

From THE DIRECTION OF TIME<sup>1</sup>

## VII

THE DIRECTION OF TIME DEFINED “IN THE ORDER OF EXISTENCE”  
THROUGH THE CONVERSION, NOT OF THE PAST INTO THE FUTURE, BUT  
OF THE FUTURE INTO THE PAST

Everyone thinks he understands rather clearly what must be meant by the direction of time in conceiving of the future as constantly emerging from the past. But perhaps this direction is not [as] we think, or at least it is necessary to discern in time—without undermining its irreversibility but on the contrary affirming it—two different directions according to whether we are considering knowledge or existence.

Only, we have to do here with an obvious paradox. For it is insufficient to say that knowledge is turned toward the past and existence toward the future. Where time’s course is concerned knowledge constantly proceeds from the past toward the future, i.e. from the known to the unknown; the future is always revealed to us after the past; and knowledge follows the very direction of our

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter Four, contained in Book Two (“Time’s Ideality”). The chapter’s title could also be translated as “The Sense of Time” or as “Time’s Meaning”. The French word in question has all of these nuances.

progress. But when we examine the order of existence we ask ourselves how the past itself is formed. Then the future precedes it and is turned into it little by little. Not that we could realise the future in advance, as it will be when accomplished. But in so far as it is a future and we can think of it as such it is not a sheer nothingness: it is an idea and, in every instance, a possibility that is precisely for us to actualise. To realise the future is to make it [something] present which immediately becomes [something] past. Now herein consists precisely every action we can make: [presupposed is] the future in the form of a possibility we bring into [concrete] existence. Thus we see that the future constantly becomes the past, that this unknown is constantly transformed for us into the known, that this virtuality ever becomes for us an actuality, sometimes solely through the play of certain forces that surpass us and sometimes with the collaboration of our will. Because the future is ahead of us it is also ahead of what is behind us and can only come after, in such a fashion that there is no past that has not first been a future, so that the direction of time undoubtedly makes us enter into the future—but [only] to make this future enter into the past in turn—and so that *beyond the most distant future there is again a past into which this future will one day be transformed.*

However there is here an ambiguity we need to avoid which risks compromising the distinction we have made between the order of knowledge and that of existence. Firstly, when we say of the past that it is before the future we speak of various events we have situated along the same time-line and at the very instant they are actualised. Consequently it is true that those [events] which today belong to the past are actualised before those that still belong to the future and that we can only place after them in the order of their eventual actualisation. This is the most common representation of time, and doubtless the most false in that, [with] the event always being considered at its point of actualisation, time [becomes] a wholly contemporaneous line for which there is properly neither past nor future. Secondly, the event's actualisation in the instant where we situate it is only a phase of its development. We cannot say that it is preceded or followed by other events which, if we look ahead or behind, precisely are not yet or no longer current (i.e. are still possibilities or already memories). On the other hand the same event that is now current was a future possibility just a moment ago, even as it will presently fall into the past of memory. The law of time is rightly not the order of the actualisation of events fixed along a line where, under the heading of "instants", we distinguish successive points upon which we pin [events] one after another; it is on the contrary that circulation which requires each event produced in the world to belong to the future, the present and the past, one after the other.

It is indeed a characteristic of all-that-is, not simply to appear at an instant in time between two domains of time in which it [does not exist]<sup>2</sup>, with respect to

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<sup>2</sup> Literally, is not.

which it is like a non-being while they are occupied with other aspects of being, but to be exempt from *ever being cast out of time*, to always occupy a given place in the future, the present and the past, though the conversion of future into past takes place in time through the intermediary of an evanescent present. [Just as no] form of being can really be banished from the totality of being, it cannot be banished from time. And we can say that *at every instant of time it is necessarily possible, current or accomplished*. Time is the movement by virtue of which it passes from one these [modalities] to another, always in the same order; and this movement proceeds from the future toward the past.

We see therefore that there are two different interpretations of time's [arrow] depending on whether we consider various events at the moment they are accomplished and then imagine a time in which they are juxtaposed according to an irreversible order—but in which, through an intolerable abstraction, each [of them] is considered only in its presence and has neither future nor past—or whether, considering each event within the totality of time, we see [time] transform a possibility into an actuality which traverses the present only to receive a new existence in the past, which the spirit<sup>3</sup> always disposes, at least in principle. These two views of time are profoundly different from each other. In the first, where there is no other reality than that of perception and the body, we find an infinite multiplicity of instants, endlessly reborn and perishing. In the second the instant is eternal; and the whole of time is inseparable from each mode of being as the condition which allows it to be realised by achieving its own possibility so to speak. In the instant, which is always the same, things continually pass but their existence does not reside in this simple passage (in which they receive only a phenomenal form); their reality is precisely the wholly spiritual bond between what they were before being ours (as sheer possibilities) and what they have become now that they have helped shape us and are joined fast to us, without [our being able] to detach them.

The instant in its turn can therefore be considered in two aspects depending on whether it is the very resting-place of my mind [where] I imagine the possible and resuscitate memory or whether, reducing it to the transition between the future and the past, I define it as the coincidence between the act I accomplish and reality such as it is given to me: then the future appears yonder and the past on this side; their meeting with existence only ever takes place in the instant where they cannot penetrate at the same time, which creates between them an order of succession which goes always from the future toward the past. Now how could it be otherwise if I need to create myself in order to become what I am? But such a development is carried out, dare we say, in the eternity of the instant i.e. in the eternity of the spirit: it expresses the impossibility of my ever removing from it any of the stages [that constitute] my particular existence. [That] is the reason why the cycle it travels from its possibility to its realisation is

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<sup>3</sup> Or mind.

entirely included in being, where [my existence] cuts a furrow so to speak such that each of its moments calls for the other in an incessant transformation, without the pure act being affected; however participation in such an act allows the successive forms of this existence to constitute their specific originality in each of time's phases and to bring about their conversion without the spirit's eternity being altered. Whereas in the classic conception of time nothing exists but material being which springs from nothing [only] to fall back into it in a time fashioned from a succession of instants which exclude more than link together, the conception we propose [regards] time as the spirit's own movement which, to the degree that it is a particular spirit, is obliged to dissociate its possibility from its reality in order to create itself but which, in order to effectuate the passage from one to the other, requires [a] relation in the present instant of its operation with a given that surpasses it yet precisely allows it to objectivise its own subjectivity and from then on to give a current place in being to that aspect of being it has virtualised in order to make it its own.

The metaphysical consequence of this doctrine is considerable; for it is not only a question of reversing the direction of time, henceforth [compelling] us to convert the future into the past rather than the past into the future, but of the necessity of identifying being with the spirit<sup>4</sup>, i.e. with this act through which *the spirit creates itself in the constant relationship it maintains between the possible and the accomplished*. Indeed we see very well that the possible and the accomplished make sense only by way of the spirit; their endlessly renewed relation is the very life of the spirit. And the materiality that separates them reunites them and allows [their transmutation from] one into the other. It is itself *phenomenal*, not only because it has existence only for a subject but because it limits him, surpasses him and constantly brings him precisely what he lacks in an experience he cannot do without; it is [also] *fleeting*, i.e. constantly disappears as soon as it has served, in order to be reborn indefinitely so as to furnish spirit with the instrument and the support it [cannot possibly] do without. And matter must be phenomenal and fleeting precisely so that the spirit can attest to its own reality in [a] living act through which it must constitute itself in order to be.

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<sup>4</sup> I feel that "spirit" is the right word, here and previously, though connotations of "mind" still apply. I believe the author is spelling out what many readers have long suspected: that for him being is spirit, particularly in its association with temporality.