

# Changed Experience of Time – Metaphysics versus Hermeneutics

Lengyel Zsuzsanna

PhD candidate in Philosophy

Eötvös Lóránd University of Budapest, Faculty of Arts,  
Doctoral School of Philosophy

## Introduction

Time, as *conditio humana*, is a fundamental characteristic feature of the human state of being. It is one of the *basic, best-known* and at the same time, *most enigmatic* events of our life. At first sight it may seem boring and uninteresting, yet it is the experience whose mystery gets the philosophical tradition to make conceptual efforts again and again. From the beginning, the concept of time has been characterized by twofold optics, the reason of which is that „there is no spontaneous desire for time“<sup>1</sup>, says Ghislain Lafont, a French theologian of the 20th century. In fact, there is a kind of general resistance to the reflection on the fundamental aspects of being from a human dimension. Thus, whoever wants to approach the mystery of time, should consider the question whether the usual concept of time – which considers it obvious or a theoretical-speculative knowledge holding no importance to us – does not only refer to our inability to fit in time.

## Hermeneutic ways of approaching time

Seeing this difficulty, Martin Heidegger, one of the major philosophers of the 20th century, does not only propose to answer the content of the time-question, but it also becomes important for him to work out a philosophical disposition which gives us access of experience to time. This means the examination of the aspects, based on which we gain experience not only about a certain thing, but also about our knowledge of the thing. Without this, there would be no possibility for us to form an idea of time itself.

The insight appearing in Heidegger's *destruction*, later in Lafont's *symbol* and in Ricoeur's *metaphor* suggests that not only time as such, but also the access to the time-phenomenon is a philosophical problem to solve. This is certainly not a new idea but the heritage of a great tradition, since Aristotle's *time-apories* in Book 4 of *Physics*, Augustine's *time-paradox* in Book 11 of *Confessiones* and Kant's *antinomy-theory* in his *Critique of Pure Reason* have given good examples of raising this methodological issue.

As different as these viewpoints are, they share one thing in common, that is the critique of intuitionism considering time as a primal givenness. They recognize that the tasks we encounter when trying to make the time-problem accessible, can't be solved through contemplation or with the help of optics. These approaches express in different ways that time can't be directly perceptible, so we have to find an indirect way in order to experience it: „Die Zeitlichkeit – writes Heidegger – ist nie etwas, was in einer überschwenglichen, einer geheimnisvollen Intuition zu schauen wäre, sondern sie erschließt sich nur in einer bestimmt gearteten begrifflichen Arbeit.“<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricoeur in his literary work entitled *Temps et récit* similarly thinks: „C' est cette

---

<sup>1</sup> LAFONT 2004, 484.p.

<sup>2</sup> HEIDEGGER 1975, 465.p.

impossibilité d' une phénoménologie *pure* du temps qu'il faudra démontrer".<sup>3</sup>. According to Ricoeur, this would be an intuitive approach to the time-structure, which, however, can't be separated from the argumentative-hermeneutic process, with the help of which the phenomenological thinking itself also proposes to solve the mystery of time. The phenomenological process which wants to represent time itself attempts the impossible. It can never be clearly described, because the meditation on time is inseparable from the presence of the discussion about it. In his methodological analyses discussing the *as-structure* of understanding, Heidegger also makes it clear that the hermeneutic viewpoint has great significance in experience: we never see things in their own naked, objective truth, but always understand them *as* something (etwas als etwas).<sup>4</sup> The elementary experience is not pure sight, either, but originally involves the interpretation-structure. Approaching something without the *as-structure* exactly means that the comprehensive sight is missing and I have misunderstood something. We may as well say that there is no experience without language. In the same way, the time-experience also needs interpretation in order to present itself, because it is never accessible without a hermeneutic effort. The significance of the hermeneutic work exactly lies in the fact that the interpretation itself makes up the field in which the thing to be interpreted can appear. If time appears only through interpretation, we can say with good reason that it first becomes an experience in this appearance, so the interpretation is, at the same time, the experience of the interpreted.

Of course, Heidegger has no doubt that the phenomenality of time – presence itself: in the way of appearing or covering – makes any hermeneutic interpretation possible. The phenomenological experience lets us know something – making it possible for us to relate to time in a hermeneutic way – and gives us food for thought, but hermeneutics has to realize the exploring and interpreting of its sense. Thus, by the given experience and by what appears through the given, we mean something that we do not find ready and finished, but something that we must turn into the object of interpretation, and for the meaning we have to struggle with the help of phenomenon. To sum up, the spoken or unspoken hermeneutic approaches say that we cannot observe time in itself. The phenomenological gist of this experience usually becomes accessible only in the context of other symbols. We always speak about time in connection with another, foremost question to be answered. As Ricoeur puts it: we learn to read time through these mediators – retrospectively:<sup>5</sup> in theology, for example, in connection with eternity, in philosophy in connection with being or another person. This hermeneutic work intends to open the horizon of meeting the temporality of our own existence. In this respect, it is worth taking a look at the important turning points, our time experience has gone through.

### **Metaphysical experience of time**

Continental philosophy interpreting the first period of our time consciousness – in the major commentators' view on this topic (Cullmann, Grondind, Pöggeler) – firmly believes that our thinking has to get free from the bonds of time. Time and historicity appear as difficulty or merely a negative which we should overcome. According to Heidegger, in this negation we can recognize the basic movement of classical metaphysics. The conception goes back to the ancient times to Plato's *Timaios*, where

---

<sup>3</sup> RICOEUR 1983-1985, I. 156.pp.

<sup>4</sup> HEIDEGGER 1993, 2001, 32.§.

<sup>5</sup> RICOEUR 1983-1985, I., 131.p.

time appears as „the moving picture of eternity“.<sup>6</sup> This interpretation of being, according to which time is just a sheer vision, the illusion of reality, has left its mark on Continental thinking. Plato's turning to ideas, which involved the underrating of arising and passing things, has established a tradition. After this, the mainstream of philosophy did not attach real importance to time, what is more, interpreted it as an antipower. Time appeared as it had been in close connection with evil.

That is why, Greek philosophers approached time from the perspective of death and interpreted it as a loss of being.<sup>7</sup> This metaphysical approach was able to build a world concept based on transcendence which endowed death with *sense* and gave man the hope of immortality.<sup>8</sup> After this, the optics of metaphysics totally ignored the positive features of time. This true not only for the „Platonic way“, but also for the thinkers who intended to speak about time and history, like Bonaventura or Hegel. Hegel was the first who reacted in an especially sensitive way to the changes of history, however, kept on interpreting time from old concepts of the tradition. He thought that the world of changes, that is, the limited historical temporal being is a „negativity“ whose meaning lies in ascending (*Aufhebung*) to the timeless, and the historical investigations only aim at enhancing the timeless validity. In this approach, the „place“ of the truth is the concept, the field of logic interpreted as a timeless sphere compared to which the historical reality is just an „illusion“.

While criticizing the speculative needs of metaphysics, which attempts to understand everything through concepts, Heidegger protests against the fact that metaphysics as the theory of knowledge ignores the factual life, and fails to recognize its time-experience when considers the supreme being as a sphere beyond time which is accessible for temporal beings only through observing and thinking. The purpose of metaphysical knowing is the supra-temporal essence, the cognition of eternal ideas, whose temporalizing is secondary. In Heidegger's opinion, however, such transcendentalism is nothing more than escaping from our own temporality. After Plato, Boethius and Eckhart master follow this way when they speak about exceeding time on the way of man's perfection, and they only use space symbolism to express spiritual existence in a positive sense.<sup>9</sup> While spatial parameters (depth and height, for example) were understood as the stages of human perfection, they considered time as an obstacle of spiritual existence rather than a possibility, since within the frames of such an interpretation, the spirit is only a subject to time and change when meeting or having lower energies. So, according to Heidegger, being without time-experience is „eternal presence“ (*nunc stans*). This metaphysical time concept, which determined Continental time consciousness for a long time, and which Derrida called the metaphysics of presence (*métaphysique de la présence*), becomes a problem in the modern times.

### **The time-experience of life and existence philosophy**

In fact, it is life and existence philosophy (Kierkegaard, Bergson, Dilthey) that begin to demolish the metaphysical experience of time by getting to the *liberation of time* (assertion) from the *elimination of time* (negation).

Kierkegaard is the first who, taking time radically seriously, sees the tense duality of finite and infinite, temporal and eternal moving towards the inner structure of human existence. While the metaphysical tradition puts the emphasis on the

---

<sup>6</sup> *Timaios*, 37d (PLATÓN 1984, 334. pp.)

<sup>7</sup> *Phaidón*, 64a, (PLATÓN 1984, 1032. pp.)

<sup>8</sup> HEIDEGGER 2001, 49.§, 288.p., See CSEJTEI 2001, 5.p.

<sup>9</sup> See CULLMANN 2000, 48.p.

negativity of time-flow, and attempts to solve the problem of evil through time and finitude, Kirkegaard finds another (Christological) way to experience and interpret time. This approach does not consider time as a loss but a possibility of existence. According to Kirkegaard's hypothesis, contrary to that of Schelling's, the choice (faith or desparation) that determines the direction of existence does not occur in a pre-existent state but here and now, in the moment of existence. The crucial relation of man to eternity, which means the basis of his existence, goes through in time, providing that man himself is the synthesis of temporal and eternal. Kirkegaard intends to „remove“ the evil-concept of metaphysics to the level of personal existence, and to emphasize the „reality of sin“ instead of the speculative „problem of evil“. By doing so, he wants to put emphasis on the importance of personal being, which is given to man only through choice. This way time relates to *choice* rather than evil, making *the positive symbolism of time* accessible. Temporality is no longer just a negative quality of human being but it is a possibility of choosing our own existence: a real *principium individuationis*. This approach, where time appears as the state of choice for the person, raises different question from the previous one: isn't it man himself standing under the power and mercy of time who, contrary to evil, can cope with himself? Bergson, by elaborating the experienced time (*temps vécu*), which he called duration, and Dilthey, with his thoughts reflecting on historicity, also determine the existential meaning of time, where the question of time includes the question of individuation, that is, the ability to become a subjectum.

The essence of the existential time-concepts is that they give a constructive meaning to time, they no longer deny its importance, and pick the time phenomenon out of the neutral field of metaphysics showing its natural relation to choice and freedom, the concept of individual existence and subjectivity. They question the epistemological subjectum-concept, and create the *existence-concept of subjectivity*, where the subjectum no longer takes up the position of epistemology but has an existential importance, thus, instead of knowing, it serves bringing into being. The merit of the existential time-concepts is that they represent a way of thinking which goes against the *loss of subjectum*. They point out the significance of individual existence, where time plays a crucial part in creating the subjectum. All this attached a positive sense to the finitude of human being, so the temporal aspect no longer appears as just a negative quality but it can be recognized as a positive, constitutive ontological motif of our existence. At the same time, according to Heidegger, these concepts, which do nothing more than turning round the dominance of duality (time-eternity), gain validity only within the frames of metaphysical questioning, and by removing the emphasis from the Platonic timeless sphere to the temporal, they do not leave the field of metaphysics. Within the frames of this duality, however, upgrading time and emphasizing the importance of its individualizing role, involves the fact that they can do absolutely nothing with the relation of time to death, the Platonic, ancient thanatological dimension.

### **Hermeneutic time-experience**

Heidegger, followed Kant, points out that by the state of metaphysics we should mean the dichotomic structure of thinking. This, as well as in terms of time, means that there are two opposing perspectives in tradition from the beginning. Terminologically, we can call them *cosmological and psychological*, or *objective and subjective* concepts of time. While the former (Aristotle, Plato) determines the time of natural processes through the movements in the universe, the latter (Augustinus, Kirkegaard, Bergson, Dilthey) deals with the time of the spirit. In

accordance with this, the classical philosophy asks whether time is objective or subjective. This question, in Heidegger's opinion, results in only alternative answers which are not able to stop each other, what is more, they tend to reproduce each other.<sup>10</sup> It is all the same, whether we want to approach to time objectively or subjectively, because both leads to the objectivization of our time-experience, thus, we should see beyond this traditional dichotomy instead. The essence of Heidegger's hermeneutic disposition is that it attempts to give such access to the time-experience in which the objective-subjective opposition seem to become insecure. The merit of this critical investigation is that it calls for a kind of meta-attitude. Since the objective-subjective time, the dichotomy between the two or the dominance of one or the other only matters within the frames of metaphysics, neither the cosmological nor the psychological time-concept is able to break through the boundaries of this model. In the case of opposing aspects, where the inner coherence of the viewpoints is inevitable, we can take radical steps ahead only if we question the sources of the debate by showing the common hypothesis of both viewpoints. We can go beyond the collision only with a critical approach signifying the motivational basis of the viewpoints. Thus, the Heideggerian criticism is not an objection which moves within the metaphysical way of putting a question, or which denies or show counter proofs for the sake of a new solution but it focuses on the elaboration of a meta-viewpoint which has something important to say about the birth of this questioning. So, this argumentation does not reject the traditional concept but shows what makes it possible. It does not ask with which arguments this or that answer can be proved but on what conditions such problems can be born. With this, Heidegger changes the way in which the time-problem is formulated and answered. In this respect, man struggling in the net of alternatives can raise his time consciousness to an upper level not with the alternatives of answers but with the help of questioning the motivations and possibility-conditions of the dichotomic way which is so typical of metaphysics. We can argue endlessly for time being objective or subjective with similarly strong and convincing arguments, but the metaphysical yes/no question can only lead to the reduction of the time-problem rather than to a solution. It illustrates the objectivization of time.

According to Heidegger, however, our thinking about time cannot follow the same way as how we create consciousness about objects. In this case we cannot think of anything object-like. Time analyses do not move within the object-subject frame. The Heideggerian use of language makes it avoidable that we comprehend the time phenomenon as the counterpole of subjectum, some kind of objective time-flow. Time cannot appear in the form of an object-like conception, because it is not one of the objects but something that already operates in all object-experience. The task of the hermeneutic approach is nothing more than bringing back the dimensions that reflexion-philosophy threw away, expanding it to the dimensions which have to remain invisible in the perspective of reflexion-philosophy so that the philosophy about time, as the object of investigation can become possible. Heidegger's fundamental understanding is that the hermeneutic phenomenology of time does not examine objects or subjects but phenomena. Time-experience does not appear as the „object“ of the investigation, as the objective or subjective pole of experience but it appears in its own phenomenality without being an object-like conception opposing man or a subjective consciousness. The interpretation of time as a phenomenon refers to the fact that the Heideggerian investigation does not follow an objective way of putting

---

<sup>10</sup> HEIDEGGER 1975, 359.p.; 361.p.

questions.<sup>11</sup> So, there is a thematization of time which does not become subjective or objective, just understood in its own experience.

The Heideggerian time analyses themselves are also bipolar. Here, we also have an impersonal time-level which is independent from us and the personal temporality of our own existence, however, the two time-levels are not strongly separated but they have an interdependent relation. The Heideggerian thematization leads to the question how the physical and the spiritual time connect to each other, that is, the question of the historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) of human existence. Historicity somehow includes the duality of the time-extasies of existence (*Zeitlichkeit*) and the related horizon (*Temporalität*), but it is not the same as the duality of objective and subjective time. We have to think at a different level here. The two differences are not equal but one is the other's possibility condition. Time is not objective or subjective in this respect but it is both at the same time, as long as it belongs to human existence itself. „Zeitlichkeit“ and „Temporalität“ is such a dynamic unity in historicity which makes the emerge of different aspects possible.

Although by changing the objective-subjective sides of the traditional way both naturalism and psychologism can be avoided, compared to these alternatives Heidegger's viewpoint is not „neutral“ but in a certain respect „subjective“ because it starts from being here, the subjectum of being in the world. This, however, is not the same as the psychologism of subjectum-metaphysics, the psychological subjectivity according to which time is just a subjective mind-act. What should we mean by this subjectivity of time-experience? Heidegger says that if we want to liberate thinking from the vicious circle of opposing viewpoints, we have to redirect the question radically to the asking person. Time, in this form, belongs to the human existence itself. While the reflexive approach is based on the hypothesis that it is able to step out of the sense-happening transmitted by the time-experience chosen as its object, according to Heidegger, philosophy discovers time only if comprehend itself as a part of it, if the meditation about time takes into account the temporality of its own meditation. We can only protect our time-experience from the thing-like objectivization if we don't approach it through a reflexive way, in the frames of a (subjective-objective type) thing-ontology. The hermeneutic prerequisites of understanding are fulfilled exactly when we do not reflect ourselves out of time. Yet, it is not the crucial thing that whether we exit the circle of the temporality but whether we enter properly, since the positive possibility of knowing existence is hiding there. Thus, from a hermeneutic respect, the following addition offers itself : if we understand the question well, its earlier sense, the stake of the problem changes, too. Time no longer appears in itself but in the perspective of *for us*. The question will no longer apply to the time-question in general but to the *sense* of time. So, Heidegger claims in his lecture entitled *The Concept of Time* in 1924 that we cannot ask : „What is time?“ in itself, instead we should ask: „Am I my own time?“<sup>12</sup>

From Heidegger's hermeneutic perspective three fundamental meaning-layers of the time-concept unfold. 1. For the objective-subjective time-concepts, time appeared in the frame of object-experience, belonging to identifiable time processes. But if, according to Heidegger, we take a look at the phenomenological feature of time, we can discover two more aspects: the existence *in time* and the *temporality* of being. 2. First of all, Heidegger sheds light on the fact that if we do not only consider time in an abstract way but we mean an existential event, projecting it on our own existence, with an attitude leading to life, then the question arises what the *existence in time*

---

<sup>11</sup> HEIDEGGER 1993, 419.pp.; id. 2001, 480.pp.

<sup>12</sup> HEIDEGGER 1992, 51.p.

means from the human perspective. It is at this individually sensitive level, where the ability to exist, the self-identity is at stake, that Heidegger elaborates his well-known thanatological concept. He intends to explore the possible ways of authentic time-experience, which opens the way to self-being (*Selbst*). In his opinion, the authentic time, which is able to offer new possibilities of man's self-interpretations, is only accessible through understanding man's limits, that is, the experience of finiteness. The possibility of accessing time depends exactly on the degree at which man is able to relate to death, and this is what determines his possibility of being himself.

3. For Heidegger, time is a key-concept of both his human conception and his entire existence conception. Through the problem of temporality, he investigates the fact that the process of the development of self-identity, its modification in time does not explain in itself the core-structure and its formation. The question of the constitution of subjectivity isn't same as the problem of the origin constituting subjectivity. If it is not man who creates the temporality of existence but is already placed in this temporality, there should be a dimension of time which is the possibility condition of the concrete facticity. Heidegger calls time temporality (*Temporalität*) in the function where it is not only the component of the actual subjectum but the „basis“ of the subjectivity-creation of human subjectivity, „the apriori of real subjectivity“.<sup>13</sup> All this makes it clear that the time-problem exceeds the boundaries of the individuation-problem, and the question here is how the ontological (or metaphysical) dimension, where the questions of the relation of human subjectivity to the world and others arise, can be clarified. In other words, the Heideggerian temporality concept expresses that it is not enough to explore the question of time on the level of the subjectivity-theme: it cannot elaborate the sense of being only through the temporality of existence. For this, we also need a time-concept which is constituted not only by the sense-contexts carried by man, which is no longer just a result of an's achievements, the „productivity of the subjectum“, but which puts the question of an original existence-state of experience. With the question of temporality we have actually reached the level of *transcendence-problem*, with the help of which Heidegger attempts to reach the heart of the schematic problem. The schematism of temporality seeks for the answer to the transcendence-problem. Tracing back to schematism does not mean falling back into the psychologism of subjectum-metaphysics, it is not at all about the inner, mental sphere of the subjectum. Heidegger is aware that it does not offer a fulfilling solution if all thinkable sense belongs to the circle of subjectivity. He says that we have to show somehow that the question of time exceeds the continuous argumentation originating from the human source. If, however, time has priority over the objective-subjective differentiation, the central question arises how the philosopher's question can lead it out of the circle of subjectivity as long as he looks for the transcendental possibility conditions of objectivity and subjectivity. Can time, as temporality play the role of the ultimate perspective?

Heidegger's main problem is that even if there is such a possible concept of time, it cannot be known. The horizontal schemes that belong to the time-extasies of existence are no longer givenness because there is no such a layer of experience in which they can be experienced. In a strict sense, time as temporality is no longer a phenomenon but the condition of the phenomena which is not accessible directly and in itself, yet, it appears somehow. Temporal schemes are directly not accessible, we can only gain knowledge about them through their effect on us. Although they contribute constitutively to the phenomenalization of every phenomenon, they do not

---

<sup>13</sup> HEIDEGGER 2001, 159p., 266 pp., 58p. See id. 1993, 131p., 229 p., 41 p.

fit in the phenomenal sphere, this is why, they can no longer be phenomenally in themselves. After all, Heidegger couldn't connect the temporal schemes to concrete experience. In this ultimate dimension of time, Heidegger's entire hermeneutic phenomenology is automatically formed. It remains unanswered how the schemes which determine our experience can become a part of an experience-analysis. It is still unclear how the momentum of schematization can be expressed by experience.

## Conclusion

Thus, Heidegger's time-analyses, similarly to those of Kant's, pointed out that time will always remain a challenge to philosophy. Although we have to put the question aiming at the temporal sense, meaning and purpose of being in a practical and moral sense, we cannot give an ultimate, well-established answer as a philosopher or a scientist. In a philosophical sense the time-problem has no solution, just sense. Philosophy cannot offer a positive result in this way, its essence lies in its struggle to rethink things carefully and to make them more complicated.

## References

- [1] Ghislain Lafont (2004): *A katolikus egyház teológiatörténete*. ford. Mártonffy Marcell, Atlantisz, Budapest.
- [2] Heidegger (1975): *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*. Hrsg.: F.-W. von Herrmann, Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main.
- [3] Paul Ricoeur (1983-1985): *Temps et récit. I-III*. Points, Éditions du Seuil.
- [4] Heidegger (2001): *Lét és idő*. ford. Vajda Mihály, Angyalosi Gergely, Bacsó Béla, Kardos András, Orosz István, Osiris, Budapest
- [5] Platón (1984): *Timaios*, ford. Kövendi Dénes, in: *Platón összes művei*, 3., Európa, Budapest.
- [6] Platón (1984): *Phaidón*, ford. Kerényi Grácia, in: *Platón összes művei*, 1., Európa, Budapest.
- [7] Csejtei Dezső (2001): *A halál hermeneutikája*, Veszprémi Humán Tudományokért Alapítvány, Veszprém.
- [8] Oscar Cullmann (2000): *Krisztus és az idő: Az őskereszténység idő- és térszemlélete*, Hermeneutikai Kutatóközpont, Budapest.
- [9] Heidegger (1993): *Sein und Zeit*, Niemeyer, Tübingen.
- [10] Heidegger (1992): *Az idő fogalma. A német egyetem önmegnyilatkozása. A rektorátus 1933/34* (ford. Fehér M. István) Kossuth, Budapest.