Impossible Time

Past and Future in the Philosophy of Religion

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ISBN 978-3-16-151956-7
ISSN 1616-346X (Religion in Philosophy and Theology)

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at *http://dnb.dnb.de*.

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The book was typeset by Frank Hamburger in Rostock, printed by Laupp & Göbel in Nehren on non-aging paper and bound by Buchbinderei Nädele in Nehren.

Printed in Germany.

Introduction

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What is time, then? If no one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain to him who asks, I know not. The philosopher who notices these perplexities suddenly discovers that the experience of time, itself a condition of possibility for experience, is rife with contradictions.[1] How can he actually be sure that the future exists? When he looks into the future, he expects that some things will happen and others will not, but they do not really exist, or do they? They exist, perhaps, in the mode of possibility. Perhaps. But what kind of existence is that? Can anyone be sure about the existence of future things? We have to answer in the negative.

What about the past, then? Does the past actually exist? Most people would think that the past exists; indeed, everything that may be called a *fact (factum)* must have existed in the past. But how can we be sure that it exists, when it is no longer here? The past is past because it is gone, and nothing can prove its reality except, perhaps, for some traces of what has been: in nature, in history, in buildings, in narratives, in scars, and in art or writing. Still, if the past actually is, it must exist in terms of its non-being, i.e., its *not* existing any longer. Even when the past is preserved by means of memory, this memorial presence "is" not identical with the past but rather a kind of "presence of absence." Hence, given this absence of the past, can the philosopher be sure that the past actually exists? Once more, we have to answer in the negative.

A similar argument pertains even when it comes to time present: "If, then, time present – if it be time – only comes into existence because it passes into time past, how do we say that even this is, whose cause of being is that it shall not be – namely, so that we cannot truly say that time is, unless because it tends not to be?"[2] The conclusion to this rather basic deliberation on the concept of time is that time is the condition of possibility for speaking about any phenomenon or fact to be observed in the world, yet time itself cannot be shown to exist. The possibility of time being past, future, or present is itself impossible. Impossible time.

[1] Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. and tr. by William Watts, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), Book XI, c. 14 [XI.14], 238–39.
[2] Ibid.

Augustine's analysis of the concept of time in Book XI of the *Confessions* is a paradigmatic example of phenomenological investigation, *avant la lettre*. He carefully observes the phenomenon we normally describe as time and temporality and reduces the scope of investigation from an immediate and common preconception of time to the formal premises of speaking of time in the first place. The result of this proto-phenomenological reduction is indeed astonishing: Time structures and conditions everything that is or happens within the world, but time as such, the very being and structure of time, seems to evade phenomenological analysis, as long as Augustine's attention is directed towards the concept of time as well as temporal phenomena. His observations thus confirm and repeat the Aristotelian aporia of time, i.e., that time can be defined neither as being nor as non-being: it *is not* in terms of being qua being (ΩN H ΩN) and yet it *must be* – presupposed at least – in terms of its non-being, i.e., as a condition for change.

This is not yet the final step of the Augustinian analysis, however. He seeks to understand the very process of perception, and hence, his attention is turned the other way around: He studies not only time as such, as a structuring and measuring aspect of the world, but he considers the mind which perceives the world and structures it according to temporality and change. This final change in perspective qualifies his analysis as phenomenological in the proper sense. He studies the observing mind and suggests that if there is time, then time must be *there*, within the mind which observes and structures the world – this mind which itself is temporal and is able to observe itself even *while* observing time, in terms of self-consciousness. Time is thus divided, once more, into external and internal time, and the latter structures the former as well as itself. If we were to speak in modern terms, Augustine thereby *constitutes* the temporal and intentional self, existence stretched out between the future and the past. He points at memory and expectation as the two modes of perception, indeed as the modes of *being* in the past and *being* in the future. This is more precisely the *place* where time is measured, if it may be measured at all:

> It is in you, my mind [*anime meus*], that I measure my times. Do not interrupt me now, that is, do not interrupt your own self with the tumults of your own impressions. In you, I say, it is that I measure my times. The impression, which things passing by cause in you, and remains even when things are gone, that is it while being still present, I do measure: not the things which have passed by that this impression might be made. This do I measure, whenever I measure times.[3]

The phenomenon of time is thus formally analyzed by its measurement and this measurement points back to the structuring of time within the mind. Time is indeed measured by *mind extension* (*extentio*), by this stretching out of the presence between the past and the future. Yet at any mo-

[3] Augustine, *Confessions* XI.27, 272 f.

ment this measuring of time is threatened by *interruptions*, i.e., by the self-interruption of distractions and impressions. The mind itself, and thus the continuity and structure of time, is threatened by subconscious distractions and the fullness of impressions. Time as such is therefore as unstable as the human mind: it threatens to collapse and dissolve. For Augustine, time remains as fragile and perishable as human existence itself, until it flows into the fire of divine love.[4]

The concept of time is thus linked to the concept of God, as are perceptions of the future and perceptions of the past. Temporality as such is linked to God in the very moment of separation. This double scission of the temporal self, dissociated from God and dissociated from – and interrupted by – itself marks a point of departure for the following deliberations on time. They adopt a double perspective on time, towards the future and towards the past, reflecting on memory and expectation within the philosophy of time. Traditionally, a philosophy of time includes the question of causation and ultimately relies on the concept of God, either as First Cause, as Creator, or as the absolute Other, whether in terms of the eternal or the contingent, as the origin of temporality or as a disturbance and interruption of temporal continuity, whether as the *kairos* and fullness of time or as the total desert of boredom under the eternal sun, indeed an *absolutism* of boredom.

Born out of prophecy, promise, and apocalyptic expectations, the philosophy of religion within Judaism and Christianity is eminently a philosophy of time. Nurtured by the memory of the past, religious traditions are themselves caught up in the power of memory. But what happens to these traditions when the structure of time is redefined, when its unity fractures and dissolves? Are we entering a new era of confusion and disruption? Would that be the legacy of the proclaimed "death of God"? Has the concept of God been caught up in metaphysical concepts that are unsustainable? Is the mystery of the divine presence connected to practices rather than abstract concepts such as being and causation, i.e., to forgiveness and promise, to forgetting the past and messianic expectations of the coming of the Other? Moreover, is forgiveness still a possibility, even a necessity, or does it already operate at the limit of the impossible? Is it still necessary to remember the dead with reverence or should the past be left to itself? Is it possible to exist under the pressure and shadows of the past? Is not forgetting, and thus letting go of the past, the condition of possibility for life?

In the criss-crossing perspectives of future and past, some of the most crucial questions are raised within current philosophy of religion, predominantly from a phenomenological point of view. Hence, the current volume is questioning the concept of time from opposing and sometimes

[4] Cf. Augustine, *Confessions* XI.30, 280

even contradictory perspectives: The past conditioning the future, and the future redefining the past, in forgetfulness, remembrance, or repetition. The first section of *Impossible Time* focuses on the future of the past, i.e., former examples of how we may question and understand the structure of future events, whereas the last section discusses the past of the future, i.e., how the past seems to structure the future but thereby also conditions the understanding of self and the questioning of God. The section in-between, part II, draws the future and the past into a historical and systematic deliberation on the possibilities and impossibilities of time. In the following we will give a short presentation of the thirteen essays included in this volume, a selection of papers presented at The Third Nordic Conference for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Copenhagen in June 2011. Carsten Pallesen and Ulrik Houlind Rasmussen deserve a heartfelt word of thanks from all the participants for their effort in organizing the event, and further thanks go to the University of Copenhagen for making the event possible. Thanks to Jennifer Adams-Massmann for her work copyediting and proofreading the manuscripts and generating the index and to Frank Hamburger for the layout and setting of the text. Finally, our sincere gratitude goes to the Nordic Council and its research unit NordForsk for their generous funding of the conference and of the network for Philosophy of Religion in Northern Europe (PRINE), and of the present volume.

The first section called *Past in the Future* includes five essays mainly focusing on studies in phenomenology, from Husserl to Heidegger, from Edith Stein to Ricoeur, as well as two essays on Nietzsche. The first essay, "Questioning Time," raises the basic question of this volume through a study of a still unpublished text by Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's manuscript "Quid est tempus?" is generally unknown and, to our knowledge, has never before been subjected to serious academic analysis. According to *Marius Timmann Mjaaland* it forces us to raise the question of time in Heidegger's philosophy from a radically different angle and trace it through the most basic periods of change and reversal in Heidegger's thought, the so-called *Kehre*. "Quid est tempus?" shows the deep influence of Augustine on Heidegger's conception of time and moves far beyond the celebrated analysis of temporality in his opus magnum, *Being and Time*. The manuscript is also riddled with the questions that keep on haunting Heidegger before and after the *Kehre*: the question of religion, of prayer, and of man's relationship to God. While introducing these questions, Mjaaland also traces Heidegger's question of time back to Aristotle and Augustine, two of the philosophers who have formed the Western conception of temporality and thus our perception of history, of consciousness, and of God.

The two essays that follow are concerned with Nietzsche, specifically his controversial expectations for the future and his problematic relationship to the past. German philosopher *Werner Stegmaier* takes this occasion to revisit

The Gay Science and the famous passages on the Madman (§ 125) and the meaning of our cheerfulness (§ 343). These two texts were written with five years distance of of one another, and the latter comments upon the former as an almost prophetic anticipation of the times to come *after* this horrifying event. Stegmaier sees this great event as largely misunderstood by Nietz-sche's contemporaries; thus, it is perceived as *past in the future (vergangene Zukunft)*. The openness of this *futuristic* past allows for new interpretations of the event, and Stegmaier's suggestion presented toward the end of his essay is indeed rather surprising.

Iben Damgaard adopts a contrary perspective on Nietzsche in her article "Nietzsche and the Past," based primarily on his early essay, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" (1874). Although Nietzsche was fond of historical consciousness and carefully studied the written traces of the past, he was suspicious of history as mere spectatorship of the past and advocated a philology and philosophy that serve life, rather than simply revering the dead. Hence the past ought to be studied *in the light of the future*. Thus, coming from the opposite angle, her essay ends up with a view of the past which supplements Stegmaier's vision of the future: it is perceived as the *future* of the past, a perspective that is also echoed in Claudia Welz's essay in the third section of this volume. According to Damgaard, forgetfulness plays a significant role in order to reopen the past for creative anticipation of future possibilities.

In her essay on "Religion at the Center of Phenomenology," *Jonna Bornemark* turns to Husserl's analysis of inner time-consciousness and points out that this is where we find the deepest foundation of his phenomenology. Focusing on the question of intentionality and its temporality, Husserl distinguishes horizontal intentionality (*Längsintentionalität*) from vertical intentionality (*Querintentionalität*), in which the latter focuses on objects, whereas the former is an awareness of the temporality and continuity of consciousness itself. However, since the act of observation can never coincide with the act of participation, the unity of time is suspended and the separation of two forms of temporality is repeated into an infinite regress. At this point Bornemark moves on to Edith Stein, who edited Husserl's first volume on inner time-consciousness and developed her own philosophy of time which begins where Husserl leaves the question in an infinite regress. She believes that the only way to solve the problem is an appeal to divine presence, similar to that suggested by Augustine, a transcendence which is radically immanent, creating the "temporality of time and the light of truth." Hence, Bornemark reveals the parallel structure of phenomenology and religion but emphasizes the basic difference, i.e., that religion may give an answer where phenomenology sticks to the question, and the methodological ignorance of *epoché*. Finally, she suggests an approach that may include both perspectives in a more *generous* phenomenology without leveling the difference, following a proposition by phenomenologist Michel Henry.

The first section ends with an essay by *Øystein Brekke,* "On the Subject of Epigenesis." Epigenesis is a figure that appears in the hermeneutic philosophy of Paul Ricoeur as well as in contemporary science. In genetics, epigenesis is applied as a concept describing "the interaction between heredity and environment in the organism as it moves in time," as Brekke notes, hence a puzzling theory of changes in the DNA points towards the contingency of future biological development. For Ricoeur the concept enters into hermeneutics as a description of the temporal change of symbolic meaning – in philosophy, in narrative, and in religion. Moreover, with Ricoeur, Brekke sees epigenesis as a possibility of conceiving the temporality of the subject, but also of refiguring its plasticity in time. By reconsidering Malabou's reinterpretation of Hegel as a philosopher of spatial time, Brekke's theoretical analysis points ahead to the essays of Comay and Pallesen in the second part of this volume. He suggests that Ricoeur's symbolism of evil may be read as a study not mainly of past religious symbols but of the future of religion and of epigenetic subjectivity, of forgiveness and of otherness within the self.

With *Philipp Stoellger's* essay on "Philosophy of Religion – and its Sense for the Impossible" we enter the second part and another core question of the present volume. Stoellger asks about the future of philosophy of religion in regard to its temporal modalities. Philosophy of religion needs a special sense for and license to deal with impossibilities, he argues. Historians, literary writers, and phenomenologists all work with different impossibilities and in various ways. "The impossible" as a gesture of exclusion may thereby appear as an undercutting of their very topic. The relevant impossibilities considered within these disciplines are, for instance, forgiving and forgetting, giving, trust and hope, and, in the stricter sense, faith. According to Stoellger, faith is not merely possible or simply real, not only necessary or merely contingent, but in a strong sense impossible but real. The decisive borderline is thereby the shift between possibility and impossibility, because faith is defined as the shifting of this borderline. Hence, he argues that philosophy of religion works with a sort of double paradox: It has to investigate both the reality of impossibilities and impossible realities. Stoellger finally displays this double dealing with the impossible in a number of (primarily) Christological images.

Arne Grøn explores the temporal relationship between immanence and transcendence in his article, "Time and Transcendence: Religion and Ethics." He argues that the idea of transcendence in terms of 'going beyond' the human is itself a deeply human enterprise. Thus, the very idea of transcendence is highly ambiguous. This ambiguity of transcendence is also reflected in the idea of time: In moving "beyond" time, he argues with

Kierkegaard, we are already situated "in" time. We are already *beyond* "in that we face the question of time, that is, what it means to be situated in time." The binary code "transcendence/immanence" shows itself as both ambiguous and problematic – and yet highly relevant to the problem of being human.

Rebecca Comay turns her attention to "David's *Death of Marat* and the Trauma of Modernity." She explores the different, paradoxical layers of meaning in this famous and highly enigmatic painting from 1793. According to Comay, the painting "points to the link between the radically open future of the revolution and its traumatically unfinished past." Hence, the French Revolution becomes a valuable interpretive key for understanding the transition to modernity. With their efforts at eradicating religious memory, the fathers of the revolution introduced new notions, new liturgies, and even intended to reestablish time "from the very beginning" with a new calendar starting at year 1. All these efforts are today perceivable in the pictures of Marat, thus making them particularly interesting for philosophical, art historical, and aesthetic analysis. Still, this artistic and artificial effort at reconfiguring time, in Comay's reading, becomes an intriguing reminder of the impossibilities of breaking out of and completely reconfiguring time. As it turns out, religious memory, the tragedy of political action, and the problem of death have all left their visible or invisible traces on the canvas.

In his essay entitled "Northern Prince Syndrome," *Carsten Pallesen* draws on the definition of pure self-affection in Kant, which is defined as a temporal synthesis lingering between the passive and the active. He sees a similar ambivalence in the definition of self-consciousness in Hegel's philosophy of Spirit. This is where the so-called northern principle in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* comes to play a peculiar and ambivalent role, political and mythical, temporally directed towards the future, and yet an eternal, atemporal ideal. Hegel appeals to the Lutheran idea of freedom as the point of departure for self-description within self-affection, overcoming the traumas of the past yet opening up the possibility of a plasticity of the self which includes the negativity within a new, politico-theologically defined subjectivity. Finally, Pallesen compares this *plastic* Hegelian identity with the theory of religious and cultural identity in Luhmann. Both imply a reduplication of actuality in religion, though not as essence or being, but rather in a figure of difference. Thus, he concludes that "self-description represents a doubling of reality not controlled by Cartesian or Platonic ideas," but by the reinterpretation of scripture and texts as future possibilities.

The third section of this volume opens with an essay called "The Future of the Past: Memory, Forgetting, and Personal Identity." Here *Claudia Welz* discusses the ethical implications of forgetting and remembering related to personal identity. Welz thus asks and tries to answer three fundamental

questions: What can we remember, i.e., what are the limits and scopes of human memory? What do we have to remember, i.e., what are we ethically obliged to remember? What may we forget, i.e., what are we not obliged to remember? Through a detailed examination of these three questions from an interdisciplinary approach including philosophy, theology, and literature, Welz relates her answers to the question of personal identity.

Jan-Olav Henriksen's essay is simply called "I need time for my 'self': The Importance of Time for the Development of Religious Selfhood." He explores the relevance of temporality in relation to religious identity, thereby avoiding the concepts of sin and guilt and emphasizing instead the positive possibilities connected to human desire. He thereby picks up the same thread as Øystein Brekke, Carsten Pallesen, and Claudia Welz in the current volume but reframes the question of identity within the framework of current psychoanalysis and narrative hermeneutics. Analyzing the impact of two quotations from Paul Ricoeur and Heinz Kohut respectively, Henriksen explores the symbolic and relational nature of religious selfhood.

Joseph Ballan's essay called "Liturgy, Inoperativity, and Time," focuses on the relation between "liturgical" and "secular" time. Contrasting Giorgio Agamben and the Catholic phenomenologist Jean-Yves Lacoste's understanding of "inoperativity," Ballan unfolds a discussion of the "secularization of time" understood as a *farewell* to liturgical time. Hence, the main question raised by Ballan is: What precisely is the relation between "liturgical" and "secular" time? The key to understanding this difference, Ballan argues, is to be found in the temporal logic of *inoperativity*.

In the final essay called "The Absolutism of Boredom," *Ulrik Houlind Rasmussen* links the renowned discussion of "the death of God" to considerations related to the (alleged) omnipotent God's boredom. "Did God," Rasmussen wonders as he draws on speculations found both in Friedrich Nietzsche and Hans Blumenberg, "eventually die from his own, unbearable boredom?" Rasmussen thereby comes back to a topic already suggested by Stegmaier in the second essay of the first section but develops this idea in a different direction: By deconstructing God's omnipotence, the possibility of another God becomes visible: a God who did not immediately know what God had done when he created the world, thereby extracting a "new," possible God from the phenomenon of boredom.

Read in its entirety, *Impossible Time* may be perceived as a recollection of time lost, a current challenge of thinking the impossible, and even as a prophecy of future insights still hidden from human eyes. The philosophy of religion thus operates at the boundary between the future and the past, and between the possible and the impossible. The current volume seeks to explore this limit, predominantly from the angle of the impossible. As the examples from the past show how philosophers kept wondering about the aporias of time, seeking to understand time and conceptualize its being, we

expect the future of philosophy of religion to be a question of imagination and impossibility, of imagining the yet unseen. Therefore, it is about unacknowledged possibilities beyond what is currently perceived as within the limits of the possible. We see it primarily as a promise but it may indeed, after all, turn out to be a curse.