past can return to exist in the future” and is unable to go beyond these boundaries. The Nietzschean notion of eternal return is only an overblown expression of the scientific ideal, which Nietzsche so discredited in any case. Whereas scientific prediction only claims to defend the possibility of predicting an event, Nietzsche turns it into a compulsory ontology for the whole of the universe.

Scientists, children of their assumptions, do not realize that the unmoving, including the unmoving within the moving, that which does not really accept the future, is a hypothesis of thought, not an empirical given. When we ask what in reality is unchanging, what is unmoving, we do not learn anything about the real, but about the way we approach that creator of novelty, reality. This is because we have to accept that in the world everything is flowing, becoming, and is not what it is, as Plato tried to explain in the *Parmenides*, the obscurest of his dialogues.

Causality

As virtually the whole history of philosophy shows, the future does not find favour with thought, which treats it as if it were dangerous, shutting windows and doors against it. And of all the doors, the great door *par excellence*, the trap designed to catch this intruder arriving to disturb the hippo-like calm of thought, is the notion of causality. What is causality but the reduction of new to old? Let us analyse this idea that is so hostile to the new and thus to the future.

First a correction. ‘Causality’ is only shorthand for *relationship of causality* or *causal link*. To talk of a relationship of causality implies:

1. A *relationship* between at least two events, one being the cause, the other the effect,
2. *Temporality*, that is to say, time distance between cause and effect, their non-simultaneity.

So causality is a temporal relationship between two events such that one is seen as the cause of the other.

In the causal relationship there are two times or moments. Cause C appears (epistemologically) or is given (ontologically) at time t_1 and the effect E appears or is given at time t_2 .

According to the following argument, this relationship implies a paradox:⁷

The fact that the causal relationship is temporal assumes that cause C is given at time t_1 , but effect E is not given, since it will appear at time t_2 . The question is whether a cause can exist such that when it is given the effect is not yet given.

This question can be answered in two ways: 1, either an additional cause is given, or 2, such a cause is not given. Let us see:

1. If a cause is given for which, the cause being given, the effect is not yet given, cause C is not the cause of E. The cause of E would be the cause that is not yet given, even though C is already given. This means that if causality is temporal, it is not causality. Because the question put about C can be repeated about the new cause, and so on *ad infinitum*.
2. If a new cause is not given, this implies that the cause of E is not C, but that we find ourselves faced with a *creatio ex nihilo*, so C does not explain E.

It seems that the solution would be to make E simultaneous with the appearance of C so as to be able to say that C is the cause of E. But then we break the condition required for causality, its temporality. We have turned the causal relationship into a conditional relationship because it is not temporal. In a conditional relationship, the conditioned is given if the condition is given, as in the case of the relationship between the triangle and its properties. Once the triangle is given, its properties are given. It is impossible for the triangle to be given at time t_1 and its properties at time t_2 , t_3 , t_4 , etc. Reducing cause to condition means giving up on the problem instead of resolving it. Look at what reductionists try to do: they turn temporal into atemporal dimensions. The condition relationship is eternal and has no past, present, or future.

Only the paradoxical thought of Hegel can account totally for the relationship of causality. Hegel says that "the cause is real only in its effect, where it is identical to itself".⁸ And the effect is the manifestation of the cause. Thus the causal relationship is the movement of the cause within itself. The causal relationship is a necessary relationship between cause and effect. The cause is by definition that which produces effects and nothing more, whilst the effect is similarly the result of the cause and nothing more. The causal relationship is resolved by the fact that cause and effect form a single unit.⁹

Faced with this reasoning, empirical arguments lose their explanatory power. They can offer up facts as arguments; however, facts are not arguments but the object of argument. Empiricists here can only supply inexplicable facts. Whereas Hegel attempts to explain the very concept of causality, empiricists have to recognize and accept the concept but do not pursue it to its ultimate consequences.

There is still more. With his critique of the notion of causal relationship, Hegel is not thinking in opposition to scientific thought, but expressing its most basic assumptions, which, like this one, close doors on the future.

Bergson made us aware of the fact that our reflective thought is much better equipped to deal with spatial than temporal relations. It is easier for thought tending to intellectualism to explain reality as atemporal, as something extensive in space and in a time without extension. However, time without extension is not real and it is not even time.¹⁰ Hence our tendency to assume that of the three dimensions of time – past, present, and future – the only one that exists is the present. But since we assume that the present is instantaneous, without dimension, the result is that, in trying to prove its existence, we disprove it. And why praise the present? Because it is not temporal! The present is the only time dimension that we can conceive of ‘spatially’. It is the only temporal dimension where we can hold time in a spatial ‘here’ that is also a temporal ‘now’.

The most typical spatialized temporality is scientific temporality. This is time as measurement, as a *uniform* flow, which is needed in order to process certain practical calculations. Newton’s time is homogeneous, directional, and irreversible.¹¹ Kant defined it as the principle of succession.¹² He argued thus: “between two moments, there is time, just as between two points there is a line. All moments are positions in time, like points that are positions in space.”¹³

Considered rigorously, scientific time is so undifferentiated that it does not even have within it the three dimensions that sense-perception finds in it. Kant states that time has only one dimension. Just like the scientific spirit of his era, he has taken away from time its past, present, and future.¹⁴ The past is a t_1 and the future a simple t_2 . Time is simply composed of indexed moments. Referring to this undifferentiated time, Spinoza explains it as a negation of reality. Strictly speaking, it is only appearance, while the real is eternal.

The development of the scientific concept of time begins here, but does not reach its conclusion. In a Newtonian spirit and developing the corresponding concept of time, Einstein makes it even more abstract and takes away the idea of the order of succession being unique and absolute.¹⁵ Because of the predominance of the idea of the simultaneity of events, time becomes reversible, since there is no longer even any before and after.¹⁶ Now order does not imply a direction, because alongside the directional order (cause reduced to a condition) there is a non-directional order (entropy).

Thus the scientific imagination, attached to its illusion of one-dimensional time, begins to play with the idea of reversibility within the framework of tridimensional temporality. In fact the reversibility of scientific time is already assumed from the outset. This time is so homogeneous that scientists invented the idea that going forward into the future was the same as going back into the past, because in truth we do not go in these directions, because time is so abstract.

Science lacks suitable tools to explain the future, for the future cannot be deduced from the past, at least insofar as it is the real future. That which is radically new cannot be predicted, it is not a reorganization of the old. The most science can do, along with Hegel, is to bar the way to the future. What is predicted is the constant, that which does not change in the midst of change, substance, order, or the constant, unchanging relationship of change (laws). Paying no attention to the form of change means standing outside it, as with generalization where constant factors are retained while differences are ignored. And so, both alarmed by and admiring of their own method, scientists discover, to everyone’s joy, that their predictions come true. Even if it turned out that the predictions did not come true, they argue, the problem lies in our relationship with the past. We are looking back for something we did not understand properly or something we could not calculate.

The practical question

We have seen that theoretical thought is a way of getting to know reality in order to understand it. Within this kind of analysis we have seen that the past can be disconnected from the links with the future, whereas the future, insofar as it is known in advance, cannot be disconnected from the past, because the mode used by human understanding, including the sciences, to know the future is an expression of the knowing subject and not the object presumed known. We can only know about the future what it has in common with the present and the past. In other words, the future cannot be known, at least to the extent that is really future, new.

There remains the question of the practical relationships between time dimensions. Practical thought is a way of knowing reality that aims to transform it. It is not a theoretical understanding but one that places limits on theoretical understanding and has its own limits determined by the goal to be attained: it is an understanding solely of what is relevant to that goal. As it is the understanding of what is necessary to attain the goal, it is governed by the value of effectiveness. Theory is governed by the value of truth or by the truth as a value. The values of practical convenience and truth (however) do not necessarily coincide. As everyone knows, it is not always convenient to know the truth. And knowing the truth does not always confer benefits. There are truths that serve no purpose, such as knowing the distance to the Andromeda galaxy or the whole of the knowledge possessed by Funes, the Borges character whose existential paralysis was simply the expression of his infinite memory. For those who know, even if they understand everything that exists, there is no practical value unless they can do something with their knowledge, with a certain aim or wish in mind. But it is just as impractical to have the will if one does not know what exists. Those who have being do not by this token have the *what-is-to-be-done*, and those who have the *what-is-to-be-done* do not yet have being. It is not practical to know what world we wish to live in if we do not know what world we are living in. Neither is it practical to know what world we are living in without knowing what we want to do there. Practicality is the particular meeting between knowledge of reality and the application of a value to it, between the present with its past as a source of being and the future as an inspiration for *what-is-to-be-done*.

What guides us in practical matters is our values. In practice there is a relationship between being and value such that that value dominates. Value determines what aspect of reality it will be relevant to know in order to achieve it.

Nevertheless, there is room for a theoretical question about practical matters: to what extent is value not at the same time produced by what it applies to? If it were so, if value or *ought-to-be* is deduced from being, then inevitably there is no freedom but only the illusion of freedom, that is, ignorance of what unconsciously determines our will. If it is not so, as I shall attempt to show, there is reason to assume freedom, a factor undetermined by destiny, by what we now are.

The question now is not whether the future is knowable but whether we can invent it, create it. Neither is it a question of whether by any chance the past is knowable, but what it is worth knowing about it in order to benefit from it. In other words, the practical question focuses on the future. Freedom and destiny, those two rivals, are at stake here. Are we perhaps free? Does the human race have the power to create itself or is it

determined by its biology, nature, circumstances, in short, by its past? Or, even more radically: are we the sum total of what we are or are we more than what we are?

In practice there is a synthesis between being and value, between being that is and being that wills to be, the recognition of reality and the fact of going beyond it. We are free and at the same time subject to our destiny. Practical life is the ground on which mutual concessions are made between opposites.

We are free. We are capable of transcending our being, going beyond what makes us what we are, insofar as freewill is also an act of self-constitution. Human beings are free to invent their own nature while remaining *attached* to what they are as given, that is, nature, past, 'personality', biology, history, psychology, and knowledge. Even knowing yourself as a given is not in itself part of the given, it is not given at all. The empirical given is the object of something that transcends it, the empirical subject is the object of the transcendental subject, which is more than what it is as empirical subject. This *addendum*, this ability of the subject to go beyond its being a subject, expresses the presence of the will. I mean that the capacity for self-knowledge, the capacity that goes beyond what can be known, is further evidence for human freedom. Any view that would claim to deny freewill will have to try to show that the evidence of consciousness is pure illusion and ignorance. It will have to say too that self-knowledge is a necessary, inevitable result of knowledge. But in order to do this, it will have to exclude from its explanation the majority of the human race.

Those subjects are free who, despite their subjectivity, are not subject to any will other than their own. But we must be careful with this notion. If this will is seen as personal, it is determined by what the individual already is. In order to be able to see it as free, as Rousseau and Kant saw it, it would have to be *impersonal*. It must not emanate from the subject's desires, tendencies, and aims, otherwise it would have been determined by them, that is to say, by what is already given.

Maybe Rousseau and Kant demand too much from freedom, but this excessive demand reveals a degree of truth. The idea is that subjects cannot be understood as the sum of what they are as given, that is, as objects. Subjects are that extra that is not reduced to what they are.

Freedom, this extra something, is set against our destiny, as the past is set against the future. The past is destiny and what necessarily is. It determines us *a priori* and, in principle, can be known. But the being of the future, as a *to-be*, is *known a posteriori*, never determined in advance. There is only one exception to this: when the future is determined by our will. In this case the future is a programme.

If freedom is awareness of necessity, as Spinoza and Hegel contended, necessity and awareness of it are not the same thing. Awareness of necessity is recognition of the determining past, but the knowledge that transcends it is not part of what determines. What Spinoza and Hegel state, whether they accept it or not, is freedom as different from necessity. This is because the past cannot enslave the future. What can enslave the future is only the present, that is, the situation in which we freely face our destiny, that magic point of contact between its opposites, the point where they reach their adjacent boundaries.

Simply playing with the terms under discussion, I would say that freedom is its application to necessity. Practical action implies free application of values to the knowledge of *facts*.

The synthesis between being and value is assured, not only as regards the self-constitution of subjects who produce laws that their action will obey, but also as regards these circumstances. Circumstances such as past living in the present, being of doing, given of fact, do not require action but form the setting for a range of alternative actions, and what decides and is free to decide is our will.

Nevertheless, the important thing about freewill is not that there should be a choice among the possible alternatives. This is done by all natural beings open to the alternatives that nature offers. But, if in addition we assumed that the alternatives themselves as such were already given as possible, then possibility would be seen as being part of the given. However, those who think this corroborate determinism since they leave no room for genuine free self-constitution. Freedom is thus the ability of subjects to set up themselves and their nature as objects of their will, in other words, the ability to face themselves.

Kant only went so far as to assign this act of will to moral conduct that could not be deduced from the given, or given ends, or given natural tendencies. A moral act is that act in which individuals constitute themselves in order to transcend the given.

Still we can go a step further than Kant and say that this is true not only of moral acts but also of every act, because human action cannot be deduced from knowledge of the given. The reason for action is the values held by the actor, values that are expressed in the action itself. Values cannot be deduced from facts,¹⁷ just as facts cannot be deduced from values. What I *ought* to do, not only in the sense of moral duty, cannot be deduced from the totality of what I know about reality, just as the world I live in cannot be deduced from knowing what I want to do.

In the following example we shall see an explanation of the relationship between being and value. Suppose the captain of the cruise-ship we are on announces that it is about to sink, a conclusion he draws from knowledge of data relating to a gash in the hull. Faced with this information, the reader will surely assume we are going rush to the muster area and climb into the lifeboats, elbowing each other out of the way. This appears to be a case where knowledge of certain data is the explanation for our attempt to reach a safe place on terra firma.

However, there is among us a young man who, finding out that his lover had been two-timing him – a common occurrence on this kind of cruise – decided to start reading *The Sufferings of Young Werther* for consolation. Deceived and wishing to make his lover suffer, when he hears the alarm he decides to carry on reading. Thus he is taking advantage of the chance to end his misfortune in the most romantic manner possible and without needing to call on the strength of his will.

This young man succeeds by his conduct in refuting the argument that says we take our decisions out of knowledge of facts, since it is not logically possible to attribute the same reason to an action and to its opposite. If the same reason explains two contradictory actions, we will be forced to conclude that the assumed reason is not cause or motive for the action. The motive for the action is a value and not a given. We try to escape from the boat that is about to capsize because we give a positive value to life, whereas he carries on reading because he gives it a negative value. It is true that knowledge relating to the gash in the hull is relevant to the decision, but it is not its cause.

What normally happens is that human beings taken their values for granted without asking about them, falling into the misconception that they are acting because of knowledge of facts and not because of their values.

Values are the attitudes we take to facts. They determine our mode of reaction to the given, a mode that is not “inscribed” in the given. And the attitude we take cannot be deduced from it but it is *our* response. The given is on the object’s side, the attitude on the subject’s.

But at the same time, as free subjects, we are ‘subject’ to what we are. The past is determining in that without it we would not be free, but we would not even be beings. Beings, in order to be beings, need a memory, an awareness of the past. Without memory we would have no experience, we could not learn, since we would always face the same ‘present’ situation as if it was original, primigenous. Without memory we could not even act with certain goals in mind, we could not plan.

However, memory is effective only if there is also forgetting, and forgetting is possible only at the far end of memory. Borges doubted whether his imaginary Funes, who remembered everything and could forget nothing, could perhaps be anything but pure fiction.¹⁸ Spinoza wondered whether someone who has totally lost his memory could be considered to be himself, that is, could continue to be the same individual.¹⁹

Only partial memory and forgetting, which are mutually limiting, help us to understand freedom and the future’s dependence on the past. The extreme cases mentioned by Borges and Spinoza demonstrate that the present cannot be reduced to the past. And this confirms the difference within unity, between past and present, and between them and the future for which they are both necessary conditions.

The future can and cannot be disconnected from the past. And the present, as critical mass of both time-dimensions, cannot be what it is without both the others, which are different from it: the past cannot be completely absent, just as it cannot be present.

How does the synthesis of values and facts work? How freedom is synthesized with necessity, future with past? This is the theoretical question about the practical question. I propose to follow this synthesis closely in the case of desiring behaviour.

Desiring behaviour

Human beings have two ways of tackling and achieving those of their desires that they will not abandon in the face of adverse destiny: turning them into dreams or turning them into plans. Dream, daydream, imagination, or plan (which is a dream with responsibility, which tries to become practical reality) are the natural solution that prevents us suffering the displeasure of not achieving our desires.

The dreaming approach (and in this case asleep or awake amounts to the same) satisfies desire with the simple pleasant image of what is desired, though the image does not galvanize the dreamer into an attempt to achieve or realize the desire. Dreamers resign themselves to accepting the limits time imposes. Here it is not important to know whether the reason for this resignation is the recognition that it is impossible to accomplish the desire, or that it is possible but that the price is so high that the subject declines to pay it.

The planning approach is where the desire does galvanize the subject into taking account of reality and adapting the means required to achieve or realize the desire. And subjects who plan will make their decision for two reasons: because accomplishment is feasible provided they use certain means and because they are willing to pay the price by

sacrificing the present for the future. It is not my intention here to judge human beings, praising the dreamer and criticizing the achiever. There are cultures that are goal-oriented, others that value spontaneity, including dreams. There are cultures that are willing to sacrifice the present for the future, Promethean²⁰ cultures, as well as Epimethean ones which reject that sacrifice.²¹

In both cases, desiring behaviour is a manifestation of both freedom and its limits, of both the human capacity for self-determination and the limits present and past impose on it, for desire has its limits. The opposite would be to confuse desire and its realization. Desire is the form of desiring behaviour and the thing desired its content.²² Desiring behaviour is the synthesis, the mode of desiring the desired object. Because it is desire for *something*, desire implies *lack* of what is desired. The form (the desire) is presence, the content (the desired object) is absence. This is why the fact that desire does not already imply its realization is not grounds for despair. Human beings, in such cases, turn, on the side of the form, on the side of reality, to a substitute for the accomplishment of what cannot be accomplished immediately: they begin by freeing themselves from the strings that tie them to the given, from the desired content, and start to imagine and desire a substitute for the original thing desired in the form of pure imagination or the image of a goal. Imagination introduces a new presence as a replacement for the absence that is out of reach. Thus desire is the wellspring of the imagination and the creative source of goals.

The imaginative capacity is evidence both for freewill and for the real limits of the time dimensions; it is as if the desiring subject accepted that what has been will not return and that what will be will perhaps never happen. Freedom is a shot fired against resignation, a form of being instead of not-being. Within the analysis of phenomenological time, when it is impossible for the content of the desire to be achieved already, there appears a limiting time that *forces* us to imagine. Form, as a substitute for content, is now wishing that the past were present, or else that it were possible to leap over it and access the future directly. This is true both for those who are resigned and imagine a goal, that is, a programme, and for those who are satisfied by dreams alone.

But imagination has its price. The imaginary cannot overcome the real, the illusory future cannot conquer the present where it takes shape, the desire cannot overcome the desiring subject. The subject will rather be drawn, as if spontaneously, we might say sucked in, trapped, by the formal, inevitable, real consequences that accompany imaginary content. Michael Kohlhaas, Kleist's righteous character, is only the personification of this dual action of our consciousness. No one doubts that justice was on his side. Kohlhaas dragged his country, his entire family, as well as himself into the hell of total war. But the reader knows for sure that he was right and that right to the end his plea for justice was completely justified. He paid the price for severing the connection between his desire, values, and idea of justice from its real nature. A desire depends on the person desiring, even as far as contradiction, and the desirer takes it out on the desire by demanding reparation for the sin of forgetting. "You will soon find out," says the desiring subject to the desire, "the price you have to pay for not considering me." Just as the ideal, when we try to realize it, does not think of the conditions of action, the real escapes along its own route and the ideal remains an illusion. A desire is illusory only if it ignores the desiring subject. Desire is dissatisfied with the real because the real is its own motivating force. The more the desire is unsatisfied with the real, which is also its own motivating force, the more it ignores the real, the circumstances in and by which it lives, and the more it

ignores the real, the more it meets with failure, its own immanent failure. Desire is guilty without knowing it.

When we burn bridges that link ideas to their circumstances, when we abandon the real aspect (context) and the eidetic aspect (text) of ideas, the practical expression of the idea does not coincide with its explicit, declared, conscious expression. The real result contradicts the eidetic intention. Form turns into the enemy of content.

Goal-directed behaviour

Goal-directed behaviour, as a particular mode of desiring behaviour, appears when, instead of restricting themselves to dream about their desired thing, individuals begin to plan so that the thing desired should not only be a dream but also a reality. The imagination that plans is a desiring behaviour that is not satisfied with the desirable, but imposes on it the limits of the feasible. However, there is a price to pay: the sacrifice that replaces satisfaction.

Just as in imaginary achievement, we see individuals with a real plan acknowledging the limits that time imposes on them. Placing limits on the imaginary is equivalent to comparing it with the real. In this comparison, in this attempt to bring together the poles of imagination and reality, the future is seen as the unrealized and *to-be-realized* present. The idea is here, already finalized, present in the present, but only as an idea that requires suitable steps to be taken in this immediate present to turn it into reality. Thus the desire to cross the frontiers of the given in the present leads individuals to the realization of their idea, as the notion of their values, by giving it the form of the goal-to-be-achieved. It is the alternative response to dreams and illusion, that is, *work*.

In its widest sense work is a goal-directed activity, that is to say, a practical activity where the present is sacrificed for the future. Other phenomenological forms of time appear in the guise of work. We now discover there is time saved and time spent. This is utilitarian time. This time will help us to measure our gains and losses when we do not know how to 'use' our resources. It is *time-as-resource*, a means among means. It is negative time. It is the necessary time spent that makes us reduce it to the minimum in order to feel it is a gain. So to speak, we save this time by spending it. It is teleological time. And because we have to check, extremely precisely, when and how much time (which here comes to the same thing) we are saving and how much time we are spending, we come to need time-as-measurement, instrumental time. The need for the clock makes its appearance, a forerunner of scientific time. The clock (or its natural precursors, the moon and the sun with their regular repetitions) answers the question: how much time must we spend in order to get the required results? For we have to spend time, which is as it were 'sacrificed', and just like with a bill we have to know how much.

Teleological temporality overturns the sense of real time. The fact of using means to attain ends is a process that moves from the future to the present and from the present to the past. The end precedes the means in the consciousness of the actor. But it precedes it in the form of a plan that gives meaning to the process, something that is not actualized but *to-be-actualized*. The end precedes the means as an idea complete in itself, though not yet realized. Teleological temporality confronts real temporality, attacking it without being able to eliminate it. Since it is a sacrifice, time-as-measurement wants real time to

contract till it becomes an instant, desire to be realized as it is in dreams or magic, using a simple formula that does not need spending resources. The rule is: minimum effort and maximum result. And since time is a resource, this also means time must be used as little as possible.

Desire in dreams and work sacrifice both for the achievement of the desired object. Non-teleological dreamers pay the price implied by ignoring the conditions in which they live, those that may eventually betray them with their cunning. Planners on the other hand sacrifice the present for the future.

Conclusion

I have attempted to answer the question about the relationships between the time dimensions by making use of two distinctions. The distinction between theoretical and practical questions, and that between the content and form of consciousness.

As regards the theoretical question, because of these distinctions I have suggested that historical research may be redeemed by recourse to the present self-consciousness for the salvation of the past. Further, I have tried to show that those who accept the possibility of predicting the future thinking they are witnessing the new, are simply chewing over and stirring up their past.

With regard to the practical question, I have suggested rescuing the idea of freewill through awareness of the limits that present and past impose as the form for the desire of future as the content.

In both cases my proposal is theoretical. It is a theory about theory and a theory about practice. What practical purpose can a theory have beyond being pure knowledge? Euclid was a victim of the same question when he was expounding geometry to an Alexandrian audience and a listener asked what theoretical geometry could do for him. The surprised geometer requested his assistant to offer the respected merchant a certain sum in drachmas so that he would get some benefit from hearing what a square is, or even better, a non-finite straight line²³

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Notes

1. See also Oded Balaban (1989). *The Hermeneutics of the Young Karl Marx*. *Diogenes*, 148, 28–41.
2. Jorge Luis Borges (1995). *Nostalgia del Presente*. In *La Cifra*. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 61.
3. “[N]either the future, nor the past exists. It is not correct to say: ‘There are three time dimensions: the past, the present, and the future.’ Perhaps it would be truer to say: ‘There are three time dimensions: the present of the past, the present of the present, the present of the future.’ For these three sorts of time exist in our minds and I do not see them anywhere else. The present of the past is memory; the present of the present is direct intuition; the present of the future is expectation.” St Augustine (1960). *Les Confessions*. Trans. Joseph Trabucco. Paris: Garnier, book 11, chap. 20.

4. Following the tradition of St Augustine, Fernand Braudel said that history is nothing but a constant interrogation of the past relative to the concerns and anxieties of the present. See Fernand Braudel (1989). *La Historia y las Ciencias Sociales*. Mexico: Alianza Editorial Mexicana.
5. Relativism does not understand that the logic of relationships implies that the absolute (A) is *y* for subject1 and that this same A is *x* for subject2. The term in relation is sacrificed to the relation, which changes the relation into the thing itself.
6. It is important to emphasize that form, in the sense I suggest, is not the form of the content. The form I refer to is not one that can be reached by a presumed process of abstraction starting from content. It is not the form of the content but the form *within* which I think this content.
7. In a little-studied passage from Hume the negation of causality leads to the annihilation of time. See David Hume (1995). *Traité de la nature humaine*. Trans. Philippe Bar. Paris: Flammarion, sect. II, 3rd part.
8. Hegel (1976). *Science de la logique*. Trans. Pierre-Jean Labarrière and Gwendoline Jarczyk. Paris: Aubier Montaigne, vol. I, book 3, p. 277.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 277–8.
10. See Henri Bergson (1970). *La pensée et le mouvant*. In *Œuvres Edition du centenaire*. Paris: PUF.
11. Isaac Newton (1687). *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, book 1, def. VIII.
12. See Immanuel Kant (1781). *Critique of Pure Reason*, B232.
13. Immanuel Kant (1997). *Cosmology*. In *Lectures on Metaphysics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 24.
14. Immanuel Kant (1781). *Critique of Pure Reason*, Transcendental Aesthetics, sect. II, Time, § 4, note 3.
15. See *Über die spezielle und die allgemeine Relativitätstheorie*, 1921, §§ 8–9.
16. See H. Reichenbach (1949). In Paul Arthur (ed.), *Albert Einstein: Philosopher-Scientist*. Evanston, Library of Living Philosophers, III, p. 289 et seq.
17. Following Giovanni Battista Vico, we prefer to use the word ‘given’, since ‘fact’ implies that the ‘given’ is a product of action, as does the Latin word *factum*, a root giving rise to *factory*.
18. ‘Funes the memorious’ in Jorge Luis Borges (1970). *Labyrinths*. London: Penguin, 87–95.
19. “[I]t sometimes happens that a man undergoes such changes that I would not find it easy to say of him that he is the same man; which has been heard of with reference to a certain Spanish poet who after an illness, although he had recovered from it, nevertheless was left with no memory at all of his past life, so that he would not believe that the comedies and tragedies he had composed were his. Indeed he could have been considered a grown-up child if he had also forgotten his mother tongue. And if this seems incredible, what shall we say about children? A mature man finds their nature so different from his that he cannot credit the fact that he was once a child without the help of other people’s remarks about him.” To cap this, he adds: “But in order not to give the superstitious material to cook up further questions, I would rather the matter remained undecided.” *Ethics*, part IV, prop. XXXIX, scholium.
20. For the Greeks Prometheus was the symbol of work and future orientation.
21. Epimetheus was the symbol of pleasure and present orientation.
22. Here I am avoiding analysing the nature of desires that are realized spontaneously, which do not imply frustration, because time is not relevant in this particular case. However, I would say that in this case desire and thing desired, form and content, merge into one so that it becomes impossible to distinguish between them.
23. The work of translation has given rise to certain observations from the viewpoint of a linguist. As they confirm the author’s views, we give a summary of them here.

Awareness of space before time. Linguistic phenomena confirm this: see Japanese ‘*mae*’ (from ‘*ma-he*’ = ‘true direction’) which means ‘in front’ (space) and “before’ (time). This identity, which is not by any means modern, or European, led a great physicist to say that the human race is sailing on the river of becoming looking backwards, > ‘before’ = ‘in front’, that is, towards the past.

Future and desire. The machine analysis of languages may contest the tripartite tense system Aristotle proposed for *verbs*, since here and there specialized forms are missing. There are even languages where time is not expressed at all through the verb. As regards synthetic forms, in present-day Europe you find the Romance languages (future of the type ‘have to’, with addition of incomplete elements in Portuguese), neo-Celtic languages (future based on an auxiliary ‘to be’, close to Latin), Baltic languages (future with ‘s-’, like ancient Greek and Sanskrit). But there is also a multitude of analytic forms suitable for marking

the future. Among them English 'will', and Byzantine Greek 'wish' which spread to southern Italian, modern Greek, and as far as Romanian. The same situation exists in modern Persian. We should remember that the synthetic forms of Greek and Sanskrit originated in a *desiderative* construction. Throughout the world we find synthetic forms, but more particularly analytic forms: 'be', 'go' (near future in French, but also in Coptic!), various forms of "must" (it is again a 'lack', dealt with in a different way by the subject) . . . and the most original: *fogni* 'catch (in flight)', from *fog* "tooth" in Hungarian. Indeed the importance of the future and the part that 'wishing' plays in it show that certain civilizations are more 'Promethean' than others.

Primacy of the present. Educational tradition confirms the 'Augustinian' temptation to bring everything into the present. It is said to be *the simplest* form. In fact throughout the history of languages the "present" is formed and undone, just like the other tenses. It may lack a synthetic form, cf. tsakonien, a modern Greek dialect (present = 'be' + participle). In modern Hebrew the present/future (imperfective) becomes specialized as the future and the present is a participial construction. Tagalog (or Pilipino, the national language of the Philippines) marks the present as the intersection of past and future (with double marker): root *kain* = 'eat'; *um* = assertive (active), *duplication 1st syllable* = repetition (exact or approximate); past: *kumain*, future: *kakain*, present: *kumakain*.

Conclusion. It is clear that linguistic form is not a rigid framework for expressing time. Nevertheless, better understanding between philosophers and linguists is needed. To think that the use of the auxiliary 'be' (for the three tenses) is not taken into consideration in ontological constructions (the auxiliary is assumed to be *empty*)! (French translator's note.)