

You Never Know How the Past Will Turn Out

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Anything at all is a designed thing. To be a thing is to have been designed: there is no such thing as formless matter—this too is an anthropomorphically scaled (and anthropocentrically scaled) illusion. What is often called Nature is simply nonhuman designed things. A thing—anything at all: a piece of topaz, a thought about a piece of topaz, a flaw in a piece of topaz, a geode full of topaz crystals—is like a train station. In this train station, past and future are trains that slide past one another without touching. The relative motion between past and future is what is mistakenly called “present,” erroneously conceived as an atomic point of whatever size (one nanosecond, a million years). (I will demonstrate this is in more detail in the essay.) The particular design of the train station itself is called temporality and anything at all has its own specific temporality. These temporalities are not necessarily anthropomorphically scaled, to put it mildly: most of them aren’t.

Every entity whatsoever — a mathematical equation about the refractive index of a piece of topaz, for instance — thus opens up a very specific kind of future, and the universe is simply a non-totalizable set of temporality structures. No one vantage point on this design universe can possibly be the perfect one, because by definition this vantage point, if real, is also a specific temporality structure.

This puts a burden on human design, because what design designs directly *are* futures, not simply things that point at a certain future. We now live in a time where agricultural-scaled anthropocentric designs are revealing their flaws: they cause global warming and mass extinction. We need to design some new things because we need some new temporalities, if only to think outside the narrow grey temporality pipe of Neolithic agricultural logistics.

We need them, and we can have them. Let me show you how.

Why do things have different temporality structures? It is in fact much better to say that they *are* different temporality structures. Why? Time is not a box in which things happen. The concept of time as a box is simply an anthropocentric construct. Because we elevate the human above everything else, we become blind to other perspectives, and this results in the objectification of human temporality — taking it as a universal container. This human temporality is then further objectified as “time,” in other words, the *measurement* of time is confused with time as such. Many human problems result from this this objectification — not the least of which being the colonialist imposition of one time to rule them all, as a brief glance at the history of Greenwich Mean Time, the establishment of London as zero longitude in the nineteenth century, will readily demonstrate.

First, then, human temporalities, which are how we make plans, project a future, create and destroy a world, get from A to B, are isolated from the other temporalities with which they overlap. Think about how your brain — which isn’t strictly “you” — has its own sense of time, which doesn’t quite fit the 24-hour clock. Think about the “plans” of your stomach bacteria, let alone the best laid plans of mice to get the bits of cheese you left on the plate after supper. These entities have their own temporality structures, which I will now call *timezones*

for the sake of convenience. It's not strictly true that there is a human-only timezone. The human timezone is composed of and overlaps with a whole host of nonhuman timezones.

Then, as I briefly sketched, this fake anthropocentric temporality is measured using some regular, rhythmical procedure such as walking or counting the numbers on a clock or detecting the decay of a cesium atom. Anthropocentric time is further objectified and reified! Unlearning that procedure, at the best of times, now takes on a highly subversive quality. Scientism denigrates it as hippy-dippy subjectivism, for example. The underlying, rippling and flowing quality of timezones is taken as a superficial candy that coats with a human flavor the truly "objective" discourses of measurement. As control society ramps up its intensity — a predominantly automatic function of its operating conditions — insisting that time isn't what we take it to be is often considered more preposterous than the existence of a Parliamentary leader whose impulses are not immediately inclined towards neoliberal "reality." Added to which, the main exponent of not taking time at (clock-) face value, Martin Heidegger, misreads temporality as destiny and puts the Germans in charge of the purest most authentic version of it. So it's terribly easy to dismiss.

But Heidegger only does this on the basis of a failure of nerve concerning his very own theory. For his idea that (human) being is time to work, Heidegger has to make unfounded metaphysical claims about nonhumans, the infamous "lizard" and the "stone" that are either poor in world (lifeforms) or entirely lacking in world (a piece of crystal, say). *World* here is a shorthand for what I mean by *timezone*, not a nice symmetrical container of events, but the Slinky-like movement that is inherent to (human) being as such, which Heidegger calls *ecstatic* (*ek-stasis*, standing outside of oneself). Stuff (Heidegger calls it "tools" or "equipment") is oriented towards our timezones. But for this orientation to work, it has to be partially invisible, just functioning in the background like an operating system in a mobile phone. It is "withdrawn" from objectifying presence, you can't point to it directly. This functioning is already a little bit not in our control! The vast, encompassing and largely unconscious shadow of being can't just be an effect of our destiny projects, because it logically subtends them — in other words, and this is how Heidegger puts it, "language speaks man," and not the other way around. The idea that there is a "we" that has a "destiny" for instance is *discursively* produced, by which is meant not simply in words (that would be nominalism) but in a manifold of practices and projects and concepts. There is something nonhuman about being as such. In which case, we might turn out to be something else altogether, at any moment — which is how history can happen.

So we don't even need to go down to the level of object-oriented ontology (commonly abbreviated as OOO), which I always like to do, in order to find the nonhuman. But when we do factor in OOO, it gets even easier. OOO is a way of thinking about how things exist. Things exist in such a way that they don't depend on how they are accessed or used or thought about (or licked or designed with) in order to exist. How things exist, then, is as a kind of mystery that can't ever be completely fathomed. To be a thing is to have a weird mysterious depth. OOO insists that for the timezoning process to work, stuff has to be radically nothing to do with us in the first place. A hammer doesn't suddenly become one when we notice it—the hammer just happens ("hammers happen" would be a good t-shirt slogan), until it breaks, in which case it reveals its not-quite-hammerness to us. And this means that the hammer is radically withdrawn, not just from human direct presencing procedures, but from *anything at all*, including the hammer in question!

In order for there to be equipment there have to be things, and these things or beings or entities (pick your favorite word) don't depend on any kind of access to make them real. Any kind at all, such as breaking them into tiny pieces in a scientific analysis. The breakage process, however neat and orderly it seems, doesn't get at the thing. Heidegger himself gives a vivid example. He holds up a piece of chalk and says okay, let's try to find out what this is by breaking it into smaller pieces. So he breaks it in half. And then he holds up the two pieces and says right, well now we have

two problems where first we had one... All the journalistic talk of CERN scientists discovering “fundamental building blocks” is simply a confusing and often oppressive reification.

Let’s return to our piece of topaz. We left it alone in the first paragraph but I can assure you it’s still around somewhere. If time isn’t to be found anywhere but in its very being, where is it? Look at the appearance of the topaz: its color, shape, heft, sparkle, all its qualities. These qualities, this appearance literally *is* the past, the past of the topaz’s timezone. It’s quite elementary to note that a number of things have happened to it: the topaz was extracted by humans and machines, it was cut into a specific shape, it was ground and polished. The appearance of the topaz is nothing but a story about what happened to it such that it became what it is right now.

But now that we’re on the subject, what exactly *is* this topaz, right now? Is it a piece of jewelry? Whose? Whose next? Is it a landing pad for this irritating mosquito? Is it a missile, albeit a rather expensive one, that I feel like chucking at the bin to see if I’m a good shot? Is it a great example of how things spray out time like a liquid in an essay by Timothy Morton?

It can be all of these things, because it isn’t any of these things. As soon as we look for the topaz like that, it slips away like the soap in the bath. This slipping-away quality *is the future*. *Is* the future, directly. Not “in” the future, but the future as such.

It’s not hard to see how this futurity is open. By *open* I mean something exactly like what is said when OOO says *withdrawn*. But perhaps *open* is a more...open word.

And it’s not hard to see how this picture leaves out the present, at least if we construe the present as a pointing-at or as an atomic point, that is, as a pointed-at-thing. Time isn’t the measurement of time, and this is one reason why we don’t want to include the present if we think it this way. But more fundamentally, things are not constantly present, and if our idea of *present* is a moment that is constantly present (however briefly), then we are thinking something that can’t exist, according to the logic I’ve all too briefly sketched out here. It is much better to think the present as an artifact of the sliding of past against future like trains at a junction. I call this sliding *nowness*. The *nowness* of the topaz jewel as it sparkles in your turning fingers...this isn’t the same as something that’s constantly there no matter what. That’s what isn’t available, whether we take that to be the jewel itself or some aspect of the jewel (its parts, say its atoms, or every single one of its aspects, in a sort of exploded view diagram).

Yet the past of the thing the past that is the appearance of the thing, is also unfathomable. This has to do with a paradox about contextualization, which is a very popular way of reducing things to “mere” effects of other things in the humanities and social sciences. Scientists break things into little bits, we contextualize them to death. But the interesting thing about contextualism is that it tends to be secretly *afraid* of the implications of contextualizing.

Because...where do you draw the line? In other words, where do you *stop* contextualizing? Form is history, history is form. With one stroke we can dispense with the age old debate between formalism and contextualism. In a way both are talking about the same thing — it’s a false dichotomy! So that isn’t the problem. The problem is, to say it again, how and why can contextualization stop? We stopped at the mine and the human miner. But the topaz also exists in the twenty-first century as a function of various economic factors such as capitalism, trade agreements, the economics of jewelry, “consumer demand” and so on. And the reason for *those* are a host of other factors which is why we could write a whole book about this one piece of topaz and not be done with it. Such accounts are often way too neat, as in the movie *The Red Violin*, which tracks the picaresque adventures of one of those instruments as it passes from human hand to human hand. At some point the contextualization machine will run out of steam — someone will just choose to stop at some arbitrary point, or temporality constraints will get in the way — I’d love to write a more complete topaz history, but breakfast got in the way, or tenure review, or my own concepts about what contexts are more relevant.

As Derrida pointed out, there is no outside-text — there is no context that finally grounds the thing, to which it can be reduced once and for all, because each context is an aspect of the thing's form, its appearance. We think we may be reaching a grounding limit: what a relief! This piece of topaz is really just “about” capitalism, or the jeweler who cut it, or the buyer who wears it, or... But we really reaching a limit as to our tolerance of the lack of a metaphysics of presence. We reach a point at which we say, this context is special, it's outside the other ones, outside the thing, so we can reduce the thing to it. In an OOO world we need something like a metaphysical immunosuppressant to prevent this from happening, because when it does, that's where the violence occurs.

The future is an abyss and the past is an abyss. The topaz opens up abyssal vortices of past and future. Potentially infinitely long trains cross at the junction, the timezone of the piece of topaz. But, as Wittgenstein said, *Explanations come to an end somewhere*, by which he means what I mean when I say that the contextualization machine stops at some point. There will always be a gap between the actual train and the potentially infinite train.

Since the past always forms a non-totalizable set of contextual horizons, without closure, center or edge, it is open too. What we have here is just this exact piece of topaz with just this exact appearance. It's not a sponge cake. But we won't be able to point directly at its determinacy. The past has its own futurity — there is a radical gap between what it is (potentially infinite contextualization) and how it appears (inevitably limited contextualization). Another way of saying the same thing is to say that every part of the topaz — and according to this our one little jewel *might* have (uncheckably) infinity parts — is a nowness junction, a timezone.

Which means that fatalism is wrong, karma is open, and you're not directly responsible for or are you inevitably chained to your horrible lot in life — it can be redirected, redesigned, reformed. There is wiggle room.

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