

## **David Couzens Hoy, *The Time of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality* (MIT Press 2009)**

**Reviewed by Keith Ansell-Pearson, University of Warwick**

In a perceptive insight into the meaning of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, David Hoy suggests that when Proust speaks of lost time (*le temps perdu*) he does not simply mean either past time or wasted time, but rather 'the sting of time,' namely, the sense we have of being 'in' time, that is, subject to time's passing and aware that our lives are running out of time (p. 183). It is in this sense, Hoy says, that the 'time of our lives' becomes an existential issue for every one of us.

In the course of this wide-ranging and hugely instructive study, David Hoy shows that the time of our lives is not only an existential issue but also, amongst other things, a political one, a task for phenomenology to work through, a task for genealogy to complicate, and a problem for hermeneutics to decipher and interpret. It is the first volume in a projected two-volume study of the history of consciousness: this one on temporality, to be followed by a second volume on the history of self-consciousness. As Hoy rightly notes in his preface, for the phenomenological tradition—and even for post-phenomenologists such as Deleuze—temporality is a condition for the possibility of subjectivity, and hence it fitting that he should begin with a study of time before providing his study of the mind or consciousness. However, Hoy thinks it is an error to privilege one over the other, time over mind or mind over time. To break with the tradition of transcendental philosophy the author finds it necessary to renounce the project of explaining which is the more primordial and which is derived. The essential

task, in fact, is to problematize both concepts, and on this point Hoy's special and longstanding interest in 'genealogy' reveals and asserts itself.

The book is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter the author focuses on Kant and Heidegger and selects the latter's *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* from 1929 as a seminal text for elaborating his own project into the history of thinking on temporality. In chapter two attention shifts to a working through of 'the now' and here the reader encounters a wide-ranging treatment of authors as diverse as Hegel, William James, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, and Nietzsche and Deleuze on eternal recurrence. In chapter three Hoy shifts his attention to the question and problem of 'the past' and largely focuses his attention on phenomenology; here the reader will find astute interpretations of Husserl, Heidegger, Bergson, and Deleuze. In chapter four Hoy dwells on the question and problem of 'the future,' and here he provides readings of Kant and Hegel (on universal history), Heidegger on the futural, Benjamin's mournful figure of the angel of history, Deleuze on the time of the self, Derrida on democracy to-come, and Zizek on Bartleby politics. In his final chapter, chapter five, he turns to the question of the 'reconciliation' of time for example, of time and temporality, or physics and phenomenology, the objective and the subjective—and considers various 'strategies,' including those we find in Proust and Benjamin, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, and Zizek, and Deleuze on *aion* and *chronos*. Finally, the author concludes his study with a 'postscript on method,' which covers genealogy, phenomenology, and critical theory, and this emphasis on 'genealogy' and critical theory will come as no surprise to readers of the author's work to date. It should perhaps be pointed out: there is no particular 'hero' in the book and no single theory or conception of time trumps any of the others that are considered. Hoy is far too an intelligent a philosopher and careful reader of life and texts to adhere himself

to such a strategy. He is no polemicist for any particular theory or thinker. Instead he finds important resources for thinking time in all the traditions, texts, and thinkers he considers. As he puts it himself with regards to the different strategies he considers in chapter five: 'No one theorist gets it right and no one is wrong. These are different ways of dealing with different senses of the time of our lives. They are all possible strategies, even if ultimately each will fall short. The sting of time can never be taken away entirely' (pp. 185-6).

Hoy has done extensive research in preparing this book and there is a great deal to admire and welcome about it. Although wide-ranging in scope and ambition, the study never loses its focus on specific questions and problems. He is for the most part a reliable scholar; he writes fluently, even gracefully at times, and he does his best to explicate extremely difficult material and thoughts in lucid and instructive terms, especially the ideas of Bergson, Heidegger, and Husserl. In addition, he is extremely judicious in the assessments he makes of his chosen thinkers at various points in his study; and along the way he has some thought-provoking insights to offer readers and that serve to challenge the way we ordinarily and habitually think about time. Readers of *The Agonist* will perhaps be most provoked by his claim that Nietzsche's eternal return is a hypothesis for which we no longer have any need! (p. 89) It is his credit to his acumen and wisdom that in the appreciation of time he provides the dimensions and ecstasies of time all assume an arresting fresh vitality, be it the past, present, or future. However, there are flaws in the book and a few criticisms can be made. The treatment of Deleuze on the temporality of the self in chapter four is, I think unsatisfactory, with the author largely paraphrasing Deleuze on the three syntheses of time and offering little in the way of fresh or probing insight (by contrast the section

that then follows on Derrida on democracy to-come is hugely informative). In his consideration of how various thinkers seek to provide modes of ‘reconciliation’ with respect to concepts and problems of time, the author suggests that ‘Nietzsche seeks reconciliation through “recurrence” ’ (p. 185). But does Nietzsche not have Zarathustra teach that the task is indeed to reconcile oneself with time but also to will something ‘higher’ than ‘reconciliation,’ and is not the doctrine of eternal recurrence deeply implicated in this superior form of willing, including how to will backwards? Finally, I am not sure it is right to say, as the author does, that ‘Proust had studied with Bergson’ (p. 189). They were related—Proust was a page-boy at the wedding of his cousin Louise Neuberger to Bergson—and I believe Bergson once invited Proust to dinner. But whilst Proust did undertake a study of *Matter and Memory*, he was always keen to deny that *Swann* should be described as a Bergsonian novel. Thus, I think it is overstating things to say Proust had studied ‘with’ Bergson.

In closing, let me state once again my admiration for this book. It merits a broad readership in philosophy and the history of ideas and would make for an ideal companion text for anyone teaching an upper level undergraduate or graduate course on the philosophy of time. It is admirably wide-ranging and it displays an impressive and expert grasp of a large terrain of modern and contemporary thought. Perhaps best of all, it adequately conveys the thought that the time of our lives should be both joyful and just: the fact that this is far from being the case in our time is all the more reason to keep engaging in demanding intellectual work and political action—and also to prize astute and wise intellects and teachers such as David Hoy.