



Geschichtstheorie am Werk
Theory of History at Work
La théorie de l'histoire à l'œuvre
La teoria della storia all'opera

A metaphor to time

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Cite as: Augusto de Carvalho, "A metaphor to time," in *Geschichtstheorie am Werk*, 20/06/2023, <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/16691>.

ISSN: 2750-7165

URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/16691>

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A metaphor to time

The idea of time has received careful attention from some of the most valuable thinkers. As the scientific image of the world is built on the study of changes rather than things,¹ be it in physics or metaphysics, the nature of time has long been a ubiquitous topic. The fact that time is an old but pivotal question did not, however, prevent its most irritating characteristic from prevailing, that of being an improbable, illogical and still insoluble problem.

That said, it might seem inappropriate to give my opinion on an issue of such high relevance. I would not dare to seriously ask *What is time?* Even so, I will take the liberty of briefly addressing the question of why time is a basic experience.² More precisely, what exactly makes it possible to experience time in the simplest sense of natural transience?

To answer that, I present a metaphor that compares the human experience of time to that of space as similar phenomena. I will begin with a premise from optics that relates to the sense of vision.

Physics teaches us that light is the mediator of the sense of vision. When one sees, that is, when one is able to grasp something from a certain spatial distance, ergo there is light connecting what is related to what is further away. In other words, all vision from this optical perspective is dependent on light as a *medium*. Light could therefore be understood as the basis of vision as the full experience of space—not only the perception of forms, which could also be achieved by touch, but the immediate knowledge of something at a distance. We are aware of spatial depth insofar as there is light, which allows, so to speak, for the recognition of space as a complex physical dimension. Accordingly, and here begins the proposed metaphor, in the same way that light is the basis or physical *medium* that enables us to see and know space, the past would, metaphorically speaking, be the basis or metaphysical *medium* that permits us to see or know time. Light, the physical principle that makes the experience of space possible, would be an analogue of the past, the metaphysical principle that makes the experience of time possible. Access to lightness is essential to the experience of space, just as access to pastness is essential to the experience of time. In these terms, the past is the elementary matter of transience, the passage of time.

The passage of time is, nevertheless, a contradictory idea. And this is a big, age-old problem. As a contradiction, it cannot be said, known or taken seriously as real from a logical viewpoint. This verdict was summarized and disseminated by J. M. E.

McTaggart in his essay *The Unreality of Time* (1908).³ McTaggart argues that by definition time is an inconsistent phenomenon, since it is an immediate expression of the contingent or provisional character of all reality, whose logical nonsense is caught in the paradox of existing while becoming. Time passes without passing, remains ephemeral, expresses its transitivity in an intransitive way. It is omnipresent, as time's presence is abiding, boundless—specious, as William James would say.⁴ For this reason, no matter how one approaches time-like phenomena, a paradox will arise at some point, and the countless aporias that emerge in any reflection on its nature make it impossible to conceptualize time.⁵ Given its entanglement in contradictions, the very passage of time has always been intractable as a concept. An absurdity for philosophical metaphysics, but also for the naturalistic view of physics.

Since it is difficult to capture the passage of time conceptually, perhaps it could be approached as a non-concept—as a metaphor, following Hans Blumenberg's metaphorology.⁶ This would avoid the many logical drawbacks that thinking conceptually about time entails. Because it is imprecise and irreducible to any concrete and consistent factor of reality, a metaphor fits well with the non-conceptual nature of time, granting intellectual access to its illogical ways of being.

Time broadens its meaning through the aforementioned metaphor, according to which the past behaves in the same manner as light, which in turn enables the seeing of a certain image: a "moving image of an ever-present eternity"⁷; a contingent "dialectical image"⁸; a provisional image of the now, resulting from an eternal before and after of the instantaneous encounter.⁹ We find images of time¹⁰ in the philosophical tradition that attempt to give form to what has no shape whatsoever. The past, therefore, would be what drives us to *see* time existing even as it becomes a provisional presence—a contradictory occurrence showing the passage of time as the object of itself. This illogical pastness state of existence would as such be the fundamental matter of time, a sort of existential (ideal) and material (as a vestige) force, one that constitutes the basis for any present presence or future prospect. As the singular metaphysical matter of time, the past does not metaphorically correspond with the phenomenon to which it is bound, that is, what one sees, the vision—what is there, the omnipresent existence. In this metaphor, the past is in fact equivalent to light, the metaphysical *medium* that makes the vision of time possible.

Although present and future are indeed considered modalities of time, the present concerns the intuition of experiencing the presence of things, while the future refers

to speculative possibilities, that is, to recursivity and creativity. Both need the past as their concrete matter and mediator—only through pastness is one allowed to access time as the *prima facie* of impermanence. If there is time, its reason is supported and justified by the manifoldness of the past. After all, time passes as long as there is past. Precedency is a logical authority when it comes to ontology: *ex nihilo nihil fit*, nothing comes from nothing.

There are those who contest or even reject this basic science with puzzling concepts, intricate efforts to explain what remains simple: if time passes, and its passage is an unsurpassable fact, there must be past, expressed as a noun, adjective and above all as a verb. Insofar as all times, present and future, pass consistently, they necessarily have already or will become past. For time past there is no ending or beginning.¹¹ And as this paradoxical origin and destiny of time, its final and principal possible form, the past then rises as the only *μεταφορά*, the conveyance to acknowledging the time we have.

Augusto de Carvalho works on the threshold of philosophy and history from an intercultural perspective, particularly from the Brazilian (Latin American) and Japanese (Asiatic) points of view. His main interest lies in the metaphysical and ontological foundations of the historical world and historical thinking, the philosophy of time and the philosophy of translation.

Tags: Metaphor / Past / time

¹ Carlo Rovelli, *L'ordine del tempo*. Milano: Adelphi, 2017.

² Miki Kiyoshi “三木 清. 人間学のマルクスの形態,” in *唯物史観と現代の意識* Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten 岩波書店, 1928.

³ John. M. E. McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” *Mind* 68 (1908), 457–474; posthumously republished in chapter XXIII of John. M. E. McTaggart, *The Nature of Existence – Vol. II*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1927; see also Carlos Cirne-Lima, *Sobre a contradição*. Porto Alegre: Edipucrs, 1993.

⁴ William James, *The principles of psychology*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1890.

⁵ See Jorge Luis Borges, “Nueva refutación del tiempo,” in *Otras inquisiciones*, ed. idem. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1960.

⁶ Blumenberg's view was well presented here by Charlotte Lerg, “Figuratively Speaking. Why Metaphors Matter in Talking About the Work Historians Do,” *Geschichtstheorie am Werk* (04.10.2022). URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/8340> (16.06.2023).

⁷ *Platonis Opera*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903, *Ti.* 37d; Plotinus, *Eneads (III)*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967, II.15. See Iaso O'Daly, G. J. P. Aeternitas, in *Augustinus—Lexikon* | Vol. I. Basel: Schwabe & Co, 1986.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991, GS I-3, 1233.

⁹ *Aristotelis Opera*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1960 [1831], *Phys.* IV.11 220a 25-26; Albert Einstein, "Bemerkungen zu den in diesem Bande vereinigten Arbeiten," in *Albert Einstein als Philosoph und Naturforscher*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp. Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1979, 51.

¹⁰ George Jaroszkiewicz, *Images of Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

¹¹ Nishitani Keiji 西谷 啓治. 空と歴史, in 宗教とは何か—宗教論集 I. Tokyo: Sōbunsha 創文社, 1961.