

Anticipation and the constitution of time in the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer

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Abstract

In this paper, I will argue with Ernst Cassirer that anticipation plays an essential part in the constitution of time, as seen from a transcendental perspective. Time is, as any transcendental concept, regarded as basically relational and subjective and only in a derivative way objective and indifferent to us. This entails that memory is prior to history, and that anticipation is prior to prediction. In this paper, I will give some examples in order to argue for this point. Furthermore, I will also argue, again with Cassirer and contra Henri Bergson, that time should be seen as a functional unity, and not as a collection of three different things-in-themselves (past, present and future).

Keywords: Time, Cassirer, Memory, Bergson, Constitution

1) Introduction

In this paper, I will argue that anticipation plays an essential part in the constitution of time as seen from a transcendental perspective, more specifically that of Ernst Cassirer. First, it plays a more important part in transcendental philosophy than in what we could call the received view in analytical philosophy of science and metaphysics, where time is seen as an objective “container”. In this view, prediction is primitive to anticipation: an anticipation is a response to a prediction. From a transcendental point of view, this cannot be the case. Second, anticipation plays a more important part in Cassirer’s philosophy than in that of Henri Bergson, where time is mainly analyzed through the phenomenon of memory. Although Bergson’s view certainly has its qualities, as I will show by relating them to some examples, it needs to be supplemented with the concept of anticipation in order to fully account for the constitution of the concept of time as we know and experience it. As a continuation of this, I will argue with Cassirer that anticipation should not be seen as separate from memory and from the experience of the present, but should be included in an integrated view on time.

2) Transcendental Philosophy in a Nutshell.

Despite the many Kantian traditions and the nuances they all deserve, I believe that we can safely say that the essence of the Kantian transcendental project consists of one basic principle and one basic consequence of this principle. The starting point of every transcendental analysis is the primacy of subjectivity over objectivity, or, probably more accurately, of involvement over distance. In traditional (“dogmatic” in the Kantian terminology) philosophical approaches like realism, empiricism and non-critical idealism, the opposite is often presupposed. Philosophy, these theories say, should start from the structure of the world (be it a world of things, sense-impressions or ideas), and then find out what the place of us, human beings, is in this world. Philosophers should first give an objective, value-free and distanced description of the world before they start interpreting it with respect to their personal situations as contingent human beings. The Kantian *Gestalt*-switch, the Copernican Revolution as Kant calls it, turns this upside-down. It starts from the fact that we, as human beings, are already deeply involved in the “world”, with which we find ourselves having a meaningful relation. The task of transcendental philosophy then is to unearth the preconditions which have to be necessarily presupposed to make this relation possible. The most important consequence of this is that the categories and concepts which form these conditions of possibility only deserve their status because they make this relation possible. Therefore, the basic terms of any transcendental philosophical system will always be relational instead of substantive, and the basic question of transcendental philosophy will always be how we relate to being, not how either we or being are or is in itself.

The principal question then which transcendental philosophy has to answer is the following: how do we get from this subjective and relational stance, which is really something personal and contingent, to our current understanding of the world as composed of objects or objective and/or universal matters of fact which, in some way or other, seem to impose themselves with a certain necessity to us and which transcend our personal situation, things such as works of art, moral situations, objects of science,... Or, to put in other terms: what are the conditions of possibility of objective knowledge, morality, art and life? From this point on, my account on transcendental philosophy will run parallel with that of Ernst Cassirer, who, in my opinion, has given the most elaborate and accurate answer to this question. In Cassirer’s view, we should see this development as a historical development which unrolls itself in the history of mankind. The moving principle of this process is the creative act of symbolization. The one essential thing all human cultural enterprises, science, art, religion, language,... have in common is that they are the result of acts of symbolization and as thus can be described as symbolic forms. The fact that this is seen as a historical process implies that, if we want to understand the true meaning of our current-day symbolic practices, we have to go back to their historical roots, which we can find in what Cassirer calls the mythical consciousness.

It is important to note that a symbolic form is not just a mere random collection of symbols. Symbols and symbolic systems are, as it were, held together and structured by universal concepts such as space, time, thing, attribute, concept, object, number,... which are both a consequence and a condition of possibility of symbols and

symbolization. I will focus on the concept time here, since this is where anticipation comes in.

3) Subjective time vs Objective time.

In the received view, objectivity is, as we have seen, primary to subjectivity. This entails that objective time is primary to subjective time. The consequence then seems simple: there is an objective “line” of time, which allows us to order events. Depending on where we find ourselves on this line, we regard events as in the future, past or present and we can relate ourselves to them as anticipation, memory or experience respectively. As Cassirer notes, however, there is a problem with this view which has in fact always been around in the history of philosophy. The problem concerns the ontological status of time, the “being” of time, which is a necessary premise if we talk about objective time as being primitive with respect to subjective time. Time, then, since it cannot be analyzed as a concept by means of which we relate ourselves to being (for example as a condition of possibility of knowledge), has to have an ontological status of its own. It has to *be* something, independent of us humans interacting with it. But this gives rise to a paradox. We can talk about the line of time as an objective being, but the moment we consider our relation with time, the “being” of time disappeared. We relate ourselves to a non-being, which, in terms of a view based on objective time, is impossible. Cassirer argues for this with a reference to Augustine’s famous words.

This dialectic that arises whenever thought seeks to master the concept of time by subordinating it to a universal concept of being has been most pregnantly and clearly expressed in that classical chapter of St. Augustine’s Confessions, which for the first time in the history of Western Philosophy sets forth the problem of time and surveys it in its full scope. If, Augustine argues, the present becomes a determination of time, a temporal present, only by flowing into the past, how can we speak of a being that subsists only by destroying itself? (PSF III, p 166)

The contradiction which is involved when we talk about the being of time is a fundamental one. It cannot be resolved in any way. The concept of “time”, considered from the point of view of the subject, can only be thought as a “flow” from past to present and from to present to future. It is permanent change, and can therefore not be considered as being or derived from being. It is simply impossible to derive this subjective conception of time as a temporal flow from objective time. The fact that objective time denies the existence of time as temporal flow becomes especially clear in the theory of relativity, where time is approached in purely spatial metaphors, as the very notion of a four-dimensional space shows.

Augustine’s solution to this problem, as is widely known, consists of giving up the idea of an absolute past and an absolute future, and speaking only of the present of past things, the present of present things and the present of future things.

Thus we may not think of time as an absolute thing, divided into three absolute parts: rather, the unitary consciousness of the “now” encompasses three

different basic directions and is first constituted in this triality. The conscious present is not confined, as it were, within a single moment, but necessarily passes beyond it, both forward and backward. To comprehend time is therefore not to compose it out of three separate but ontically related substances – it is rather to understand how three clearly separate intentions – the intentions toward the now, toward the earlier, and toward the later – are composed into the unity of meaning. True, the possibility of such a synthesis cannot be derived from something else or proved by something else – rather, we stand here before a genuine original phenomenon which as such can only be accredited and explained out of itself. (PSF III, p 169)

This switch from a triality of substances to a triality of “directions” departing from the now, implies a switch from objective to subjective time. What Augustinus’ argument shows us then is that, if we start from objective time and then wonder what our relation is towards it, we end up with a contradiction which can only be solved by reversing its very premises, namely by giving subjective time a primacy over objective time and considering the subjective temporal flow to be a basic phenomenon, only explicable out of itself, as Cassirer argues. The important thing for us is that this change in perspective from objective to subjective time also implies a switch from, what we can call “distanced” or “independent” time, to a more “involved” notion of time. In the case of the past, this implies a switch from history to memory. In the case of the future, the switch is from prediction to anticipation. In the next part, we will first focus on the notion of memory, and then turn to anticipation.

4) The Being-in-the-present of the past

As, we have seen, the Kantian Copernican revolution, which forms the starting point of transcendental philosophy, implies the statement that time is first subjective before it is objective.

With respect to our relation with the past, this entails the following; memory is not seen as a recollection of objective past events, but objective past events are seen as an abstraction or an evolution from the pure phenomenon of memory, which we can only really describe as the being-in-the-present of the past. I will illustrate by means of a few examples that this phenomenon is present in a very real way in the way we interact with time. The focus at this point is on the role of the past and memory, since for some reason, as the mythological examples show, the past seems to play a more basic role than the future. It is not a coincidence that myths are almost always about origins and never about destinations. The fact that the past is vital in mythical thinking is shown by the fact that the sanctity of a certain thing in mythical thinking can only be proven by referring to its origins in an indeterminable mythic past. (PSF II p 105).

Nevertheless, this past is not seen as a distant, objective “thing” which serves merely to explain why things are what they are in the present. This would be a projection of our modern objective and causal view on time on the mythical consciousness. We should

not, for example, consider a ritual to be a technique of remembrance of certain objective past events. Rather, we should regard rituals as a way by means of which we constitute these past events. The fact itself that these mythical points of origin are first “remembered” through a re-enactment and not by a story which is told and written down is a definite hint for this point. In a ritual, past and present are much more intertwined than in a story. If a great event which is supposed to have taken place in a mythical point of origin, for instance the creation of the world or a battle between gods or demons, is reenacted by means of a mythical ritual, this ritual is not experienced as a representation or a metaphor, but really as the “real thing”. The past event is experienced as really happening in the present.

It is no mere play the dancer in a mythical drama is enacting; the dancer is the God, he becomes the God. (PSF II, p 39)

One might think that these mythological examples are far-fetched and not really relevant for us today. This, however, is not true. The being-in-the-present of the past (and, consequently, the being-in-the-past of the present) is something which still has a very important influence. The whole idea of jurisprudence, for example, is based on the notion that a crime committed in the past can be (partly) annulled by a punishment in the present. The crime, as it were, is not over and done with once it has been committed, but remains in the present for a long time (which is specified exactly) in order to leave open the possibility of its annulment. (Bevernage 2008, p 152) The very concepts of justice and revenge can only be understood by presupposing an influence of the present on the past, or, in other words, the being-in-the-past of the present and the being-in-the-present of the past. A similar phenomenon shows itself very clearly in the phenomenon of historical truth commissions. In countries which continue to struggle with a traumatic past, such as Argentina, Sierra Leone and South Africa, governments founded special truth commissions to find out the truth about (or better, to objectify) the past, thoroughly convinced of the fact that objectifying the past would stop or at least diminish its influence on the present. (see Bevernage 2008) The fact that the original way of dealing with a traumatic past involves the being-in-the-present of the past in a very strong sense, and the fact that objectification is seen as a way to keep the past under control and to break its relation with the present, to put it at a distance as it were, illustrates our general point about the primacy of subjective time over objective time very well.

What I wish to suggest here is that these kind of practices, the mythical ritual and our current-day legal practices based on the idea of justice, become a lot more understandable if one adopts the idea of the being-in-the-present of the past. From the point of view of objective time, the right way to relate ourselves to the past is first to clarify what objectively has happened, and then to decide if and how we are going to respond to it. Yet human culture seems to have started off from the second step, the response to the past, without ever having taken the first, the objectivation of the past. If one adapts the objective view on time, the first instantiations of temporal consciousness, those found in mythical thinking, should be viewed as aberrations. In this view, rituals

try to commemorate things of which they have no proof they actually happened, and which are supposed to have taken in a vaguely defined indeterminate past. The only conclusion for the objectivist is then to regard the people who “invented” these practices as plainly stupid. Cassirer formulates this in the following way:

Many anthropologists have asserted that myth is, after all, a very simple phenomenon -- for which we hardly need a complicated psychological or philosophical explanation. It is simplicity itself; for it is nothing but the "sancta simplicitas" of the human race. It is not the outcome of reflection or thought, nor is it enough to describe it as a product of human imagination. Imagination alone cannot account for all its incongruities and fantastic and bizarre elements. It is rather the "Urdummheit" of man that is responsible for these absurdities and contradictions. Without this "primeval stupidity" there would be no myth. (MS, p 8)

This is, of course still a coherent stance, and the examples given above do not form evidence of some sort against this objectivist view. Still, the subjective perspective on time, or better, the view in which subjective time is fundamental to objective time, allows us to regard the history of human culture as a progressive development in which the early phases take in a meaningful place, as the basis on which our current-day conceptions of time, such as the ones involved in justice, have found their place.

5) Cassirer's Criticism of Bergson

This “transcendental” stance with regard to time and memory and the role of memory as the being-in-the-present of the past has been developed into a metaphysical system by Henri Bergson, specifically in *Matière et Mémoire*. At first sight, it seems like the ideal philosophical system for a transcendental analysis of the concept of time. Nevertheless, according to Cassirer, Bergson's system suffers from two interrelated flaws. First, it does not bring into account the symbolic character of time, and second, it leaves out the temporal intention to towards the future: it focuses entirely on memory and leaves out anticipation, which is why it interesting here to discuss.

Basically and disrespectfully summarized, the Bergsonian ontology consists of two basic building blocks: matter and memory. (PSF III, p 185). The term “memory” should in the case be regarded as spiritual memory and contrasted with pure motoric memory. According to Bergson, the original metaphysical “event”, so to speak, in humanity is the halt of the flow of matter and the entrance of the memory of images. Memory comes in when a gap is created between the sense-input and the output in terms of actions of an organism. Cassirer describes this in the following way.

There is a purely motor memory that consists merely in a sequence of movements acquired by practice – which is thus solely a form of habit. But truly spiritual memory is strictly and fundamentally separate from this type of motor memory, of mechanism and automatism. For with spiritual memory we have left the realm of necessity for the realm of freedom: we are no longer under the

constraint of things but in the center of the ego, of the pure self-consciousness. The true self is not the self that reaches and acts outward; it is the ego that is capable of looking back into time in pure recollection and of finding itself again in its depth. This view into the depth of time is opened up to us only when action is replaced by pure vision – when our present becomes permeated with the past, and the two are experienced as an immediate unity. But this mode and direction of vision are continuously obstructed and diverted by the other trend, which is directed toward action and its future goal. (PSF III, p 185)

The dualism between matter and memory Bergson advocates is really a dualism between action and reflection. If we go from the pure phenomenon of memory to an orientation towards future, the image of memory is replaced by the images of space and bodies in space, which serve as “centers” around which our actions, and ultimately our ego, orientate themselves.

[E]very step towards this “reality”, this aggregate of possible activities, removes us farther away and farther from true reality, from immersion in the original form and life of the self. If we wish to regain this life, we must free ourselves by a kind of violent decision from the dominance of perception, for this power drives us forward, while we wish to go back into the past. (PSF III, p 186)

Although Bergson’s metaphysics is a development of the philosophical stance with regard to the relation between present and past we have sketched above, it cannot be called transcendental in the full sense. Cassirer argues that Bergson did not fulfill the task he has set himself. Bergson wanted a metaphysics based on the pure intuition of time. Memory, however, is not the pure intuition of time, but already one of its instantiations. There is no reason in principle for the qualitative and really quite strongly determined difference between our orientation towards the future and our orientation towards the past. Time itself as a phenomenon is left out of Bergson’s philosophy. A system such as Bergson’s cannot explain why time is experienced as a unity, and without this unity, time itself does not exist: only memory and action do. The difference with Cassirer’s view about the primacy of memory over anticipation is that Bergson regards this as a metaphysical difference, while Cassirer regards it as merely historical. It is true that memory was originally more important than anticipation, but the essence of the concept of time is that it strives, through history, to overcome this difference rather than to fix it in metaphysical categories.

According to Cassirer, the reason for this is that Bergson sees memory as a substance, and not as a function. This means that Bergson, according to Cassirer, regards memory too much as an original “thing in itself”. So, although Bergson was right to start from subjective time, the pure phenomenon of memory, he forgot that this subjective time is in the first place also a *relational time*. Time, as a transcendental concept, functions as a mediating entity between subject and being, and as such constitutes both at the same time. Bergson, however, regards time, and more specifically memory, as a being in itself which constitutes the ego and which is fundamental to it. In short, he turns the

relation of man with the past into a substance, a being in itself. As we have seen in the quotation by Augustine, this cannot work: time is essentially three-fold, but none of these three instances can co-exist with each other. Therefore, one of these three has to be singled out and regarded as the ontological base of the others, which will always lead to the denial of the unity of time.

The transcendental solution to this is to regard time not as a “being”, but as a mediating concept which both constitutes and is constituted by being and the subject. Time, in this sense, does not exist (which is why we avoid the problems in Bergson’s philosophy), but is a necessary condition which allows us to say that things are. In Cassirer’s terms, time is regarded as a function of representation which comprises a threefold direction. Because time is not regarded as a being, it is pointless to try to find a definition of time in itself, without any reference to human practice. The only sensible way we can talk about time is by referring to events, things, objects, but also Gods, ancestors, demons,...which are *in* time. This also entails that the concept of time automatically implies other concepts which allow us to state the existence of these events, things, objects,...Without these, the word “time” does not mean anything. Therefore, as we will see, it is legitimate to state that the concept of time is really constituted by these other concepts.

6) Anticipation, Prophetism and the Future.

Now, we can ask ourselves the question “what does all this mean with regard to anticipation?” To recall, I have first stated that transcendental philosophy is always relational before it is substantial. In the fourth and fifth part of this paper, I have argued that, despite its importance, the phenomenon of memory, of the being-in-the-present of the past, cannot alone account for the concept of time. It needs to be supplemented with our relation with being in the present (which we might call “experience”) and with our relation towards the future, namely anticipation. To be entirely accurate, even at this point, there are already too much divisions. The real starting point of a transcendental analysis of time should be the functional unity of time. Only in the development of human culture does it become clear that time does indeed have this twofold direction, one towards the past and one towards the future. Despite the fact that, as we have seen, mythical thinking is oriented towards origins, these origins are not really supposed to have taken place in the past as we would say this nowadays. The only important thing about these origins is that they happen in the not-now, in some time which is different from the now but still has an influence on it. Because it is supposed to have this influence, anthropologists usually interpret as having taken place in the past, but this might not be a good interpretation. Cassirer mentions several examples to back this up. In Ewe, a language spoken in middle-Africa, the same word is used for “today” and “tomorrow”. In Shambala, the language of a people in Tanzania, the same word is used to refer to the distant future as to the distant past. (PSF I 220-221). These examples suggest that the past as it is regarded in mythical consciousness should not be equated too much with our modern conception of the past. It is easily understandable why this cannot be the case. The past can only really be objectified in contrast with the future and

vice versa. Therefore, we can only arrive at the modern conception of time when we have a differentiation between past and future, or, in other words, when the vague mythical idea of the “origin-past” is supplemented with a view on the future. Our earlier talk about the primacy of the past over the future in mythical consciousness is therefore a necessary *hinein*-interpretation. The mythical past appears to be the past to us, because we know it will eventually be contrasted with the future. For the mythical subject, on the other hand, what we call the past is only the not-now. Nevertheless, since transcendental philosophy is a philosophy which starts from *our* viewpoint in the world, we can understand more about the mythical concept of time by consciously interpreting it from our point of view.

The deciding moment where the duality between past and present becomes clear in history is, according to Cassirer, the coming into to existence of prophetism, both in the Jewish and the Babylonian versions. Where in mythical thinking, time, in the shape of the mythical point of origin, is always closely connected to the world, the essence of prophetism is that it cuts itself loose from the world. The central idea of prophetism is that the world as it currently is, is merely a coincidental and more or less evil situation.

Particularly in the religious consciousness of the Prophets, there is, consequently, a sharp turn away from nature and from the temporal orders of the natural processes. While the Psalms praise God as the creator of nature, as Him to whom day and night belong, who assigns a fixed course to the sun and the planets, who has made the moon to divide the year by, the prophetic view, although these great images appear in it, take an entirely different road. Since the divine will has created no symbol of itself in nature, nature becomes a matter of indifference for the purely ethical-religious pathos of the Prophets. Belief in God is seen as superstition if, whether in hope or in fear, it clings to nature. “Learn not the way of the heathen”, says Jeremiah, “and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them”. (PSF II p 120-121)

In the advent of prophetism, it becomes clear that there are two different directions in our temporal consciousness: one through which the world is affirmed, and one through which the world is denied. The first is memory, the second anticipation. Although memory is already present in the mythical consciousness, it can only be said to take full determinate meaning in contrast to the phenomenon of anticipation. Only through this split between anticipation and memory will we be able to speak of future and past. Again, it is not a coincidence that this conception of the future is first created by prophets, and not by scientists, astrologists or astronomers. The future of the prophets is a not an indifferent future, but a future which inspires us to change our actions, and with which we are deeply involved, be it in a way which is radically from mythical consciousness. Where the temporal consciousness in mythical thinking implied a direct influence of the mythical origin on the world, the temporal consciousness of prophetism really is indifferent to the world and instead has a direct influence on our actions.

7) Summary and Conclusion: the Importance of Anticipation

To summarize, I have argued for a transcendental view on time, which has the following characteristic features.

Time is, as any transcendental concept, seen as basically relational and subjective and only in a derivative way objective and indifferent to us. This entails that memory is prior to history, and anticipation is prior to prediction.

Time is seen as basically a functional unity. It is functional, because time is not seen as a being in itself, but as a creative function of consciousness which allows us to talk about being. It is a unity, because the basic function of the concept of time can be grasped by the idea of the “not-now”. The original mythical temporal consciousness is confined to this idea of the not-now, because the only way it can characterize this not-now is by stating that it stands into a relation with the world in the now. In prophetic consciousness, this changes. The not-now is seen as a denial of the world as it is now instead of its origins. This denial also demands a different response. Instead of thinking the way the world was is forever fixed by its mythical origins, we are asked by the religious consciousness of prophetism to act and change the world in virtue of the future. In short, temporal consciousness consists of two different directions. One of these, the not-know as directly related to the world of the now, is basic, while the other one, the not-now as the possibility of a different world and as an incentive to change the present world, is derivative.

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