

The Need for Temporality in Theoretical Psychology:

A Commentary on Manoussakis's *The Ethics of Time*

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Manoussakis's most recent book, *The Ethics of time: A phenomenology and hermeneutics of change* (2017), is timely for me (no pun intended). Between my first book some 25 years ago, entitled *Time and Psychological Explanation* (Slife, 1993), and my tenth book due out later this year on hermeneutic moral realism (Slife & Yanchar, in press), Manoussakis's book spans and complements my entire career. More substantively, however, this book is an important contribution to the scholarly literature, especially to my discipline of psychology. I believe it brings a depth of awareness to one of the least understood and most important aspects of psychology's conceptual underpinnings—time and temporality. The book is also worth its price just for the intellectual nuggets scattered throughout the text, not the least of which is its insightful epilogue.

My intention here is to speak from my vantage point as the editor of the *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*. This journal is the flagship journal of Division 24 of the American Psychological Association (APA), the Society for Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology (STPP). It is also the only APA journal devoted exclusively to the theory and philosophy of psychology. From this editorial perspective, I believe I can see how badly Manoussakis's temporal lessons are needed for the theories of psychology.

My Concern

This concern is not to ignore how many of us in the STPP have long held an interest in Manoussakis's primary points of departure—phenomenology, narrative, and hermeneutics. In broad terms, these theorists have attempted to contrast, in all its many variations, ontological

hermeneutics (or “strong relationality”) with what could be called ontological abstractionism. Ontological relationality assumes that the experiences, objects, and events of the world are most real or fundamental when they are understood as having a shared being with their contexts, while ontological abstractionism assumes that the experiences, objects, and events of the world are most real or fundamental when they are understood as abstracted from these contexts (e.g., the laboratory tradition). Indeed, some of us have recently tried to document how this latter form of ontology has dominated Western intellectual culture generally and American psychology specifically (e.g., Fowers, Richardson, & Slife, 2017; Slife, Ghelfi, & Martin, in press; Slife, Reber, & Richardson, 2005). The dominance of abstractionism has led many of us to explore varieties of strong relationality as fertile alternatives for psychological theory and practice (Freeman, 2014; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Slife, O’Grady, & Kosits, 2017).

Unfortunately—and this is where I believe Manoussakis’s book is so pivotal for psychological theorists—many relational theorists still de-emphasize the vital context of temporality. The contexts of our lives are not merely the surroundings of the present, including our bodies, environments, and cultures, but also the “surroundings” of our past and future. I put scare quotes around the term “surroundings” because virtually everyone recognizes the import of the past and future. However, this recognition usually assumes that the three dimensions of time—past, present, and future—occur in a linear sequence. Such a sequence necessarily implies that each dimension of time happens one-at-a-time, which does not truly allow the context of the other dimensions at the *same* time (Slife, 1993). This linear conception is not truly ontologically relational, and thus is problematic for many species of narrative, hermeneutics, and phenomenology.

For them to be strongly relational, as many philosophers and psychologists have noted, the three dimensions of time must co-occur. Fuller (1990), for example, characterizes temporality in this manner: “our life’s temporal moments—alreadyness [past], present, future—are in active communication with one another at any given moment, reciprocally determining one another” (p. 184). Heidegger (1972) casts it this way: “The unity of time’s three dimensions consists in the interplay of each toward each” (p. 15). And Manning (1993) puts it so succinctly: the past, present, and future happen “as synchrony, not as diachrony” (p. 85).

I readily acknowledge the hermeneutists, phenomenologists, and narrativists of my Society who have been quick to recognize the import of history in this relational sense. Present events and experiences simply make no sense without the past as co-occurring context (even though this context is too often seen as determinative, robbing both the past and present of their possibility). Still, the real import of the future in this simultaneously relational sense has rarely been significantly explored. And this co-occurring future is as vital to the meaningfulness of the now as is the past, especially when considering the inherent teleology of virtue ethics and narrative psychology (Fowers, Richardson, & Slife, 2017; Freeman, 1993), as well as the intentionality of phenomenology (Giorgi, 2005; Wertz, 2005) and the futurity of hermeneutics (Yanchar & Slife, 2017). Although these types of temporal constructs are often recognized and even described, they are far too frequently linearized.

Engaging The Ethics of Time

Given that Manoussakis’s fine book is the inspiration for the foregoing concerns, I will explore them through some of his examples and terms, all perhaps more theological than the peculiar secularism of psychological theorizing. Indeed, I wonder if the discipline’s relative avoidance and perhaps even rejection of the insights of theology—whatever the psychologist’s

feelings about religion per se—have hindered its understanding and exploration of the truly temporal, and thus truly relational. With my limited space, I cannot fully develop these explorations here. Nevertheless, I hope to intrigue the reader to consider Manoussakis's thicker renderings.

Beginnings and Endings. Consider, for example, Manoussakis's (2017) contention that the human mind can apprehend “the perfect and complete,” (p. 31) especially when the perfect and complete include the *Telos* of the future. As he notes, this apprehension means that our present knowledge is necessarily partial and imperfect, which is well-recognized in psychological hermeneutics. However, it is rarely understood that we sense this incompleteness and imperfection through our temporal apprehension of completion and perfection (Manoussakis, 2017). As Manoussakis puts it, the “penultimate draws its existence and significance from the perfection of the Ultimate” (p. 42). Our disenchantment or “longing,” as Kierkegaard once described it, is because the Ultimate Good of our longing is not met. The abstracting away of time in our Society’s theorizing keeps us from seeing the contemporaneous import of this Ultimate Telos, making it more difficult for psychological theorists to address human purpose and moral direction in their work. Indeed, this lack of moral direction may be reflective of a lack of this Telos in the larger society. Recent studies, for example, have indicated that America’s adolescents have difficulty finding purpose and moral compass (Smith, 2002).

Manoussakis also argues that the temporal recognition of this Ultimate Good is hindered by the refusal to acknowledge our origin in time. This refusal is the beginning of sin for the Christian, because the absence of origins, or even the ignorance that one has an origin, means that we succumb to the pride of self-creation and become the god of our own lives. As Manoussakis explains succinctly, “autobiography is impossible” (2017, p. 39). I agree with him

that human language is relational or, in his terms, “responsorial,” (p. 43) and thus no truly self-created biography is possible. We are existentially dependent, as Fowers, Richardson, and I (2017) point out in a recent book on human frailty, and cannot be the gods of our own lives. Understanding our relational origin should move us away from this pride and move us toward general humility. However, in my view, most theorizing in psychology has served the self or ego (Slife, O’Grady, & Kosits, 2017). In other words, I believe the absence of temporal origin and temporal telos is a major factor in what Mark Freeman (2014) describes as psychology’s tendency to “delimit its focus largely on what was happening inside the self, within the enclosure of the skin” (p. 1). With Freeman’s emphasis on otherness, many psychologists will likely see his point as exclusively spatial—to consider the “outside” or other as well as the “inside” or self. My point here, and perhaps Manoussakis’s too, is that a parallel otherness involves the temporal—the beginning or origin and end or ultimate purpose.

Natural Attitude. Another intriguing way in which many contemporary psychologists have abstracted away time concerns the “natural attitude” (p. 43). Although this attitude is frequently viewed as helpful, especially from the perspective of many phenomenologists, Manoussakis casts it in a slightly different light. Here he emphasizes the context and contingency that time brings. The natural attitude, as he explains, stems from finding ourselves “*in the world*” in the modern sense of finding ourselves in a spatial world where we are inevitably separated from one another through spatial distance. As Manoussakis notes, however, we never really live by this modern understanding. This understanding is only reached by “detaching ourselves from the experience of the [entangled and interconnected temporal] world,” making this “natural attitude . . . really un-natural” (p. 43). We may have the mental ability to abstract and separate ourselves from one another, but this abstraction is not our

phenomenological reality. As Manoussakis points out, this “classical notion of nature” (p. 46) “scorns human contingency,” (p. 44) especially temporal contingency, because it fails to recognize the shared temporal being of humans and their worlds.

Just one of the many ramifications of this abstractionist mode of thought is the formalist nature of psychological theorizing. Most common conceptions of theorizing understand it to consist of a list of propositional principles that are essentially impervious to change of context and contingency. Indeed, the emphasis on the abstract and universal over the concrete and particular is almost synonymous with the notion of classical theory in psychology. The personality theory tradition in psychology—the work of such luminaries as Sigmund Freud, Carl Rogers, and B.F. Skinner—is a case in point (Rychlak, 1981; Slife, Reber, & Richardson, 2005). Many psychotherapy strategies are derived from this tradition, yet these theories are presented as one atemporal and universal proposition after another. As a result, most practicing clinicians report that these theories are quite thin and even impersonal (Levine, Sandeen, & Murphy, 1992; Shean, 2013; Weisz, 2015), because the temporal context that Manoussakis describes is not provided. Here, especially, the abstractionism of the natural attitude has not served psychology well.

Contextless Freedom. This attitude has also fostered contextless notions of human freedom in psychology. Many theorists of freedom assume that its process is abstracted and ultimately devoid of temporal context, especially the context of the past, because they fear that this sort of temporal context would determine human choices and prevent real freedom. In fact, one of the foremost proponents of this type of freedom was my mentor, Joseph Rychlak (1979). He spoke of human agency as ultimately independent of the past, and thus essentially arbitrary, for fear that conditions of the past would determine this agency and thus rob it of its freedom.

This understanding of “freedom from” or relative independence of context is also part of what Erich Fromm (1941) criticized in American culture, where he viewed Americans as more concerned with freedom *from obligations* rather than freedom *to* life purpose. Another source of these contextless conceptions of freedom is theology, where some understandings of the agency of deity—*creatio ex nihilo*, freedom without temporal condition or ground—have no doubt been an implicit model for human agency.

As Manoussakis describes, however, we never experience the world in this contextless, abstractionist manner, but instead a “world of becoming and change,” (p. 45) including presumably that of the past itself. In other words, the common cultural and psychological conception of the past as unchangeable is an atemporal past, as oxymoronic as this term may seem. The difference between these two understandings of the world, the classical and phenomenological, “is decided above all by the place time occupies,” with time “playing a central role for phenomenology” (p. 46). The changeableness and possibility of time *as meaning*, in this sense, solves the problem of how the past plays a “central role” in grounding our choices without this grounding becoming an efficient cause and therefore the determinant of those choices.

The Prodigal Son. I believe that Manoussakis weaves these conceptual threads together beautifully in his interpretation of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32, New International Version). The son asks for his independence, his ungrounded freedom, so that he can be the “father of himself,” (p. 63) the god of his own life. Yet, as we see unfold in the son’s immediate life, an ungrounded freedom is ultimately meaningless. Without the origin of our past in which we have been and are being created, and without the *telos* or purpose of our future in which we are being perfected, the prodigal son’s life has no temporal context and cannot help but be meaningless.

The natural attitude of a primarily spatial world is also illustrated in the son's going to a "distant land" which, as Manoussakis notes, is really "the land of distance," where interpersonal closeness is ruled out and community is lost (p. 105). The son, then, not only longs for closeness with his Father, his true origin, but also desires purpose again in the completeness and perfection of his teleological future. I wonder if this allegory could also be viewed as a parable of the prodigal theorist in psychology, where the secularism of psychology has led many of us to avoid the transcendent and, in the process, time itself. With the secularism of psychology, the capital "O" Other is either considered inappropriate or at best a vague part of what Taylor calls our "social imaginary" (Taylor, 2007, p. 171). In other words, it is hard for us even to imagine the incorporation of transcendent conceptions like the Ultimate Origin and Ultimate Telos into our theorizing. I wonder if the incorporation of hermeneutic temporality itself is also made more difficult, leaving us with an abstractionist, ungrounded, and less-than-meaningful psychology.

Temporal Epistemology. As a final aspect of psychology's abstracting away of time, consider psychology's quantitative epistemology, its focus particularly on the kind of empiricism that narrows experience to observation, and thus the sense of vision almost exclusively. With the help of St. Augustine, Manoussakis does an interesting thing with epistemology. He stands the traditional empiricist hierarchy of the senses on its head, placing vision at the lowest end and giving priority instead to touch. As he explains, "tactile intimacy" requires the "annihilation of distance on which vision operated" and the natural attitude depended (p. 103). In other words, the ascendancy of touch deemphasizes mere observation and thus conventional knowledge-at-a-distance, and replaces it with a kind of intimacy and thus relational knowing. Such intimate interaction is inherently temporal in his view, because it cannot help but be concrete and contingent over time. One has to actually "be with" the other in a kind of tactile narrative to

really understand who/what they are. He cites the example of racism, which is rarely defeated through simple observation. It typically takes close interaction over time to conquer the abstraction that racism is.

Interestingly, this kind of tactile intimacy is also the focus of other phenomenologists, such as Jean-Luc Marion (2008) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2013). They emphasize how often embodiment is overlooked in just this regard. Marion, for example, contends that love cannot be fully understood as agape; it must include the “erotic,” the tactile and temporal intimacy of the body. Manoussakis himself offers a striking example in this regard. He explains that it is not accidental in Christianity that the actual body of Christ traversed the distance that separated humanity from him, because it means that God is no longer the god who merely observes. He’s the “god who touches and can be touched” (p. 105). In this sense, the condescension of Christ could be viewed as challenging the traditional epistemological hierarchy of vision and space, and advocating instead the ascension of touch and time.

Conclusion

I recognize, as I conclude my brief commentary, that my points may be thin for many readers. My hope, however, is that they are tantalizingly thin, at least in the sense of raising the theorist’s consciousness about the temporal as well as the spatial in strongly relational approaches. In this sense, I believe that Manoussakis’s book is a helpful resource. Just beware: his book is not for the faint of heart, not only because of its theological perspective but also because of its rather dense and yet rewarding style.

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