

## REVIEW

**David Couzens Hoy, *The Time of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), ISBN: 978-0262013048**

When things are boring, it feels as though time is standing still. When things go well, or when one is having a good time, time flies. Such are the common proverbs related to time. In order to go beyond mere proverbs, such as these, Hoy has written a book on the human understanding of time. *The Times of Our Lives*, as it is called – for good reasons, to which I will come back later – will be reviewed in the following way. First, I will summarize the main arguments in the book. Second, I will address both strengths and weaknesses in the argumentation and conclude with some critical comments, albeit affirmative in character.

### **Part 1**

In the continental philosophical tradition, which Hoy is working in, time as perceived or experienced by humans is conceptualized as temporality. As the title of the book suggests, it is *the times of our lives*, i.e., an anthropocentric hermeneutical view, not the time of the universe as such, that is being discussed. Consequently, human understanding of time is something different from physiological or any measurable time. But what is then temporality? For Hoy temporality is real. As such, temporality is equally subjective and objective. Whether time goes by slowly or quickly is a subjective or rather a temporal matter dependant on the mind. But time, undeniably, also passes by in an objective manner, independent of the mind. Thus, it is not possible to step outside of time, or for the temporal to be more accurate. The temporal dimension is always there as it is a central aspect of being a human.

Hoy starts by what he calls Heidegger's misreading of Kant. If I am correct, the discussion takes root before any distinction between idealism and realism is made. So instead of understanding Kant's "transcendental idealism" as the only way to be an "empirical realist," Heidegger, according to Hoy, understands each moment of experience as a unit of time through the imagination of the mind—not transcendental reason. His intermediate conclusion is both comprehensible and convincing; that time is one of the most, if not *the* most fundamental principle in philosophy. Subsequently, notions of temporality are necessary in order to understand *being, politics, history* and much else.

Hoy goes on to distinguish three understandings of time: the past, the present and the future. Under each of these thematic headings, different philosophers are discussed. Although Hegel, James, Husserl, Nietzsche and others employ slightly different concepts when trying to understand the present, e.g., the now, the eternal return, this modality is elusive.

The present is here for one moment and gone the next. The Now hardly exists as a phenomenon. It can only be experienced in hindsight. As I understand Hoy, he is skeptical about the present as a separate mode of temporality. The present needs to be understood in relation to other modes of temporality, namely the past and the future.

Here, Hoy aligns with Derrida, against Heidegger, in saying that any distinction between time and temporality is not only difficult, but also a dubious task, as this acknowledges Kant's transcendental philosophy. Put briefly, Kant makes a distinction between *a priori* knowledge, which is transcendental, and *a posteriori* knowledge, which is empirical—and this distinction allows a separation of time and temporality. A hermeneutical theory of interpretation, such as the one favored by Hoy, has consequences insofar as time and temporality cannot be separated. Consequently, Hoy asserts that "If understanding is always interpretative, there is no understanding of interpretation that is not also an interpretation." (93) He continues by saying that "Temporality is a basic feature of interpretations of the world. An interpretation of the world will always have a temporal dimension, and if that temporality is changed, the interpretation will change as well." (93) Conversely, Hoy further develops this idea of how the past and the future ought to be understood as modes of the present.

When discussing different philosophers' understandings of the past, Hoy asks why the past is of any interest at all to us. Why study something that cannot be changed, something that is over and done with? He touches upon the answer to this several times in the chapter concerning the past. But it is not until he discusses the differences between genealogy and phenomenology that he gives an answer. Genealogy, according to Hoy, has advantages over phenomenology insofar as it "recognizes itself as an interpretation that is not simply a presuppositionless description, but a view generated by a particular standpoint." (137) In genealogy, there is always a circular relation between the past and the present, whereas in phenomenology the past still belongs to history. Hence, the past is neither something one can wish away, nor something, a place let us say, independent of the mind or one's memory. Put slightly differently, the past influence the present (and the future), but the present (and visions of the future) also influence the past, or at least our interpretations of it.

As regards the future, Hoy enters a discussion with Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Benjamin, Deleuze, Derrida and Zizek. Whereas Heidegger emphasizes the future as primordial to temporality and hence the present, Hoy argues along the lines of Benjamin, Deleuze, Derrida and Zizek that the present is in constant relation to the future. Action is directed towards the future, although simultaneously framed by interpretations of the past. As such, temporality in itself has implications for the present. That is to say, what is happening in the present is fueled by how one is envisioning the future, but also how one is interpreting the past. One could therefore ask whether *memory* and *utopia* would be better concepts instead of past and future. Needless to say, Hoy discussed this as well, although I do not go into that here.

Hoy concludes by asserting that "The futural can be understood both as the projection of a present that is already past, and as the future of a past that has not occurred." (182) So what does that mean? I take that to mean the following: on the one hand, the future can be found in the past or in new interpretations of the past. A history of the present, genealogy, that is, is directed towards the future by constantly re-interpreting the past. On the other hand, to imagine a future does not necessarily mean that one is subscribing to a utopian

progressive project based on images of the past. Instead, heterotopias can be imagined. For example, to study how universals are neither natural nor necessary but contingent and historical opens up different forms of actions in society and thus possible futures, or heterotopias. In this regard, Hoy distances himself from the progressive thoughts found in the Critical Theory of the early Frankfurt School. Whereas *Ideologiekritik* tends to be akin to universals and at unmasking “false consciousness,” genealogy opens up a critique of ideology and universals as such. Although he does not totally reject the idea of universals, Hoy’s version of genealogy is skeptical, albeit accepting of them. Consequently, universals are not a solid ground for critique unless one also admits that universals always are coming from a particular standpoint in space and time.

## **Part 2**

Although it is common to think about time as the past, the present and the future, it is nonetheless not the only way to understand different modes of temporality. Of course, such a modality would entail a totally different book, but in many languages there are several different nuances of temporality. In addition, Hoy’s thematization sometimes makes the presentation of each philosopher’s position on temporality unnecessarily complicated. To examine understandings of the future among phenomenologists, one would also need to include understandings of the past. Gadamer’s ideas on time horizons, or Nietzsche’s ideas on the Eternal return are but two examples that do not fit very well into Hoy’s thematization. If this results from their non-linear understanding of time is an open question, however. Having said this, Hoy is not limited by his own thematization. Actually, Hoy himself encourages both a horizontal and a vertical reading of the book. Even if the book at first sight might seem linearly structured, he asserts that it can be read non-linearly, as well. So whether one is particularly interested in one philosopher, or is interested in one particular mode of temporality, either way is fine. To open up the book to different ways of reading can have both advantages and disadvantages for the reader, depending on one’s view. I tend to favor the first view.

I agree with Hoy’s main arguments and think he unfolds them in a way that will convince most scholars interested in the subject matter. For example, by highlighting the differences between Kant and Heidegger, between genealogy and phenomenology, between critical theorists and post-modernists—all in relation to temporality—Hoy does manage to build a strong case for how to understand *the times of our lives*. But what then is the book’s main contribution, how does it help to expand our understanding of temporality? Nothing radically new is added to existing knowledge about temporality. Instead, the main contribution is that Hoy actually brings together much previous knowledge, while also building a strong case for understanding the past, the present and the future through the method of genealogy. Who should then read this book? I think it will be useful for most scholars interested in temporality, as it brings together ideas about time that previously have not been discussed collectively. Furthermore, as the book can be read both horizontally and vertically, many readers will be encouraged to find out more about the different philosophers’ ideas. To conclude, Hoy has written a challenging and accessible book on temporality.

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