



Now upstream of time

Michel Bitbol

► To cite this version:

| Michel Bitbol. Now upstream of time. Philosophy World Democracy, 2021. hal-03469730

HAL Id: hal-03469730

<https://hal.science/hal-03469730>

Submitted on 7 Dec 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

NOW UPSTREAM OF TIME¹

Michel Bitbol

Archives Husserl, CNRS/ENS, 45, rue d'Ulm, 75005, Paris

Philosophy World Democracy, 14 June 2021

<https://www.philosophy-world-democracy.org/now-upstream-of-time-part-1>
<https://www.philosophy-world-democracy.org/now-upstream-of-time-part-2>

*"If all time is eternally present,
all time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
remaining a perpetual possibility
only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
point to one end, which is always present".*

T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets

"Now" is a word.

If its meaning is limited to its use, as the second Wittgenstein proposes, this word is clear. "Now" can be the trigger for action without delay: "start now!" Or it can be an attractor of shared attention to what is happening in the immediate sphere of understanding of the speakers: "listen to those birds singing now"; or it can be a piece of information about the availability of a good, announced but postponed until then: "the calendar for the year 2022 is now on sale".

If, on the other hand, we start to ask what the word *designates*, what it *refers to*, according to the regime of the noun extended to adverbs, the difficulties multiply. They are poorly concealed by the terms used to characterize its use: "without delay", "immediate", "until then"; for these terms, and many others such as "actual" or "present", merely surround "now" with a constellation of terms that are sometimes redundant, sometimes as problematic as it itself is. What is actuality if the act can be past or planned, rather than "in the process of" happening? What is the immediate or the present, if not what is happening *now*?

The etymologies, for their part, are only half illuminating. The etymology of the French word "Main-Tenant" says the holding-in-hand, the persistence of the presence retained under the hand. "Main-Tenant" inscribes presence in a tactile relationship, where the word "presence" itself suggests a visual relationship: *prae-esse*, in Latin, means to be here before the eyes. The

¹ French original version « Maintenant en amont du temps », published in : *Chroniques Phénoménologiques*, 17, 5-17, November 2020

Indo-European etymology, *nū*, Greek *νῦν*, Latin *nunc*, German *nun* (*jetzt*), English *now*, is probably the zero degree of the word *neuo*, Latin *neo*, German *neues*, English *new*. It says novelty, the appearance, the sudden departure, of something that is perhaps about to last. The etymology of the Italian word *adesso* takes up the Latin *ad ipsum*, "in (at) this", implying at this very moment. It pronounces the identity of act and time, and imports a central deictic function, *this*, into a temporal deictic (*this* time). In this respect, it accords with the Spanish *ahora*, *hac hora* in Latin: this hour (the word '*hora*' can originally refer not only to the hour but to various periods of time, being related to the English word year; it is found in another word used in Italian for 'now': *ora*). But behind the scenes of all these etymologies, as well as in the variety of uses of "now", there is a passage to the limit. *Adesso*, "this very moment", seeks to capture the precise instant in which it is enunciated, even if this pseudo-instant is misguidedly extended by the duration of the enunciation. *Maintenant*, in French, is pronounced abruptly, with a burst of voice on 'Main', when it is a matter of giving the start of a gesture or process. *Nū*, *New*, signifies a break between the before and after, an unpredictable novelty that feels sudden. By breaking a continuity, *nū* seeks to capture the instantaneous, the infinitesimal caesura between what was and what will be.

So what does "now" designate: the duration of the presence maintained, or the discontinuity of a present without precedent and without tomorrow? In this simple question we can see an ancient metaphysical dispute whose two opposing terms are the permanent and the present. Already the misunderstandings about Parmenides, eternalist or presentist, are emerging. Already the internal tension in Aristotle's work between *οὐσία* [ousia] and *νῦν* [nun], between the substance and the instant, seems inevitable.

It would be tempting to enter this arena of metaphysical debate about the present without delay, starting again from its closest heritage, such as the text *Ousia and Grammè* in Jacques Derrida's *Margins of Philosophy*. It would be tempting to take a new step in the debate, by re-reading the dense history of the question of time, and by first exposing some of its presuppositions in order to overcome the false dichotomies conditioned by them. But, under the guise of disturbing some presuppositions of the metaphysical theses on time, this would mean accepting the presupposition of all metaphysics' presuppositions, the one that founds it as an organized discourse, underneath those that underlie its constellations of superficially opposing theses.

This elementary presupposition of metaphysical discourse, so elementary that it is difficult to recognize it as such, is firstly that words almost always have a *meaning*, a power of "*de-signation*", which moves us from the sphere of their sounds to the terrain of what is out there independently of them. It is then that concepts necessarily have a consistency of their own,

whether it is that of a division of nature into its articulations, or that of a mental categorization of what appears. Finally, it is that the stability of the meaning and use of words, their repetition beyond the occurrences, allows us to *gather*, in what is designated, centers of constancy beyond the flux of appearances, and that this alone allows us to grant a truth value to propositions. For the *true* here designates the statement that conforms to the constant being, whereas the *false* designates the statement that affirms what is only inconstantly apparent. This scheme of *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, which expresses and redoubles the adequacy of things to words, resisted the Kantian revolution, provided that the verb "to constitute" was substituted for the verb "to gather". Within the framework of Kantian criticism, but also in Husserl's *Experience and Judgement*, concepts and words are certainly no longer supposed to point to immutable "things in themselves" behind the curtain of appearances, but at least they delimit by their use regions of invariance (intersubjective as well as trans-temporal) within the constellations of phenomena, thus *constituting* domains of objectivity from them. In this new framework, the adequacy of concepts and propositions to their objects is no longer a passively recognized *given*, but it remains relevant as the result of an actively sought co-stabilization of the act of signifying and the term of signification.

However, each of these presuppositions about the function of words in metaphysical discourse becomes an insurmountable obstacle, and a source of confusion, when we try to characterize 'now'.

If a word implies the expulsion of attention from where it is, the hope of expressing what the word "now" covers suddenly vanishes. For to say "now" in a sentence in the indicative or imperative mode is to want to repatriate attention in its emergence. To say "now" is to invite listeners to suspend their flight to memories and projects, and to return to the place where the word is spoken, with its vibration as a reference point. Uttering the word "now" is not intended to take listeners away from themselves; on the contrary, it aims to suspend their thoughtless forays into other times, and to bring them reflexively back into their own perceptual, memorial and imaginary spaces. In short, the mere act of signifying runs counter to the legitimate meaning of the word "now".

That a concept is the translation of a particular natural articulation or mental category, as opposed to other articulations or categories, does not fit the concept of 'now' either. On the one hand, there is nothing in an objectified nature that resembles "now". And on the other hand, the mind has nothing to oppose to what is happening now, since, as St. Augustine pointed out, our mind has access to the past and the future only through their present donation. The word "now" therefore lacks not only the possibility of meaning in the ordinary sense of "referring to something", but also in the Saussurean sense of being opposed to other meanings.

As for the stabilizing function of words and recurrences in language, it is most obviously at odds with the lexical field of "now". What is signified by a noun is a *thing* whose being and manifestation extend far beyond now; what is signified by an adjective is a *feature* of the thing that also extends, to a lesser extent, beyond now. What is signified by the adverb of place "here" is a specific spatial situation that can sometimes be maintained for some time and sometimes be repeated by a return movement. But what is signified by "now" does not continue beyond now. What is signified by "now" obviously does not stabilize any configuration of phenomena, since it is the very instability of appearing. What is signified by the adverb of time "now" is not a locatable situation either, since the duration of the act of locating it is sufficient to remove it definitively from its location.

We have just documented a series of well known paradoxes about the temporal features that we seek to signify. They arise if we want to stop their meaning, rather than let it go to its metamorphoses at the mercy of usage. The expression of time and its alleged characteristics takes time, the time of enunciation. Time is the presupposition of its own meaning. As for the expression of now, it never ceases to escape its actuality because it lasts. And simultaneously, it can only remain now, always-now, because its entire duration trails in the wake of the present where it ends.

To arrest the meaning of the very terminology of mobility is an impossible task. According to Bergson's clear verdict, this is a sign of the most insurmountable failure of intelligence and its linguistic instrument. Intelligence claims to capture reality by immobilizing it in verbal repetitions, whereas "movement is undoubtedly reality itself"². Through the litany of its lexical recurrences, intelligence does not take a single step towards its metaphysical dream, but only achieves a practical objective: to foresee and use the more or less reproducible aspect of appearing. Through the rules of simultaneity between the readings of clocks and events, by spelling out the names of the instants identified by these clocks, through their graphic arrangement along a straight line (the fourth dimension of relativistic space-time), scientific intelligence does not capture the essence of time either; it just *replaces* it with an operational procedure of prediction of dynamic variables, valid for any inertial or accelerated reference frame.

These paradoxes of the expression of time and now are those of an attempt to say a "non-thing" that does not face us, and that we cannot grasp as a tool; a "non-thing" that is neither the present-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*), nor the ready-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*). This "non-thing" that we are trying to say is what we have always bathed in without having been able to put it before us, without being able to use it in any way. This "non-thing" that we want to say carries us, trans-ports us, goes through us. In short, and in an

² H. Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2018, p. 156.

almost self-contradictory way, what we are trying to say when we pronounce the word "now" is neither pre-sentable (in the sense of *prae-esse*, of being-before), nor hand-holdable (in the sense of usable).

It is confirmed that what we are trying to indicate by "now" is not a possible object of *meaning*, because we can neither move towards it nor make use of it in a certain direction of activity. Should we therefore deprive ourselves of this word? Do we have to comply with the injunction to retain in our discourse only those words to which we can give *meaning*, according to the traditional meaning of the word "meaning", which implies assigning a direction to the intentional gaze? And if we cannot, should we give up, remain silent, forget everything we know how to do and have done in everyday life when we use the common words "now", "yesterday" and "tomorrow"?

If we want to avoid that extreme retreat in which an excess of philosophical acuity would let us lose the benefit of living in the community of speaking beings, if we want to make allowances for the fact that this community to which we belong does not automatically fall into absurdity when it uses adverbs of time and conjugations of verbs, we must identify the alternative regime of "meaning" under which these singular words are successfully implemented in discourse and dialogue. To identify this alternative meaning of meaning, it may suffice to go back upstream of the completed act of signifying, to that state where the target of the act of intentional aiming at is not yet grasped, let alone seen, but where we are inhabited by an unfulfilled desire for it, where we feel the vague discomfort of its probable lack. The desire to say what haunts us, and the discomfort of not knowing how to say it, because we don't know what we are haunted by. But also the desire to transmit our haunting to the other person in order to probe his or her ability to take part in it, to make him or her feel our sense of lack as keenly as possible. And the desire to observe in the other person the complicity that will fulfill our wishes, or, at worse, her incomprehension that will force us to refine our expressive resources.

The desire to say something [*vouloir dire*], here, is still deprived of a said. More precisely, the desire to say something, here, is that whose "said" [*le dit*] is reduced to its own unsatisfied gap, and to the hope that the interlocutor will inscribe herself, as long as it has not been appeased, in the same cavity of dissatisfaction we have experienced. It is this upstream and this foundation of the completed act of signifying that Merleau-Ponty highlighted in *Signs*:

The significant intention in me (as well as in the listener who finds it again when hearing me) is at the moment, and even if it must then fructify into 'thoughts' - only a *determined void*, to be filled by words, -

the excess of what I want to say over what is or what has already been said³.

In the ordinary course of speech or writing, this void ends up being filled, this desire for expression ends up being satisfied. The thickness of the text, the song of the signifying sounds, are usually enough to arouse satisfaction in oneself and in others, if the talent of their author is sufficient. But what if the gap keeps widening, if the fulfilment of the desire for meaning is a lure that attracts us without ever being achievable? What remains is precisely what could not be filled: the emptiness, the excavation, the actuality of the lack without the perspective of its filling. There also remains the possibility of making others recognize it again as their own abode, an abode that cannot be pointed to because it envelops us both, a focus that cannot be placed under the beam of a gaze because it is the origin of seeing.

In the case of the word "now", this is precisely the case. The desire to signify cannot be satisfied, since signifying "now" has the immediate consequence of letting it slip through one's hands and no longer holding it. The best we can do, since we cannot grasp now, is to *share* its flight: by holding each other by the hand, by recognizing that we inhabit the same alveolus in the making, by putting in common, in the glow of an exchanged glance, the flickering flame that we know to be, by burning our lives together on the infinitesimal film of our fluid co-presence.

A series of remarks spanning millennia of history suffice to illustrate the escape of "now" from any attempt to designate it, the inability to pose it as a signifiable being. The three remarks chosen are cited in an order from the oldest to the most recent, and from the most detailed to the most concise. After encapsulating the three tenses in the present alone, as if the latter were a kind of unlimited container, St Augustine turns around, denying the present the privilege of *being*: "If the present, in order to be time, must go into the past, how can we say that a thing *is*, which can only be on the condition of no longer being?". Simplicius, for his part, quotes an anonymous author, known as the pseudo-Archytas, who overemphasizes the paradox of speaking of 'now' by making the word last. He again hammers home the withdrawal of what is given by this word, as soon as it is given: "The now being indivisible, it is already in the past when we speak of it and when we try to apprehend it". Finally, there is Hegel, who reaches the height of conciseness, when he simply points out that "The now is precisely this of not being any longer when it is"⁴.

Hegel's justification of his refusal to attribute being to "now" is, however, uncertain. Hegel in fact evokes successively the now that "is" and the now that is not. The now that is not is identified with that which is reflected and designated as now, in other words, with that which is now "shown" as now.

³ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, Gallimard, 1960, p. 112.

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *La phénoménologie de l'esprit*, Paris, Aubier, 1999, p. 88.

If we are to admit that this latter "now" is not, it is because it, once captured by an act of designation, is thrown back into the past, and the past is no longer, which is equivalent to *not being at all* by virtue of what Derrida has denounced as the ontological privilege of presence. But is it acceptable to distinguish several "nows", a "now" that is, and a "now" that is not? In the name of what should we say that *a particular* "now" slips from the present into the past, as if it had a form of individuality and permanence? And how can it be conceived that anything, including the act of designating it, can throw "now" back into the past? Isn't it an obvious contradiction in terms, since now is no longer now as soon as it shifts into the past? Isn't the use of the word "now" abusively extended if it starts to encompass a past event?

This impropriety testifies to the persistence in Hegel, and no doubt in the whole history of philosophy, of the Aristotelian concept of the "now". The Aristotelian concept hardly separates "now" from a particular moment in time. It is from such a concept that we will have to free ourselves entirely if we want to elucidate what Hegel calls (debatably, as we shall see) "the now that is", namely, just *now*.

So let us meditate, after so many other readers, on the treatise on time in the fourth book of the *Physics*. The instant, the $\nu\nu\nu$, is at the heart of the paradoxes of time that Aristotle lists. Without going into the details of the ebb and flow of his conceptualization of the instant, it suffices to underline the opposition of two statuses that coexist rather uneasily in it.

The first status resembles that of the "now that is" in Hegel's sense: "Is this moment, this present itself (...) one? Does it always remain identical and unchanging? Or is it different and constantly different?".⁵ The present moment, in this limited sense, blurs the opposition of constant self-identity and incessant difference: "in one sense, the moment is the same; and in another sense, it is not the same"⁶. Its status is uncertain, and this very uncertainty is constitutive of it. What makes its concept safe from outright rejection is that the status of the other two tenses, the past and the future, is even worse. "One of the two parts of time has been and is no longer; the other part must be and is not yet"⁷.

But how can we understand the two terms of the dichotomy: the incessant difference *and* the constant identity of the moment?

Should we consider that a particular instant is preserved through time, thus allowing us to take its constant identity at face value? This would deny change, and thus the very essence of time; or it would border on the absurd if it forced one to declare that such and such an instant remains the same from one instant to the next.

⁵ Aristotle, *Physics*, IV, XIV, 5.

⁶ Aristotle, *Physics*, IV, XVII, 2.

⁷ Aristotle, *Physics*, IV, XIV, 2.

Should we say, on the contrary, that an instant "perishes", to allow it to differ from itself? This is not acceptable either, for, as Aristotle remarks, "it is not possible for the instant to have perished in itself, since it existed at the time; nor is it possible for the previous instant to have perished in another instant"⁸. To perish is a process, it cannot take only one instant, all the more so when what is supposed to perish is the instant itself.

The second status of the instant, of the $\nu\nu\nu$, is then sketched out, but once again in a hesitant manner. Aristotle begins by stating: "it does not seem that time is composed of presents, of instants"⁹. This could imply that "now", the present, is radically heterogeneous to time, of a completely different nature than time. But Aristotle suggests that this is not what he means here. His simple use of the plural for the words 'present' and 'moments' is enough to suggest their spacing on a line, which sketches a representation of time. And this representation is confirmed when Aristotle makes the non-composition of time by "presents" equivalent to the non-composition of the spatial line by points¹⁰. The instant is thus assimilated, as a non-durable limit of duration, to the non-extended limit-point that composes the extended line¹¹. If time does not consist of presents, it is not because of a difference in nature between time and the present. It is, like the relationship between point and spatial line, because of the opposition between the zero extent of the instant and the non-zero extent of time. This correspondence of time and spatial extent, of the instant and the point, is made inevitable by their articulation in the movement and trajectory of the mobile body. By his double gesture of bringing time and space together, Aristotle announces medieval and then Galilean kinematics, in which time is represented by an axis analogous to that of space in order to represent the movement of the mobile body by a line immersed in a four-dimensional volume. At the same time, he sketches out the confusion, denounced as a litany by Bergson, between the duration actually experienced and the deposition of its intellectualized residue in a spatialized pseudo-time.

For all that, Aristotle himself did not take the ultimate step, and the ultimate impropriety, that would be implied by the pure and simple spatialization of time; he carefully maintained the specificity of time in relation to space, despite their partial analogy. His nuanced text describes the combination of common and distinctive features he sees between the instant in time, and the point in the line: "The present instant (...) is the limit of time, the beginning of the one and the end of the other. But this is not obvious for the instant, as it is for the line, which remains motionless. The instant divides and divides time only in power; insofar as it divides, it is

⁸ Aristotle, *Physics*, IV, XIV, 6.

⁹ Aristotle, *Physics*, IV, XIV, 4.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Physics*, IV, VIII.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Physics*, IV, XVII, 5.

always other; insofar as it unites and continues, it is always the same"¹². The instant therefore divides time in power, while the point divides the line in act. But to say that the instant divides time, even if in potential, or that it limits the anterior and posterior, even if it escapes them, is to virtually posit a temporal line and to situate the instant somewhere within it. In this case, it is right to translate "instant" as a kind of temporal point articulating the past and the future. A point-in-time subject to the fate of fading away, because it is renewed immediately after having served to articulate the two times that adjoin it.

But what we are looking for is not a moment, but the *now*. Now without equal, and not *this* particular now. Now unique in its very evanescence, and not a certain now that is, distinguished from other nows that are not, that are no longer. In order to remain faithful to the now, one must fuse its flight from meaning with its remanence as that which has nowhere to flee, rather than opposing flight and remanence. We must hold together these two edges of the gap between the act of signifying and the mere outline of signification, even if this means creating a dizzying exception in language.

The first edge of the split. That "now" flees its own meaning implies, as we have seen, that it remains in the state of a mere signifying intention, that the word "now" only manages to dig a semantic void calling without hope for its intentional direction. The signifying anfractuosity of "*now*" could only be filled by a particular moment, and not by *now*, this absolute singular. As a pure signifier, "*now*" cannot grasp a signified.

Second edge of the split. Now remains, because it would have no time to flee from if it were nevertheless signified. A past now would not be a now, but a chronometrically situated time. A chronometrically situated now would already have expired and would therefore not be now. Now remains, even if time passes. This has an immense implication: that now is not a time. For time, with its polarity and chronology, never ceases to be woven now. Time is woven into this true now that does more than remain, since it is the abode of things that are, of things that pass away as well as things that persist.

But how can this be done? How do we weave time now? By a certain interpretation of the reading of natural and artificial clocks. A reading that makes us *believe* that clocks capture time and subject it to quantitative evaluation. As Bergson has shown, this belief is the illusory consequence of an articulation between quantity and quality, between the numerical intervals of clock readings and the lived perception of duration. Everything is said in his text about the indissoluble relationship between quantified time and the lived now:

¹² Aristotle, *Physics*, IV, XVIII, 14.

"When I follow with my eyes, on the dial of a clock, the movement of the hand that corresponds to the oscillations of the pendulum, I am not measuring duration, as people seem to think. I am merely counting simultaneities, which is quite different. Outside of me, in space, there is only ever a single position of the needle and the pendulum, because *nothing remains of past positions*. Within me, a process of organisation or mutual penetration of the facts of consciousness continues, which constitutes true duration. It is because I last in this way that I represent what I call the past oscillations of the pendulum, at the same time as I perceive the present oscillation"¹³.

In other words, the relationship between quantified time and experienced duration is itself experienced in the now that both flees and remains. Quantitative clock readings acquire their temporal meaning only in and through the *currently* experienced "representation" of the differences between their successive indications. But this representation of differences requires the retention in the living present of previous clock readings; a retention whose objective correlate, studied by the cognitive sciences, is a memory provisionally inscribed in the "working memory". Outside of this experienced retention, nothing manifests itself but *a single position* of the clock hand, punctuated by a throbbing "now" that does not even know it is repetitive, so oblivious is it to its past occurrences. The physical concept of time is thus the natural child of an interbreeding between the immobilization of the instant by its numerical designation (the time it is), and the mobility that is experienced now in the retentional trail.

It is indeed *at this very moment* that time is being woven, and we now know how this happens. But if time is woven now, now cannot be a time. And since now is not anything else than a time, it cannot even be said to be, contrary to what Hegel says. What Hegel calls "the now that is" must therefore be understood as the *now that is not*. And what Hegel calls "the now that is not" must be understood as a particular instant that is; a punctual instant placed there-before our attention, as an object of reflection and of chronometric representation.

This reversal of the attribution of being or non-being to "now" evokes another reversal indicated by John Scotus Eriugena in his mystical-metaphysical epic of the *Periphyseon*. According to the Carolingian philosopher, the most fundamental division that runs through nature separates things that are from things that are not. The primary sense in which this division is to be understood places phenomena, space, and time, on the side of things that are; whereas the non-phenomenal and non-spatio-temporal precondition of the apprehension of phenomena, space, and time,

¹³ H. Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, In: H. Bergson, *Œuvres*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1959, pp. 72-73.

is placed on the side of things that are not. In the words of John Scotus Eriugena:

"Everything that can be perceived by the bodily sense or by the intellect is truly and logically said to be 'being'. But everything which, by virtue of the excellence of its nature, escapes not only the senses, but also all intellect and reason, is rightly regarded as 'non-being' "¹⁴.

For John Scotus Eriugena (as for the whole tradition of negative theology), this non-being by dint of excellence is called God. Because all that is, is as a correlate of Him who *is not*, of Him who stands in the beginnings of being, of Him who lies in the backstage of their unnoticed precondition. The correlation between Him who is not, and the things that are, is called "creation". It is described as the relationship of the uncreated creator to his creatures.

But the unnoticed, non-being, prerequisite of the things that perceive and are could just as well be called "now" in a secular version of Eriugena's theodicy ¹⁵. Is it not indeed *now* that the ultimate creative act is accomplished, *now* that the outpouring of unpredictable novelty takes place? As Bergson points out in his introductions to *Thought and Motion*, what prevents us from indulging in the duration currently experienced is a quest for reproducibility characteristic of the intellect, the intellectual position of scenarios that can follow the present state and are made possible by inductive analogy with the past. In other words, what prevents us from recognizing *what is* as duration is that we have methodically covered the absolute creativity of the singular present with a layer of generic repetitiveness. But for a thought destabilized in its search for repetition, for a thought returned to its unparalleled, *sui generis* source, which is the now-which-is-not (in a sense analogous to that of John Scotus Eriugena's negative theology), this creativity is again self-evident. If now *is not* in the Eriugena sense, this means that everything *is* in it and relative to it: present things, time springing from lived duration, the represented time of clock scans, memories, hopes and fears. Everything *is* relative to now without it *being*; and it is because now *is not* that everything that is *is* relative to it.

The lesson of Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence can be thus accepted without denying the evidence of the present. That the present is only *thinkable* through the possibility of its retentional trace must be conceded to Derrida. But the identification of original being with the trace does not follow from this. What only follows is that thought is only capable

¹⁴ John Scotus Eriugena, *De la division de la nature, I*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1995, p. 67.

¹⁵ See the concept of Infinite Judgement in Kant *CRP* A71/ B96 ff. To subtract a thing from the finite set of those which have *such and such a property* is to put them by difference into an infinite/undefined category. Like "now" which *is not* in time.

of *grasping* traces, and that it grasps them from the original non-being that is the unthought but thinking present.

A related question arises from this. Does the fact that thought can only grasp traces imply that the now *that is not*, is not part of the thinkable? I would be in conflict with myself if I said so, since what I am doing now, at this very moment, is in contradiction with the incapacity of thought to approach the authentic now! The now *that is not* remains in some way thinkable; but it can only be thought by a thought that allows itself to be reabsorbed by the thinking.

This aptitude for reabsorption was manifested in my previous analysis of the use of the word "now". Let us reformulate this analysis, in order to better grasp what the involution of thought in the thinking person can be. That "now" is signifying without any signified corresponding to it, that it digs an abyss of *wanting to say* without anything being able to fill the absence of what is said, manifests the most scrupulous fidelity to what one seeks to signify. It is the very awareness of the present lack of a signified of the word "present" that allows one to be in the presence of what is meant by this word. The atmosphere of lack takes the place of the signified. The thinker's reception of the emptiness of the present of all that presents itself is precisely what "now" means.

What has just been stated is, however, understandable only on one condition. A condition that goes almost without saying, a condition that has been suggested several times by terms such as "experience" or "awareness", but a condition that is best made explicit if we do not want to perpetuate misunderstandings. What has just been stated about "now" is only apparently akin to metaphysical discourse; it is in fact the verbal shadow of a pre-verbal effort towards the eternal recommencement that phenomenology strives for. There is nothing speculative about what has just been said about "now", but rather a stubborn attempt to get back in touch with the non-speculative source of metaphysical discourse. The thought that thinks about thinkable things is metaphysics, the thought that resonates with the thinking is phenomenology.

Rather than asserting that now, the authentic now, is not, I could therefore have simply pointed out that the meaning of the word "now" is not part of what can be experienced but is the experience itself in its fulfilment. Or I could have stated that what the word "now" signifies is not any object of experience but experience itself as a precondition for the objects that are its intentional correlates. It is confirmed that only the lack of an object meant by words like "now" or "present" can, paradoxically, manifest their meaning. And if this is so, it is because this lack excludes any escape to a designated elsewhere, it is because this lack redeposits us willy-nilly in the

experience being lived. This lack redeposits us in what shows itself without being able to be shown.

You recognize these expressions, which are those of all transcendental philosophy. Their metaphorical illustration is Wittgenstein's eye, that is invisible in its own field of vision. The problem is that the preceding expressions lack precision and discriminating power. "Experience", "eye", "now"; all that is missing is 'I' and "consciousness" to keep the perplexity going. What is the right name for the transcendental field among all these? To get an idea, it is wise to follow Husserl's research step by step. For Husserl made it one of his tasks to name the transcendental field correctly, as he avoided one after the other the psychological pitfalls of his reflexive reversal.

Husserl began by using the words mind and subjectivity, stripping them of their ultimate naturalizing connotations. "Pure consciousness", that is, not the particular consciousness of someone, but consciousness as that in relation to which the someone(s) and the something(s) are posited and ground their claim to exist. Transcendental "I" or transcendental "ego", i.e. not the particular *ego* of an empirical human being, but the center of perspective from which all beings, including human beings and personal self, are viewed.

Not to understand this passage to the limit, this radical, though perpetually unfinished, setting aside of the transcendental field with respect to all empirical residue, is to expose oneself to many misunderstandings of the phenomenological approach. And it is to run the risk of holding it to be incoherent, whereas it is rooted below logic, in the soil of a lived life where nothing is missing, not even the possibility of constituting a logic and its norms of coherence. Whenever there is a risk of confusion between the transcendental and its empirical verbal equivalent, one should not conclude that phenomenology as such is confused. It should simply be noted that the steps taken by the phenomenologist towards the living source of his discipline are unfinished; that his *epochè* has stopped too early, and that it has left a layer of phenomenological reduction still superficial.

Let us consider in this spirit a situation that Husserl imagined in his book *The Earth Does Not Move* in order to test his thesis of pure constitutive consciousness. What happens to constituted nature if a future catastrophe puts an end to all conscious life on Earth, and what about constituted nature when conscious life had not yet appeared on Earth? Should we, on the pretext that consciousnesses were not in operation at these future or past times, deny nature the *existence* that is their constitutive correlate? From a consequent phenomenological point of view, to affirm this is clearly to confuse the transcendental field of pure consciousness with the empirical consciousnesses of human persons. The absence or abolition of the empirical consciousnesses of living beings is still a fact of the nature

constituted by the constitutive pure consciousness; it is an intentional correlate for the transcendental *ego*. Nature thus remains, including in its pre-human past and post-human future, not certainly for the empirical subjects who are absent from it, but as a correlate of an intentional act of the transcendental subject.

To be satisfied with this purely conceptual corrective, this simple imputation of categorical confusion between the empirical and the transcendental, however leaves us with a feeling of incompleteness. What is this pure consciousness or transcendental *ego*? What relationship do they have with the empirical world and its history? Doesn't evoking a non-worldly consciousness tacitly adhere to a form of substance dualism? Doesn't making the entire history of the world, or even of time itself, the correlate of the transcendental *ego* amount to making the latter a kind of extra-temporal *thing* after having made it an extra-worldly *thing*?

If this were so, phenomenology would unwillingly lead to the most disheveled of speculative theses: the thesis of an extra-natural and extra-temporal being. If this were so, phenomenology would lead to the affirmation of a form of transcendence under the guise of an approach to the transcendental. However, *this cannot be the case*, otherwise the neutral and critical posture of phenomenology would be self-negating. When a consequential phenomenology departs from empirically manifested nature, it cannot be in the upward direction of a metempirical entity or a *super-natural* principle, not even the God sketched and then withdrawn by Husserl in paragraph 51 of *Ideen I*. It must be, in contrast, in the downward direction of the increasingly elementary preconditions of the constitution of a nature; it must be through what one is inclined to call the *sub-natural* backing of any work of naturalization.

It is therefore necessary to dig deeper than consciousness, deeper than the *ego*; it is necessary to reiterate the levelling of the *epoché*, to pierce the ground of transcendental reduction towards ever and ever lower strata. Jan Patočka has rightly recommended this gesture, thereby moving from a still subjective phenomenology to an a-subjective phenomenology. But Husserl had marked out this path before him. Starting from the transcendental *ego*, from the constitutive subjectivity, his downward spiral from suspension of judgement to suspension of judgement finally¹⁶ led him to the *living present*. A non-punctual present, non-assimilable to the natural moment, in which not only a nature is constituted, but also the *ego* as presentification of a past that it identifies as its own; and not only this particular *ego*, but *every ego* as

¹⁶ This chronology of Husserl's approach is hasty. The primacy of the living present appears very early in Husserl's work, in his 1905 lectures, *Leçons pour une phénoménologie de la conscience intime du temps*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1964. However, it is evaded in the main work of 1913, *Idées directrices pour une phénoménologie*, before being taken up again in later texts.

empathic presentification of the perspective of another, in other words as an *alter-ego*.

The transcendental solipsism of the early chapters of the *Cartesian Meditations* is thus undermined at its base by a pre-subjective field of presence. And the driving force behind the search for this increasingly subterranean basis is the desire not to lose one's way on the path towards the evidence of an *experienced absolute*. In the 1913 *Guiding Ideas for a Phenomenology*, Husserl had characterized "the totality of absolute being"¹⁷ as *pure consciousness*, since the unsurpassable evidence of conscious being is opposed to the simple claim to being of its intentional objects. But as the excavation of experience by *epochè* deepens, as its reductive strata are uncovered, the absolute is given other names, less and less psychologizing¹⁸. The absolute itself, Husserl later writes, "is that original universal present; in it resides all time and all the world"¹⁹. And, further on, "Time and the world are temporalized in the absolute, which is a flowing *now*"²⁰. It is *now* that holds the posture of the absolute; a *now* that is fluid but pre-temporal, because it is the ground of all constitution of the times that are ordered in it. Thus, with regard to *now*, "the past is precisely what is past and *is only* as past of the present"²¹.

The pre-temporal now is also pre-subjective, and it is therefore the ground of any constitution of the subject that is self-revealing in it: "I am as a flowing present, but my being-for-me is itself *constituted in* this flowing present"²². "I", the ultimate origin of all seeing and conceiving, is originally anonymous, non-personal; "I" is then nothing other than the very opening of the flowing present. Then, in this present that I am, the being-for-me that I know to be is constituted; in this present that I am, the historically and spatially limited person that I identify as myself crystallizes.

But what do we mean when we say that the original present is "flowing", or that the original present "temporalizes"? Certainly not that it is likely to disappear with the passage of time, nor that a flux takes it away and makes it past; that would be to repeat the aporias of the instant in which metaphysics has been struggling since Aristotle. A present that disappears, a present that flips into the past, is not the original present, but a worldly present; a present that can pass is only a brief interval of the time of the *constituted* nature, measured by natural or artificial clocks. In contrast to a worldly present, the originary present neither appears nor disappears; it is in

¹⁷ E. Husserl, *Idées directrices pour une phénoménologie*, Gallimard, 1950, §50.

¹⁸ This transition from the idealist absolute of consciousness to the neutral absolute of the present remains hesitant in Husserl. See N. Depraz, "Temporalisation de l'absolu selon Husserl", *Epokhè*, n°2, Jérôme Millon, 1991, p. 401.

¹⁹ Hua XV, n°38, p.668, quoted and brilliantly commented by N. Depraz, "Temporalisation de l'absolu selon Husserl", *Epokhè*, n°2, Jérôme Millon, 1991, p. 399.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 670.

²¹ E. Husserl, "Temporalisation de l'absolu selon Husserl", *op. cit.*, p. 379.

²² *Ibid.*

it that appearance and disappearance take place; it is in it that protention towards what will appear and retention of what has disappeared are articulated. The original present is felt as flowing because it is followed by a wake that is recognized as the barely disappeared, and also because in it a dizzying lack is created that demands to be filled by a yet unseen appearance. The impossibility for the word "now" to designate a moment in time, the void that this impossibility creates, is decidedly far from marking a deficiency in the signifying power of this word. On the contrary, this impossibility is the best guarantee that the word "now" brings us into intimate and experienced contact with what the speakers who use it mean. The felt lack that the word "now" elicits is in fact the faithful echo of the existential lack that the temporalization of the original present feeds on.

This being the case, we can return to the question posed by Husserl in *La Terre ne se meut pas*. And at the same time confront Quentin Meillassoux's argument of ancestrality. What will happen to the constitution of a nature when the human empirical support of the constituent consciousnesses has been wiped off the face of the Earth by some nuclear, ecological, geological or cosmic catastrophe? What was nature before the human empirical support of constituent consciousnesses appeared? The quick way to answer, as we have seen, is to consider that nature, in its pre-human past and post-human future, *remains* relative to transcendental consciousness, not relative to such empirical consciousnesses as are attributed to empirical human beings. What has evolved in this answer is that at the end of our phenomenological journey, we are no longer unclear about the status of transcendental consciousness or *ego*. On examination, the term "transcendental *ego*" does not refer to some extra-natural and extra-temporal entity, but to the proto-natural and proto-temporal field in which both nature and the time that marks its epochs are constituted, both the other and myself, both the history of the world and the history of the self. This proto-natural and proto-temporal field is none other than *now*, with its traces fading away, with its opening that is anticipating because it is desiring, and with its power to link both (traces and opening) into a stable objectified constellation. Unlike human beings, the *now* has never appeared in any past epoch of natural history, and it has no vocation to disappear in any future epoch of natural history.

This is precisely what Husserl writes about the transcendental "I", before identifying it with the living present: "The transcendental life and the transcendental I cannot be born, only a human being in the world can be born"²³. But if the transcendental I cannot be born, unlike an empirical human being within the world, it is not because it is outside the world and the time of births. It is because it constitutively precedes the world and

²³ E. Husserl, in: E. Housset, *Personne et sujet selon Husserl*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1997. (See chapter II.)

time; it is because it is the non-being on which the constitution of the world and time that *are* is based. It is, in short, because it is now, always-now again. "I am now," writes Husserl, "and to this now belongs a horizon of the past that can be unrolled infinitely²⁴. To this now belongs a horizon of the past without any temporal limit; a horizon that includes in particular the fraction of the past in which the empirical existence of the human being was not proven. In this now there is also a future horizon without any temporal limit; a horizon that includes in particular the fraction of the future in which the empirical existence of the human being is no longer assured. Constituted nature may be relative to a constituent consciousness, but it has no reason to emerge from nothingness at the time of the empirical appearance of conscious human beings, nor to sink into nothingness at the time of their empirical disappearance; for this constituent consciousness is *now*, and I dare say *eternally* now. I dare to say this with Husserl himself, who continues, "And, precisely, this means: *I was eternally*". "I", as the *transcendental I*, is, was and will be eternally, unlike the empirical I which has a beginning and an end. But this eternity of the *transcendental I* has nothing of a sempiternity, nothing of a temporal persistence; it is the exact opposite. The transcendental I is indeed eternal only because it is *now* co-extensive with all the instants of the nature that is constituted in it. The infinite and all-encompassing God is here replaced by an infinitesimal but all-underpinning I. The arch of divine eternity is replaced by the flash of present eternity. An unlimited transcendental sphere is replaced by an elusive transcendental center.

If confirmation were needed, it could come from another culture; a culture that has been able to maintain its ability to make us take a step aside, in the sense of François Jullien²⁵, while having assimilated the entire past of Western philosophy. This is Japanese culture, whose effort to integrate itself into the world history of thought is formidably represented by the founder of the Kyoto School, Nishida Kitaro. According to Nishida, "(The self) is the singular center of an absolute present that includes in itself the eternal past and future. That is why I call the self an instantaneous self-determination of the absolute present²⁶."

As a result, the idea of ancestry, the thought of a primordial or aged universe devoid of empirical human subjects, fails to reduce correlationism to the absurd. For phenomenological correlation does not bind real objects in time to empirical human subjects contemporary with them; it binds, upstream of time, the present act of constitution to an always-now

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ F. Jullien, *Un sage est sans idée*, Éditions du Seuil, 2013. "Stepping aside" here means : seeing one's own culture from the vantage point of another one.

²⁶ Quoted in: R. Raud, "'Place' and 'being-time': spatiotemporal concepts in the thought of Nishida Kitaro and Dogen Kigen", *Philosophy East and West*, 54, 29-51, 2004

constituted spatio-temporal natural domain. Husserl stated something of this order, albeit in an as yet undecided manner: "A world *without* subjects to actually experience it (...) is only thinkable as the past of a world *with* such subjects"; for only present subjects are able of "regressively constituting"²⁷ a past prior to them. What bothers me about this formulation, however, is that it seems to entrust the constitution of a world to the semi-empirical subjects who happen to live in our time, contingently, on this planet. In order to go all the way to the end of the act of freeing the constitution from empirical or semi-empirical subjects, it would have been necessary to go back even further, to a still anonymous gesture of constitution of the subjects themselves and of their imputation of inclusion in the world. But this ultimate constitution cannot be accomplished at any moment of time, even the one in which we, human subjects, are conscious of living. It can only be accomplished upstream of time, that is to say, now; now in which all determination is in gestation, including that of our humanity, including that of our embodiment, including that of our situation in history, including the identification of our presentiments as memories or as reactivations of traces, and including our understanding of the past as past.

However, Meillassoux's objection to correlationism is not limited to the ancestrality argument. It is more general than that. It consists in reproaching correlationism for its alleged tendency to devalue modern natural science. Meillassoux considers that the scientific researcher must be allowed to make statements that are literally true. He asks to avoid denigrating from the outset the *claim to* absolute truth of scientific statements, and therefore to avoid declaring that these statements are valid only in relation to an experimental operation, a conceptual system, a cognitive schema, or a theoretical paradigm. The fact of attributing to them, with Popper, a merely hypothetical status, does not depart from this prescription, since a hypothesis is a thesis before the thesis, a thesis that is exposed to refutation, but also, potentially, to corroboration. However, Meillassoux's demand that the exoteric propositions of scientific researchers, those they pronounce at the end of their research or for the general public, be taken literally, does not do justice to the creative, critical and reflexive resources of the development of science. The developing sciences have much more to teach us than all their dogmatic proposals about what they think the 'external universe' is. Beyond their cosmogonic narratives, they have an exceptional power of self-revelation of their own limitations, as first manifested in the 'incompleteness' theorems of mathematical theories, formulated by Gödel. The evolution of the sciences can in fact lead them to question their own

²⁷ E. Husserl, *Transzendentaler Idealismus*. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1908-1921), Husserliana, vol. XXXVI, ed. by R. D. Rollinger in collaboration with R. Sowa, Dordrecht, Boston, London, Kluwer, 2003, pp. 141-144. Quoted and commented by L. Tengelyi, "Philosophy as an opening to the world", *Les Études Philosophiques* 1, 2016, 123-138.

foundations and their own epistemological status, as has happened (at least) three or four times in history, during the passage from the Aristotelian to the Galileo-Newtonian vision of scientific knowledge, at the advent of the empiricist paradigms of thermodynamics and electromagnetism in the nineteenth century, and finally during the relativistic and quantum revolutions of the twentieth century.

And that is not all. It could be that the sciences have the ability to challenge even their most elementary presupposition, the one they have inherited from ordinary language, from the natural attitude, and from Platonic philosophy: that knowing consists in stabilizing phenomena into poles that can be named by language, into structures that can be coded by mathematics, and into effects that can be reproduced by experimentation; that knowing consists, in short, in extracting from the ceaseless spiral of becoming something that can be symbolized.

At first sight, the sciences cannot be anything else than this: the enterprise of building a theoretical bridge over the river of appearances, the overcoming by intelligence of the sensible transition, the replacement of "now" and "here" by an immutable and ubiquitous spatio-temporal tetrahedron, the rejection of the chronicle of facts in favor of the statement of recurrences. Didn't Henri Poincaré lend the physicist this famous phrase that radically differentiates his discipline from history: "John, King of England, has passed through here: I don't care, since he won't pass through again"²⁸? If this is the case, the break between the world of science and the world of experienced and sensitive life is extreme and irremediable. And a merciless debate can then break out to find out which of the two is the more profound truth.

Nietzsche, provocateur of all, arbitrated against Hegel in favor of sensible immediacy against rational mediation. "The senses do not lie insofar as they show becoming, disappearance, change (...) But in his assertion that being is a fiction, Heraclitus will be eternally right. The 'world of appearances' is the only real one: the 'true-world' is only *added by a lie*..."²⁹. Faced with the real truth of the flowing sensible, the immobilization imposed by "rationalist activity"³⁰ is held by Nietzsche to be a pure and simple lie. A lie whose perpetuation is only justified because it has a practical utility; because it allows the teaching and advancement of the reproducible procedures of technology.

But, like its reciprocal, the opposition between the truth of the flowing phenomenon and the lie of the fixed concept is somewhat caricatural. For, like mathematics with Gödel's theorem, the physical sciences are capable of

²⁸ H. Poincaré, *La science et l'hypothèse*, IX.

²⁹ F. Nietzsche, *Le crépuscule des idoles*, La raison dans la philosophie, 2. In: F. Nietzsche, *Œuvres complètes XII*, Mercure de France, 1908, p. 127

³⁰ G. Bachelard, *L'activité rationaliste de la physique contemporaine*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1965.

producing their own antidote. The concept is burnt by the incandescence of the sciences. The lie of pure forms has the capacity to reveal the truth of the becoming that carries them.

In the physical sciences, the antidote to predictability is to acknowledge randomness, the antidote to superimposed immobility is to admit an underlying mobility, the antidote to the fixed volume of space-time is to experience the brilliance of the creative present of research. Although I cannot go into detail here, all this has happened, or is happening, in the evolution of interpretations of quantum theory. Thus, according to *Quantum Bayesianism*, known by its acronym QBism³¹, subatomic physics deals with a process of incoercible creation of phenomena co-produced by the experimental operations of the physicists who seek to study them. These phenomena are natively random, all the more irremediably random in that the researchers who strive to predict them *participate*, by their actions, in the predicted occurrences. Sequences of microscopic phenomena that are constantly renewed, never identical to the previous ones, are the most perfect example that can be given of a Heraclitean flow, of a becoming without rest. Under these conditions, the only invariant that QBism produces in the long term is the generic structure of the probabilistic predictions made by the agents-predictors-physicists. And this predictive structure derives from a simple condition of internal consistency of bets on the occurrence of phenomena, light years away from the requirement of correspondence of the descriptive structures of theories to the structures of an external-independent reality.

Basically, the only thing that does not vary in the quantum realm is the structure of our expectations, while what is expected varies without control. The sciences have thus acquired the ultimate power to turn in on themselves, and to free themselves from an opaque metaphysical legacy that has been both their driving force and their obstacle. In reflecting on themselves, the sciences realize that they have never brought to light some immutable core of being that was supposed to have always waited beneath the surface of the mutable appearance. In truth, they have only forged a stable attitude in order to look good, and navigate well, in an eminently unstable participatory process. They have adopted and are adopting this stable attitude in order to float elegantly in the ocean of becoming manifested at this moment as experience.

What is remarkable is that the sciences have been able to recognize their inscription in a Heraclitan flux on the basis of one of the most elaborate theories they have ever produced under a Platonic presupposition. The

³¹ C. Fuchs & R. Schack, "QBism and the Greeks: why a quantum state does not represent an element of physical reality", *Physica Scripta*, 90, 015104, 2015; H.C. Von Baeyer, *QBism, the Future of Quantum Physics*, Harvard University Press, 2016; M. Bitbol, *Quantum philosophy: the world is not external*, in preparation.

extreme of their quest for absolute invariance has led to the extreme of the recognition of the variation of the relative; the extreme of their dream of the timeless has turned into the extreme of an awakening to the present. As David Mermin, one of the main advocates of QBism, admits, "the problem of *now* will not be solved by rejecting the *now* as an 'illusion', or as a 'chauvinism of the present moment'. It is immediately resolved if we identify the error that has led us to conclude, against all our lived experience, that there is no place for *now* in our physical description of the world"³². More than two thousand years after the exclusion of lived experience and the life world by a science inherited from Platonism, the repressed returns in its most unbridled form: that of a living present recognizing itself as the blind spot of physical science, under the pressure of the most profound advances of this science.

It is true that, as an interpretative framework, QBism is not unique, nor is it univocally imposed by the structure of quantum theory. But it has emerged after long historical meanderings, as the only simple and viable answer to the paradoxes and errors of the so-called "realist" or "representationalist" interpretations, that is, still fixist and metaphysical approaches, of quantum physics. Suspending scientific realism, as science itself cryptically but insistently suggests, opens our eyes to the real reality that is present at the moment. And the sciences are being reborn today from these open eyes.

³² N.D. Mermin, "QBism as CBism: solving the problem of the Now", <https://arxiv.org/abs/1312.7825v1>; N.D. Mermin, "What I think about now", *Physics Today*, 67, 3, 8, 2014.