INTRODUCTION

Questions about the nature of time have always puzzled the philosophically disposed mind. What are the essential properties of time? How can we know them? How does time relate to other fundamental features and facts of the universe such as space, conscious life, and the occurrence in it of events and their connections? Does anything exist beyond time? Is, in what may seem like a fleeting sequence of ever passing nows, time a mere succession of discrete moments, or does it harbor a more fundamental continuity? Is time real or in some sense a function of the human perspective? The questions arising from even the briefest and most casual reflection on time are numerous, difficult, and, we tend to think, profound.

Time itself can never be made directly present in experience. Evanescent and intangible to the point of appearing ungraspable, it nevertheless permeates and, in a sense, governs everything that takes place. It dissolves into things, processes, and events as the mode of their becoming, and yet is typically represented by means of space and spatiality, as though time were a mere medium of movement. Our experience of time defies such an easy definition, however, and seems to involve mental abilities such as remembering, synthesizing, and anticipating. As Augustine notes in an often-quoted passage in the *Confessions*, "I know well enough what [time] is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled."[1]

Many philosophers interested in questions of time have focussed on time as an abstract concept, excluding not only the relation to human conceptualization and agency but any association with the wider social,

1 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 264.

psychological, and political dimensions of human existence that are studied in disciplines such as history, anthropology, comparative literature, and sociology. Time has been an object of metaphysics.

In this study I will refrain from raising any of the perennial metaphysical questions of time. My interest, rather, is human existence in time and what it means to exist temporally.[2] In this regard, I will be making three guiding yet crucial claims. The first is that our consciousness of time, the way we relate to time and take it up, to a large extent is a function of historically mediated horizons of meaning. Our schematization of time is expressive of our identities as knowing and desiring beings, while also influencing these identities. Drawing on philosophical interpretations relating to specific social realities, I intend, in other words, to explore how agents, being at least partly self-legislative and self-interpretive, *experience* time, and what the implications may be of such experience. The second guiding claim is that there is something peculiar about the time of modernity (or what I will equate with Western modernity in order to distinguish it from other and possibly different processes of modernization occurring elsewhere).[3] The time of modernity, which I will argue imposes specific constraints on what we can take human existence in time to entail, is torn loose from its erstwhile association with natural cycles and processes to become a disenchanted succession of essentially homogeneous now-points. In thrall to such momentous changes as urbanization, secularization, commercialization, technicization, as well as an ever greater increase in social complexity, the life of modern societies and subjects is to a tremendously detailed and overwhelming degree organized with reference to the chronometer, the representation of time according to a principle of successive instants,

2 In *The Time of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), p. xiii, David Couzens Hoy distinguishes between "time" defined as "clock-time" and "temporality" defined as "time in so far as it manifests itself in human existence." A distinction between clock-time and lived time will be important in this book as well, although I do not distinguish rigorously between "time" and "temporality." As I see it, this would have been counter-productive given the fact that this terminology is not employed consistently, or even at all, by the thinkers I will be discussing.

3 The Weberian question about the uniqueness of Western modernization has recently been the subject of a lot of debate. There are those, following Weber, who continue to believe that there is something unique about the Western process of modernization, and that, while unique, it carries a universal significance. Today, however, it is common to talk about a plurality of different processes of modernization. Since my own conception of modernization is fundamentally Weberian, I will restrict my findings to a Western context and leave the question of universality open.

each of which has a similar weight, leading in a linear direction from a past that is gone forever to a not yet actualized future. As I will argue, this temporal configuration raises a number of existential and ethical-political questions. My third guiding claim is that this development has sparked off its own philosophical discourse of modernity, in which key figures in the post-Kantian tradition have explored, and in many cases criticized, the ramifications of the rampant consolidation of a modern, disenchanted time-consciousness.[4]

The advantages wrought by a disenchanted time-consciousness are both obvious and numerous. Most strikingly it makes possible a new and enormously effective system for precisely coordinating social interaction. With the chronometer comes a vast increase in discipline, efficiency, and social speed, transforming every major institution in Western societies. The factory is totally clock-based, and so is the current office environment and urban space in general, as well as private life. Transportation, business, the flow of information, indeed everything we do, either alone or with others, is to a greater or lesser extent controlled by the clock. Moreover, the very idea of progress, which can be traced back to Christian conceptions of providence, is largely owed to technological innovation, presupposing a linear conception of time according to which the past is irretrievable and the future an open horizon. The *before* and *after*, the idea that history offers movement, change, and development is based on appeals to clocks and calendars. Perhaps most strikingly, the rise of the exact sciences and modern industrial technology would not have been possible without an objectivist, clock-based understanding of time. It is impossible to imagine the modern world without the clock.

For many of the central post-Kantian thinkers, however, including Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Adorno, the disintegration of external, socio-historically sanctioned authority with its premodern forms of time-consciousness has brought about a wide-ranging

4 The idea of analyzing at least selected parts of the post-Kantian tradition of European philosophy as engaged in some type of extended debate over the nature, promises, and (in many cases) dissatisfactions of modernity is by no means new. It features prominently in Jürgen Habermas's influential study *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987) and has been pursued in considerable depth by Hans Blumenberg, Michel Foucault, Theodor W. Adorno, Leo Strauss, and many others. However, no account so far has interpreted the discourse of modernity in terms mainly of problems related to temporality and duration. For a good overview, see Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (Cambridge, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

sense of dissatisfaction. In some instances, such as those of Hegel and Nietzsche, this has led to the recommendation of new and, in these philosophers' view, emancipatory forms of commitment. However, in many of them it has been viewed as a potential threat to both agency and motivation. If time, calculated and commodified, is disenchanted to become a succession of irreversible now-points to be taken up by the instrumental pursuits of a post-conventional agent, then every traditional certainty, whether of faith or sensation, stands in danger of being rendered hollow or invalid. Clock-time, while a homogeneous resource, lending itself to be exploited by rational and calculative behavior, is empty and uniform, devoid of any intrinsic sense of significance.

The aim of this study is to analyze and discuss how the temporally inflected experience of uncertainty accompanying the perpetual and dynamic process of modernization finds a cultural response in the tradition of philosophical reflection from Kant to Adorno.[5] Two interconnected issues, both related to subjective effects of modernization, arise in this regard. One is the lack of *existential meaning* in a world in which few or no permanent and intersubjectively validated cultural, spiritual, ethical, or aesthetic contexts in which to experience the bindingness of value are accepted. Lack of meaning, I argue, is a function of the modern agent's – and modern society's – incessant erosion of pre-given authority and value-patterns. With the destruction of the various contexts that grant human life existential meaning and form, and which permit the formation of narratives that in an intersubjectively binding fashion can generate both individual and collective meaning, a quotidian crisis of subjectivity begins to emerge. As ends are subjectivized, agents start relating instrumentally to them, and the crisis grows even deeper. The time merely of waiting to achieve a subjectively and, from the point of view of any such meaning-giving contexts, arbitrarily set end is empty, meaningless, and self-stultifying.

Another important concern is the changing and changed experience of *transitoriness*. On a traditional metaphysical account of transcendence, like that found in Platonism, the adequate ethical response to the fact of temporality (and hence of transitoriness) consisted in trying to invent and employ procedures and practices of evasion. By purifying the soul through rational or ecstatic participation in noetic

5 I here follow Marshall Berman, who in *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988) consistently speaks of "modernism" as a reaction to "modernization."

essence, or, as in Christianity, through salvation, the human being could triumph over time and be united, after her brief earthly sojourn, with the transcendent sphere of immutable being. Secularization, enlightenment rationalism, and skepticism have largely undermined this appeal to transcendence, thereby radically transforming how agents are able to interpret and make sense of fundamental facts of life such as embodiment, suffering, and death. Indeed, the disintegration of metaphysics became an ideological hallmark of modernity itself, placing man in a concrete historicity, a historical time, that, when fully secularized, stretches indefinitely into the future, with no possibility of archetypical return or repetition, leaving the modern agent to pursue her goals exclusively in relation to her own capacity for autonomous reason-giving. In tandem with the emerging social and cognitive impact of physicalist interpretations of time (or clock-time), agents have increasingly been led to perceive time as a mere succession of homogenous instants devoid of any inherent meaning that could justify the experience of radical contingency made possible by this time frame. Transitoriness obtains a particular significance precisely because the time of the active modern agent is measured out in ever-more precious seconds, minutes, days, and months that need to be conquered and controlled.

Philosophy has by no means been the only field in which modern time and time-consciousness has sparked off reflection. In the arts, and especially in literature, there are numerous and powerful responses to this issue. As early as in his 1916 study *The Theory of the Novel*, Georg Lukács claimed that time is the key to understanding the modern novel, and that only the novel has been able to register fully how intimately the alienation of modern subjectivity from a sense of objective purpose is connected to changing conceptions of time.[6] Much of the growing body of critical discourse on Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* has been examining how the relationship between time and modernization is reflected in literary form.[7] The novel, in particular, provides historical context and subjective viewpoints, thereby bringing the relevant phenomena to light in ways that no philosophical text is able to match. While often accomplished in interpreting the

6 See Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1978), p. 121.

7 See, for example, Julia Kristeva, *Proust and the Sense of Time*, trans. Stephen Bann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) and Malcolm Bowie, *Proust among the Stars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

general significance of such matters, philosophy has typically shunned questions to do with context and lived subjectivity.[8] As I will try to show, however, while the historical dimension is often only implicit, it is never completely absent; thus my task as an interpreter has been to bring it to light and read the relevant philosophical texts as responding to their own social conditions and the type of experience these conditions make possible. I therefore offer a rereading of certain central representatives of the modern European tradition, different from that advanced by standard histories of modern philosophy, in order to seek in them a fruitful approach to the too often ignored relationship between modernization and time-consciousness. Appearances notwithstanding, the philosophy I will be dealing with is indeed a discourse on, as well as a response to, modernity.

Although I hope to demonstrate the centrality of the question of time in any proper account of the philosophical discourse of modernity, I will not provide reasons to believe that the dominant responses to the emergence of a modern conception of time are tremendously persuasive. Reconstructing a tradition that runs from Kant over Hegel to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and certain of the figures associated with the early Frankfurt school, I will on the contrary argue that they are all faced with very tough challenges – though some more so than others. The position I favor will be based, though not closely, on accounts coming out of the writings of Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno.

The first chapter is predominantly methodological. The aim here is to make plausible the idea that time can, and indeed should, be analyzed with reference to publicly endorsable structures of engagement that, when employed to schematize concepts, provide time with significance. While capable of being distorted in various ways, they can never be completely replaced by objectivist or naturalist conceptions of time. Of importance for my argument is the first-person point of view and its relevance for understanding the kinds of responses agents are able to muster when

8 One current exception to this tendency is Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2007). On p. 3, Taylor refers to secularity, his object of philosophical investigation, as being "a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place." He continues that "by 'context of understanding' here, I mean both matters that will probably have been explicitly formulated by almost everyone, such as the plurality of options, and some which form the implicit, largely unfocussed background of this experience and search, its 'pre-ontology', to use a Heideggerian term."

relating to these structures. I also offer a brief account of narrative, arguing that lived time tends to be structured along narrative lines.

The second chapter presents historical material and interpretations regarding the rise of a modern consciousness of time. I try to show how, with the rise of modernity, radical changes in the organization of everyday life conspired with the Enlightenment critique of metaphysics and the commitment to progress to generate a new sense of time and one's place in it. Accompanying these vast changes is a huge transformation of structures of self-interpretation and action-orientation. From having been constituted by appeals to pre-given forms of symbolic authority, they gradually become oriented towards the formal and instrumental, serving mainly subjective rather than objective ends. The chapter ends by identifying two important strands in the modern experience of temporality that will subsequently cause discontent: first, the universalization of linear, homogeneous time, which radicalizes the age-old problem of transitoriness, calling for substantive reconceptualizations of man's relation to society, to others, and to his own mortality; and, second, the orientation towards progress which will turn out to stand in conflict with the displacement and, in the most extreme cases, rejection – with considerable ethical and existential consequences – of vocabularies expressive of the anchoring of identities in a fabric of collective meaning and purpose.

In Chapter 3 I consider two responses to the time of modernity: one Kantian and one Aristotelian. The Kantian strategy is to argue that rationally endorsed projects – projects initiated by an agent capable of rational self-determination – cannot involve the kind of alienation that I associate with the modern time frame. However, since the exercise of pure and decontextualized autonomy is itself predicated on the acceptance of a disenchanted temporality, it follows that the issues of transitoriness and existential meaning do not go away. By contrast, the Aristotelian strategy is to retrieve an alternative temporality based on the idea of *praxis*. Here the activity is its own end, the fulfilling expression of an intersubjectively endorsed cultural commitment, and time, rather than being understood within an instrumental framework, is theorized as a field, an enabling medium, in which meaningful action – action that draws on historically binding, traditional patterns of action and interpretation – can occur. I argue that although such an Aristotelian critique of modernity is in some ways promising, it underestimates the difficulties involved in rejecting the temporal economy of modern life, seeking refuge in an altogether unrealistic anti-modernism.

In Chapter 4 I turn to Hegel and examine the tension between, on the one hand, his theory of time and, on the other, his early interpretation of European modernity. On the basis of his theory of time, which interprets time in terms of the necessary unfolding of a rational process, Hegel's theory aims to eliminate the ethical and existential consequences of the disenchanted modern time frame. As a form of life and embodied in institutions that self-consciously express it, Hegel's *Geist* is a self-determining rational structure whose development is inherently meaningful. In the early account, however, Hegel paints a much darker picture, especially of European modernity and the challenges it imposes on the formation of an autonomous form of subjectivity. I thus attempt to reveal the tensions between his metaphysics of time and his thinking about the crisis of modern subjectivity.

In sharp opposition to his rival Hegel, Schopenhauer, who is mainly concerned with the problems of finitude and transitoriness, rejects the notion of rationality as an immanent process of self-realization, instead offering an account of transcendence. In Chapter 5 I analyze his account of time and aesthetic experience, arguing that his vision of Platonic transcendence does not adequately resolve the problem of transitoriness. I also suggest that the Schopenhauerian view represents a melancholic response to time: in refusing to accept finitude and transitoriness, it exemplifies a resistance to come to terms with loss and thereby to mourn.

Turning, in Chapter 6, to the early Nietzsche, I discuss how his critique of Enlightenment rationalism, embedded in an account of Greek tragedy, leads to the advocacy of a pre-modern, cyclical understanding of time opposed to the contingency and irreversibility of linear time. I propose that the early Nietzsche, for reasons internal to his account, fails to identify modern authorities capable of offering the kind of non-reflective assurance that he needs in order to ground his position. The later Nietzsche, examined in Chapter 7, criticizes all attempts to negate transient life, associating them with nihilism. Accepting transience becomes a matter of affirming the past as irretrievably gone; it is to accept that nothing lasts while resisting the desire to establish a melancholic attachment to the lost object. I finally analyze Nietzsche's ambitious attempt to rethink the notion of time by means of his conception of the eternal recurrence of the same. Criticizing Nietzsche, I suggest that none of his recipes for countering the modern crisis of temporal awareness is satisfactory. The appeal to myth is regressive;

the active nihilism of his later work is incapable of solving the problems to which it is designed to respond. In particular, I contend that since, on his account, there can be no unchosen demands upon the self, the creations being presented by Nietzsche's *Übermensch* remain without any binding value. The redirecting of desire towards the transient world becomes a narcissistic game incapable of overcoming the problem of nihilism.

While both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche focus mainly on transitoriness, Heidegger, whose work I discuss in Chapter 8, turns to the problem of meaning more generally. In his analysis of the relation between time-consciousness and modernity's achievement of a secular order marked by the pursuit of autonomy and technological mastery, he establishes a link between rationalized modernity and boredom. Of particular importance for my purposes is that Heidegger understands boredom as a direct and painful confrontation with the emptiness characterizing a mere succession of mutually homogenous moments of time. Modern technological environments, and indeed modern society in general, are structured such as to preclude the possibility of meaningful engagement. They are, in Heidegger's view, quite simply boring. In light of this diagnosis I discuss Heidegger's appeal to a notion of commitment. By taking full responsibility for one's self-definition and by implicating the self in one's engagements, experience again becomes meaningful and significant, and the awareness of time no longer a burden. I ask how successful this account really is. In particular I argue that his concepts of commitment and authenticity essentially remain stuck within the parameters of a modern, disenchanted temporal economy.

Theorists of postmodernity invariably claim that the modern project, with its various meta-narratives of progress, innovation, and emancipation, has come to an end, and that what we now witness is a tremendously pervasive and exclusive orientation towards the present, the given, and the appearing (as opposed to any conceptions of essence or origin).[9]

9 The most influential study of the concept of the postmodern has undoubtedly been Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). See also Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) and Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). For a cogent exposition of the relation between modernist ideologies that make reference to the "new" and the postmodern rejection of this category, see Boris Groys, *Über das Neue: Versuch einer Kulturökonomie* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1992).

In their view, technological advancement has reinforced this position: the tremendous increases in physical and informational speed have made our horizon of expectation less a function of the narratives we construct regarding historical development and change than of the more immediate demands and desires of individual agents. Although these developments, which I examine in Chapter 9, seem undeniable, I suggest that the values and problems of modernity have not been entirely superseded by the emergence of the postmodern. On the contrary, understanding and criticizing the present requires a thorough analysis of what I will call a modernist consciousness of time. Thus, I will analyze a position according to which lived time is understood in terms of the subject's relation to a form of immanent transcendence. For Bloch, Benjamin, and Adorno, the time of progressive modernization is empty and homogeneous, and by extension the same is true of the protracted now of postmodern temporality. In countering this time frame and its social conditions they introduce a set of critical tools with which to think not only about time but about experience and ethics. According to the view I excavate and extrapolate from their writings, time, while predominantly homogeneous, occasionally permits a dimension of alterity to affect the ego, thereby placing it in a relationship of ethically relevant responsibility. I conclude Chapter 9 by arguing that the problem of existing in time must be related to a notion of social critique. When the subject finds itself in a position of being addressed by a significant and authoritative, yet ultimately sublime, other, the solitary time of boredom and emptiness has the potential to be transformed into a common project. I end by hinting towards the political implications of this point.