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Book Review | *The Time of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality*

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***The Time of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality*. David Couzens Hoy. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009. xxi; 288 pages; 978-0-262-01304-8**

The Time of Our Lives is an intriguing book whose focus seems as elusive as the concept the author explores. On completing the book and therefore in retrospect, one realizes that Hoy offers clues for the wary reader. It is a critical history of temporality, and while one might naturally key on either history or temporality, by the end of the post script it becomes clear the author's main interest is what he means by the word "critical."

As a history of temporality, it is far from exhaustive. Rather, Hoy selects the elements he considers significant and dodges the inevitable criticism of what is missing by building a tight thematic structure. It is, in effect, more of a critical timeline, with as many gaps as an Anglo Saxon chronicle; some authors and periods are as summarily noted as a chronicler recorded a less personally-significant year ("Ann. 845. Much rain").

Such a structure makes somewhat disingenuous the offer for readers to skip across chapters to trace out the thoughts on temporality of a particular philosophical player. While Hoy has done a superb job of caricature, the sketches (however deft) are still five minute charcoal versions of much more sophisticated and complex ideas. Again, the wary reader would realize that something else must be afoot, because Hoy is too careful and judicious in his writing not to notice himself the gaps and caricatures in what he has presented.

At first blush, the thematic contents are specific and clear: Chapter 1 ("In Search of Lost

Time: Kant and Heidegger”) lays out fundamentals of the two main and arguably most formidable contributors to philosophical discussions about the nature and meaning of time. Chapter 2 (“There is No Time Like the Present! On the Now”) considers what major philosophers have written on the concept of present time. Chapter 3 (“Where Does the Time Go? On the Past”) does the same for the concepts of past time. Chapter 4 (“The Times They Are a-Changin’: On the Future”) moves past Bob Dylan into what is understood by future time. Chapter 5 (“Le temps retrouvé: Time Reconciled”) lays out a series of four strategies for dealing with the idea of the passage of time.

Hoy states boldly that “in this volume, the idea of time-consciousness itself is called into question right at the beginning. Whether it survives at the end or not, it undergoes conceptual transformations that might well make it unrecognizable to its most famous proponent, Edmund Husserl” (viii). When the main chapters conclude with a series of strategies, the reader is left wondering about both the link between such bold pronouncements and so diffuse an ending and why Hoy has presented such an abbreviated explication of what others have said about time and temporality.

Given that this book – the first in a two volume set on the history of consciousness – is a history of “time consciousness,” Hoy posits the needs to consider the order that places “mind before time” (vii), challenging the conceptual foundations of the whole discussion about time and consciousness. Defining the difference between time (universal) and temporality (or experience of it, existence, or as Hoy calls it, “the life of our lives”), he sets up the polemic that all we have is temporality.

Aligning himself with his friend and late colleague Richard Rorty, Hoy dismisses a Kantian position that holds the universality of philosophical questions, concepts and the ways in which they are addressed. Meaning change in concepts occurs over time; while he steps back from an Hegelian sweep through history, Hoy argues that thinking about things, here and now, involves a dimension of temporality necessarily discontinuous from what others might have thought about things, there and then. Thus, he says, we need to think more particularly about what is meant by temporality as “the time of our lives.”

Meaning change, moreover, is not holistic and Hoy cites Foucault on the history of ethics to demonstrate that related concepts may change over time at different rates, further complicating the analysis of their relationship and meaning (227).

It is not until the postscript on method, however, that Hoy really explains the book itself is an illustration of the method he espouses. Rather than arguing for the method up front and then providing illustration of what he means, Hoy first demonstrates the method and then – by the point the reader (however wary) gets the explanation – the illustrations are well-embedded in the thematic framework presented. Diffident comments in the introduction, in retrospect, assume more significance after reading the post script – when

he says the “subsidiary thesis of this book is that the history of philosophy can make a philosophical difference” (viii), Hoy means it literally, as his method is intended to contribute to “transformation” that is potentially “tectonic” (viii).

His method is genealogy, in preference to both phenomenology and critical theory. He offers a “tentative, working definition” of genealogy as “a philosophical method of analysis of how certain cognitive structures, moral categories, or social practices have come into being historically in ways that are contrary to the ordinary understanding of them” (223). Viewing post-structuralism as a chronological distinction as opposed to a philosophical school (“There was, however, never really any *structuralist* philosophy” (224)), he observes “the styles of the poststructuralist philosophers are so different from one another that they can just as easily be pitted against one another as allied under such a vacuous term as poststructuralism” (224). Unlike poststructuralism, he argues that in both continental and analytic traditions, genealogy has been adopted as the name for “a distinctive method” (224), one which though often attributed to Nietzsche, is also attributed by Nietzsche to “earlier British philosophers” (Hoy has argued elsewhere this included David Hume).

Emerging further from his shell as the post script unfolds, Hoy becomes less diffident about his philosophical allegiances. He aligns critical theory and genealogy against traditional theory, explicating the necessity of a “standpoint” analysis, especially when it comes to morals, in order to avoid the problem of power relations co-opting philosophy in the service of social order. Both critical theory and genealogy are more historical, sharing “a similar attitude toward past, present and future” and claiming validity “only so long as they are useful” (229). Aimed “at social transformation,” critical theory and genealogy “both try to unmask power and show it for what it is” (231).

These approaches do not necessarily result in social change, but Hoy says they make it more likely. More cautious in its conclusions than critical theory, “genealogy recognizes more cautiously that it does not change the world, but it does prepare the world for change. By disrupting the fatalism resulting from the inevitability of oppressive social institutions, genealogy frees us for social transformation, even if it does not tell us precisely what to do or where to go” (230).

Hoy’s preference for genealogy (in the French poststructuralist vein) over Frankfurt School-style critical theory comes out of the some divergences, first in the philosophy of history and then in its appeal to real interests. Genealogy does not presume to posit any “bottom line for social criticism,” as theory “lacks the grounds for identifying some interests as true or real and others as false or illusory” (232). Thus, Hoy concludes, “genealogy strikes me as being more thoroughgoing than critical theory and *Ideologiekritik* in that it challenges the very idea of ideology. A suspicious genealogy cannot leave anything unexamined, including itself” (232).

Not afraid even at the end of his book to tackle large questions in a short span, Hoy synthesizes Habermas and Derrida in relating the method of genealogy to the problem of the existence of universals. Can this kind of genealogical approach ever have anything meaningful to say if it is suspicious of everything, even itself? Hoy concludes “genealogy need not be opposed to universals. The problem is not universals per se. Though genealogy may be suspicious of claims to universality, it need not reject all appeals to universal structures or values” (234).

Advocating a kind of “methodological nominalism” (235), he claims that genealogy “acts as if universals do not exist but with the caveat that they are not nothing” (235), concluding (as he reads Foucault) “genealogy is thus the study of the birth of universals and their transformation into principles of domination” (235), not “a form of universal history” but “a history of universals” (235-6).

Taking the terms of Bernard Williams, he divides the genealogical method into two poles – vindicatory and unmasking – acknowledging at the end of the book that his critical history of temporality (with Hume) is more “vindicatory” of the ideas offered by the authors considered rather than the “unmasking” that Nietzsche preferred (242): “The project has been to examine everyday beliefs about temporality along with their philosophical interpretations, to deconstruct them or turn them in another direction, and to come up with another analysis than would result from the standpoint of the metaphysics of universal time” (242). If “the time of our lives” is existential time, however tentative and partial, it is the only sense in which we have access to time. Other more universal and objective assertions about time are undermined by a genealogical approach that casts suspicion on the terms, the method and any conclusions.

By placing these things in his post script, however many clues and hints were to be found elsewhere, Hoy misses the chance to step up and “boldly go.” As an editor, had I received this in manuscript, I would have done my best to persuade him to reverse the structure and use the thematic contents to demonstrate the validity of his assessment of how genealogy has real, present value as a critical approach to the philosophical and practical problems of our generation.

The book itself is sparsely and elegantly written. Each word and phrase is in its place and the care with which each comment is offered demonstrates a level of craftsmanship that makes the book a pleasure to read. Having set the stage for the second volume, however, David Couzens Hoy can be assured that his readers will be expecting a move from merely vindicatory genealogy to a real unmasking of the assumptions about self-consciousness that underpin the social and political ills of our society. Whether it is self-absorption, self-consciousness or the primacy of self, who we are and how we conceive ourselves – especially since the turn to autobiography in the eighteenth century – has

created the conditions of global culture that both imperil and shape the future history not only of the human race but the planet itself. The history of philosophy – however critical or genealogical the method – requires more than a vindication of what has been said before if it is truly to contribute to making social change possible, especially the “tectonic” nature of the changes required for a sustainable society.

To use Shakespeare’s words, “what’s past is prologue” is more than a comment on time-consciousness in a tempestuous age. Hoy hints at the ethical moment in this book. The next one needs to do more than vindicate notions of self, whether past or present. To really make his case for the present value of the history of philosophy, in volume two, he needs to say more about who then we should become – not just vindicating “the time of our lives,” but unmasking what we should do with it.

I look forward to reading volume two!