

Temporal Interaction in The Philosophy of Buber and Theunissen

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Abstract:

The post-existential subject is no longer solitary, but a relational being who constructs their consciousness not on the remnants of their autonomous subjectivity, but on the transition toward relating themselves to the possibility of reconciliation with the Other.

The post-existential projection of temporal experience attempts to lift consciousness out of its state of suffering in relation to temporal events and to integrate it into the abstract models of creativity, interaction, and expression, situated beyond the existential eschatological horizon.

Keywords: Buber, Theunissen, Time, Existence, Other, I, Human being, Subject.

I. INTRODUCTION

The state of the postwar European existentialist paradigm is undergoing changes due to the fundamentally new cognitive horizons opening up before humanity as a whole. The narratives of the classical existentialist period of European philosophy are once again giving way to the sensuousness of existence, which is no longer experienced as a cradle of hopelessness, an unintentional striving toward death, or the experience of the Other, in Sartre’s sense of the word [12], as an infernal presence. The themes of finitude as inevitability, of immediate hostility as an unconscious intention, or of the Camusian meaninglessness of existence [3] as absurdity recede into the background along with the objective changes in Europe since the time of post-existential discourse.

And since human beings are trying to bury the hatchet, even if they still or already belong to different ideological camps, the search for the Other – as something not turned away by me myself and not in the sense of *Hospes-Hostis* – begins to take on increasingly distinct dimensions in the European philosophical tradition.

The existential slant in the understanding of the Other remains, but more as a source of curiosity than as an expression of fear. The focus in understanding the Self and its existence in the world shifts from individualistic approaches, which view the human being as a self-aware loner, constrained by the harsh reality surrounding them, to the being that is here and now, to feel, sense, and accept otherness as an alternative, even though it is still quite unsettled by the uncertainty regarding its manifestation.

II. TIME AS A DIALOGICAL PROCESS

This is why the conception of time as a fundamental existential construct also undergoes a metamorphosis – human beings are no longer cast into the world and condemned to live in their own isolation [4]. They

now possess a face and can be held accountable for their actions, as Levinas argues [7] with regard to what he calls “first philosophy.”

The post-existentialist subject is no longer lonely, but a being of relations who builds his consciousness not on the remnants of his autonomous subjectivity, but on the transition toward relating himself to the possibility of reconciliation with the Other, as Michael Theunissen argues [8, *Preface*]. The quintessence of existence does not lie at its end, but in relating one’s present to the future, to the extrapolation of one’s own subjectivity into possibility. That is why sensibility is reintroduced into human existence – the way in which being familiarly gives meaning to our own existence – not necessarily through an unpleasant emotion, but through the domestication of the Other via the act of hope as an attempt to extrapolate pleasantness and authenticity into the relationship with the Other.

The above presupposes a radically different anthropological perspective, which finely attunes the human being to interaction with the Other, so that they may come to know themselves and feel at home in the world of phenomena.

And if, according to Heidegger [4;§51], being-toward-death leaves no authentic choice for self-expression, because the subject cannot practically be free in either an ethical or an ontological sense, then responsibility toward the Other as identical to myself raises the question of how the subject could be responsible for something outside of himself, and how this might bring him new dimensions of freedom and fulfillment.

Martin Buber presents the human being with the possibility of not merely being an object of events, but of seeking an authentic encounter with oneself through the Other. Immersed in the present, the subject does not belong to the past, but strives to reveal itself and thus to authenticate itself in its present presence (*Gegenwart*). The latter undoubtedly leads to a state of being in the presence of and in relation to a certain otherness – most often another “I,” which can be grasped only through dialogue with it [2]. Thus arises the idea of the temporal dichotomy of time: the I–It (*Ich–Es*) relationship, which determines the subject’s relation to what is objectively given outside of it, to that which is knowable and subordinated to temporal reflections that can be objectively measured, even by the „I” itself; and the I–Thou (*Ich–Du*) relationship, which emanates from the interaction between two self-aware beings. It renders objectified time meaningless, since in communication, temporal segments are irrelevant. I and the Other are aware of ourselves without being constrained by temporal constants. We have all the time in the world to get to know one another and align our perceptions of time. The emotion arising from the unique experience of encountering the Other gives meaning to the present. It is not merely an apodictic form of the „I” existence, but a presence that is not understood chronologically, nor in terms of the objective intervals of time that led to the very existential union of two thinking subjects who, by being self-conscious of their Otherness in relation to their “Not-I”, hope to come to know one another, and in this act of knowing, time has no significance whatsoever. Here, Husserl’s [5; p. 200] “presentness” of dwelling between past and future is superseded. The turning toward the future, in the form of expectation, or the holding onto the past, now possess the quality not merely of phenomena, but of events bearing an evaluative character. And while for Husserl only the future is burdened with some kind of emotional weight, for Buber the “now” is synonymous with openness and reciprocity. Togetherness is a condition for knowing the Other. For this reason, communication or dialogue cannot be temporally grounded, since it is a symbol of existence itself, which is not predicative – and thus not limited by secondary temporal relations – but substantial to the human being. The experience of time in Buber is deontologised. It possesses existence insofar as it enables the realization of dialogue.

On the other hand, speaking of the Other as irrelevant to temporality, Theunissen argues that the Western philosophical tradition itself inappropriately favors the present as an unchanging locus of truth and ontological presence [9]. He opposes the thesis that human life must be confined solely between the scissors of the past and the future. In this sense, Theunissen goes beyond Husserl's understanding of protension as merely an anticipation of what has not yet come to pass, instead imbuing it with a much stronger emotional quality of hope and possibility, as Buber does as well. But unlike the latter, who seeks the fundamental meaning and fullness of existence solely in the dialogue of the present, Theunissen emphasises the act of incompleteness, rather than the eschatological finality – as the existential tradition does – of human existence, directed toward the future. The subject is not merely defined by the inevitable possibility of its non-existence, thanks to the fact that, being here and now, it has not yet realised itself. A thesis that recalls Aristotle's entelechy as intentional being-in-itself for every human being [1; Book Θ, IX].

III. TIME AS PURPOSE

For this reason, the subject's orientation toward the future is essential to defining the human being as a present reality. The subject does not simply exist because it exists, but because it can devote itself to something or renounce something else if that is morally alien to it. Immediate presence is not a form of actual existence. It is a future with a purpose. What is important to Theunissen is not what will happen and that the inevitable will occur, but that we anticipate it and orient our own horizon of being toward that expectation. Man's true temporality lies in the hope for what is to come. And this cannot, by necessity, be of a pejorative nature, since the very act of anticipation is experienced as a positive emotion.

Buber maintains that living is possible only in the past, because that is where the objectified "It" resides, whereas existence belongs to the present, because that is where the relationship with "Thou" is built [2, p. 63]. That is why Buber argues that existence is based on objectivist principles and accumulated experience, while true existence occurs through the phenomenon of the encounter with the Other, which is in itself the present itself. [2, p. 65],

On the other hand, Theunissen does not accept the stagnation of consciousness within the linear structure of objective time, in which we are all accustomed to situating our temporal experience. The superior positioning of the past, with which we attempt to explain existence, cannot bring satisfaction on a cognitive level, because the past lacks the capacity to change, and thus to generate anticipation and positive emotions. Since it is what it is, it serves only to facilitate a successful orientation in the world of phenomena, but it cannot provide a substantial existential pillar for every human being in potential.

Thus, in the post-existentialist philosophical paradigm, the question of eternity returns once more, but no longer as a hopeless and meaningless sequence of objective events, but as a tense anticipation arising from our sense of remembrance, dwelling in the present, and anticipation of the future [11, p. 11]. In this way, the human being experiences eternity – no longer as a meaningless infinity in the objectivist sense of the word – but as an essence capable of placing our consciousness in the position of a companion to the experience of anticipation. Eternity is an anticipation that does not matter whether it will come to pass, since it is experienced as unchanging and imperishable in the present. In this sense, the subject should not experience itself as privileged for being possible in the present as the sole field for its expression, because the anticipation of the future is what brings it true freedom, since a whole horizon of possibilities lies open before them, from which they can choose the one that will most successfully make them one with themselves.

That is why Theunissen concludes, in a sense quite dramatically, that the subject must not be confined to the present as an objective duration, nor must it transcend time in the Platonic sense of the word, by transporting the individual into another, somehow more perfect and ideal world than the one in which he is actually immersed [8, p. 63]. That is, time can be understood not as transcendence, but as abstraction, without excluding or limiting ourselves solely to its objectified essence in the form of duration. It signifies a kind of relationship and presence that need not necessarily be counted, but rather understood as a medium for the occurrence of events significant to consciousness. This is why, under the term “bad empirics” (schlechte Empirie) [8; p. 63], Theunissen does not refer to everything that attempts to measure time in its manifestation, which is untenable from an ontological standpoint, but rather to the simplification of time into a reductionist understanding of linearity and causal eventfulness. The highest abstraction – feelings, emotions, interaction between people, art, and even reflection – cannot be objectified temporally. This would be insufficient for their apprehension by consciousness. The phenomena of consciousness cannot be explained temporally or spatially, nor do they need to fall into a mathematical-type bad infinity. They belong to the depth of the present. Here, Theunissen’s conception of the present coincides with Buber’s experience of it in the subject’s consciousness. But unlike, for example, Kierkegaard [6; p. 89], who identifies the present moment as the meeting place of the present with eternity, Theunissen is not tempted to confuse objective time with abstract time. Ultimately, he chooses the method of negative theology, because, in the manner of Thomas Aquinas [10; I, Q.3, prologue] in the medieval scholastic tradition (via negativa), who found it more successful to describe what God is not rather than what He is, Theunissen describes time through its negation. For it is precisely in the explication of temporal non-being that a more convenient and successful way of attributing being to a concept such as time is found.

The externalisation of time in its totality beyond the rational paradigm of the philosophising mind transcends it in an empirical sense, rather than in an ideal one. Such a cognitive perspective regarding this phenomenon would not only be counterproductive in an anthropological dimension but would also be palliative within the post-existentialist paradigm. Time should not be absolutised, substantivised, and objectified outside of consciousness as a self-sufficient concept. It is possible primarily in human experience, through the presence of subjectivity in the world as a strong anthropocentric position. Abstraction does not abolish time, but reveals its immanent function for consciousness – to be transcended within its own framework. Thus, Buber’s dialogical “I-Thou” relationship, revealed in the in-between (Das Zwischen) and in the present presence (Das Gegenwart) of the encounter, acquires an even more anthropological dimension in Theunissen through the analysis of the experience of time as lingering (*Verweilen*) and anticipation in the act of the temporal openness of consciousness.

IV. CONCLUSION

The post-existential projection of temporal experience seeks to lift consciousness out of its state of suffering in relation to temporal events and to integrate it into the abstract models of creativity, interaction, and expression, situated beyond the existential eschatological horizon. Even if he calls his cognitive method “negative theology,” Theunissen removes the subject from its seemingly inevitable state of doom, imposed upon it by the existentialist paradigm. It is no longer the inevitability of finitude that gives meaning to human existence, but the possibility that consciousness may dwell in other relations besides those defining it as finite. With Buber and Theunissen, the creatively irrational, moral, and openly interactive discourse returns in a substantive sense and imparts a new sense of comfort to the consciousness of the reflecting being. Time is no longer our master (Zeit als Herrschaft), but rather acquires the characteristics of life (Zeit des Lebens). Consciousness can now enjoy its dwelling in the present without

constantly attempting to measure it. Time is no longer merely sequential, but rather dense. Infinite duration and even eternity are abolished. Time gains authenticity and identity. Radical philosophical rhetoric regarding temporality in its relation to reflective consciousness is no longer necessary, and time becomes tamed, one's own, personal, and giving meaning to existence rather than taking it away. Man is no longer fixated on his inevitable end, because the objective danger of it is no longer empirically ubiquitous, but resides in contemplation, self-knowledge, and the "enlightened" present, which is no longer torn between past and future, but exists in the world of its own and mediated serene existence.

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