

Schriftenreihe der
FRIAS School of History

Edited by
Ulrich Herbert and Jörn Leonhard

Volume 7

www.frias.uni-freiburg.de

Breaking up Time

Negotiating the Borders between
Present, Past and Future

Edited by
Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Jacket illustration:
Hawaii, Big Island, Hawaii Volcanoes National Park
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Bibliographic information published by
the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in
the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data
available online: <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.
ISBN 978-3-525-31046-5
ISBN 978-3-647-31046-6 (e-book)

© 2013, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen/
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Typesetting by: Dörlemann Satz, Lemförde
Printed and bound in Germany by Hubert & Co, Göttingen
Redaktion: Eva Jaunzems, Jörg Später
Assistenz: Madeleine Therstappen
Printed on non-aging paper.

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Constantin Fasolt

Breaking up Time – Escaping from Time: Self-Assertion and Knowledge of the Past¹

Perhaps the idea of a new historical period is an idea of a generation whose natural reactions – not merely whose ideas or mores – diverge from the old; it is an idea of a new (human) nature. And different historical periods may exist side by side, over long stretches, and within one human breast.

Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*

Different human beings at different times in different places have different attitudes to time. Some focus on the present, some on the past, some on the future. Some view time as a devourer, others as a healer of all wounds. Some believe that time can be divided into segments, while others treat it as a seamless web. Time can be perceived as moving fast or slow or standing still. Time can be likened to an arrow, a river, a circle, a wheel. For some human beings time is the most elementary reality; for others it is nothing but illusion.²

These differences raise many questions for historians and philosophers of history. Some of those questions concern the notion of a break in time. That is the subject of this paper, which is divided into seven parts. First, I describe

1 I would like to thank Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage for challenging me to extend the case I made in *The Limits of History* (Chicago, 2004). I would also like to thank the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies, the contributors to the conference, the members of the Early Modern Workshop at the University of Chicago, Jean K. Carney, Bob Rosen, David Terman, John Riker, Marcia Dobson and David Nirenberg for helping me to clarify my thoughts and their expression.

2 For rough guidance to a vast and variegated literature, consider Stephen E. Toulmin/June Goodfield, *The Discovery of Time* (New York, 1965); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton/NJ, 2000); Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York, 2002); William H. Sewell, Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005); Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia, 2008); Zachary S. Schiffman, *The Birth of the Past* (Baltimore, 2011); and Arnaldo Momigliano's characteristically incisive *Time in Ancient Historiography, History and Theory* VI, 1966, 1–23.

Moore's paradox. Second, I use Moore's paradox to explicate the grammar – the *essence* – of change over time.³ Third, I examine what it means to make a break in time. Fourth, I address the question whether a whole society can make a break in time. Fifth, I treat Sophocles' *Oedipus* as a poetic example of a break in time made by an individual. Sixth, I treat Europe as a historical example of a break in time made by an entire society. Seventh, I turn to the role historians have played in that break. Finally, in conclusion, I propose an explanation for the tenacity of the conventional division of European history into ancient, medieval and modern periods.

1. Moore's Paradox

The most effective way I know to clarify just what is meant by a break in time is to focus first on Moore's paradox, named after Ludwig Wittgenstein's friend and predecessor as Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge, G. E. Moore.⁴ Moore's paradox appears in sentences like this: 'It is raining, and I do not believe that it is raining.' This sentence consists of a conjunction of two propositions. One states that it is raining. The other states that I do not believe that it is raining. The paradox is that the sentence has no intelligible meaning and yet may very well be true. It may be true that it is raining. It may also be true that I do not believe that it is raining. Logically speaking these truths are unrelated. They do not contradict each other. Each is a matter of contingent fact. And yet their combination has no intelligible meaning. If I say, 'It is raining and I do not believe that it is raining,' I make no sense. I give the impression of a human being who does not understand what he is saying. The best response would be to ask, 'What do you mean?'

Moore's paradox is limited to sentences combining an assertion of a fact with an expression of disbelief in the truth of that fact in the first person present indicative.⁵ It vanishes as soon as you change the person or the tense. If, for example, you change the first person into the third person and say, 'It

3 The relationship between grammar and essence is considered below.

4 Mitchell S. Green/John Williams (eds.), *Moore's Paradox: New Essays on Belief, Rationality, and the First Person* (Oxford, 2007).

5 As Wittgenstein put it, 'One can mistrust one's own senses, but not one's own belief. If there were a verb meaning "to believe falsely", it would not have a meaningful first person present indicative.' Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen = Philosophical Investigations*, G. E. M. Anscombe/Peter M. S. Hacker/Joachim Schulte (trans.) (Chichester, 2009), Part II x.91–92. What used to be called Part II of the *Philosophical Investigations* in older editions is called *Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment* in the much-improved edition of 2009, where the title *Philosophical Investigations* is reserved for Part I. I henceforth cite Part I as PI and Part II as PPF, followed by section number.

is raining and *he* does not believe that it is raining,' you make perfectly good sense. You assert that someone mistakenly believes something to be the case that is not so. That is a commonplace occurrence. Again, if you change the tense from the present to the past, there is no problem. If I say, 'It *was* raining and I *did* not believe that it was raining,' I assert that I once mistakenly believed something to be the case that was not so. That, too, is a perfectly commonplace occurrence. Why then does it create a paradox to say in the first person present indicative that 'It is raining and I do not believe it is raining'?

The answer to that question may seem to be a matter of purely grammatical or logical significance. But it is neither 'purely grammatical' nor 'purely logical'. It rather is grammatical in the full sense that Wittgenstein gave to grammar. There is no space here to explain that sense. What does need to be said, however, is that it is not 'purely linguistic', though it is often said to be. To treat grammar as a 'purely linguistic' matter is, roughly speaking, to deny that grammar has anything to do with the reality of things, or to assert that language stands between us and the reality of things, or that reality is a mere construct of our minds. That is an idea at least as ancient as Protagoras. Today it forms the pivot of what is often called the 'linguistic turn'.⁶ Once the linguistic turn is made, reality seems to move out of sight, the very concept of an 'essence' seems to become untenable, and facts seem to be barely, if at all, discernible from fiction.

But that is not what Wittgenstein maintained. Quite the opposite, on Wittgenstein's understanding it is precisely grammar that gives us access to the reality of things. He certainly acknowledged how strongly we are 'tempted to say that our way of speaking does not describe the facts as they really are. As if, for example, the proposition "he has pains" could be false in some other way than by that man's *not* having pains. As if the form of expression were saying something false, even when the proposition *faute de mieux* asserted something true.'⁷ But that temptation was precisely what he attacked. He thought the talk opposing language to reality is fundamentally confused because it does not heed the difference between the world and things existing in the world. He gave that difference pride of place at the beginning of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: 'The world is the totality of

6 Cf. Roland Barthes, *The Discourse of History*, Stephen Bann (trans.), *Comparative Criticism* III, 1981, 7–20 (first published 1967); John E. Toews, *Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience*, *American Historical Review* XCII, 1987, 879–907; Joyce O. Appleby/Lynn A. Hunt/Margaret C. Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York, 1994); and Gabrielle M. Spiegel (ed.), *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (New York, 2005).

7 PI 402.

facts, not of things.⁸ He kept insisting that, 'when we say, *mean*, that such-and-such is the case, then, with what we mean, we do not stop anywhere short of the fact.'⁹ He declared that 'essence is expressed in grammar.'¹⁰ He held that 'grammar tells what kind of object anything is.'¹¹ And he brusquely rebutted the sceptic who deems that we construct the truth on terms we are at liberty to choose by drawing an elementary distinction between agreement in language and telling the truth: "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?" – What is true or false is what human beings *say*; and it is in their *language* that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life.'¹²

2. Change over Time

In this sense of grammar Moore's paradox is anything but 'purely grammatical'. It rather tells us that the difference between 'I believe' in the first person *present* indicative and 'I believed' in the first person *past* indicative amounts to something more substantial than a mere change in the time to which these sentences refer. For one thing, the change from 'I believe' to 'I believed' changes the meaning of the word 'believe'.¹³ What I believe in the present is something I cannot regard as false. But I can very well regard as false what I believed in the past. For another, the change from 'I believe' to 'I believed' changes my relationship to other people. My present belief puts me in disagreement with anyone who says that I am wrong. I can acknowledge the possibility that my belief is false as a hypothesis, but my belief excludes the possibility of my agreeing that the hypothesis is true. My past belief does nothing of the kind. I can very well agree with other people that my past belief was false. Above all else, the change from 'I believe' to 'I believed' changes

8 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Charles Kay Ogden (trans.) (London, 1922), 1.1.

9 PI 95.

10 PI 371.

11 PI 373.

12 PI 241. The chief authorities from whom I have drawn my understanding of Wittgenstein are Gordon P. Baker/P. M. S. Hacker, *An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1980–96); Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge/MA, 1991); Alice Marguerite Crary/Rupert J. Read (eds.), *The New Wittgenstein* (London, 2000); and the writings of Rush Rhees, Norman Malcolm, Georg Henrik von Wright, G. E. M. Anscombe, Peter Winch, Stanley Cavell, D. Z. Phillips, Ernst Tugendhat and Joachim Schulte.

13 'Don't regard it as a matter of course, but as a most remarkable thing, that the verbs "believe", "wish", "want" display all the grammatical forms possessed by "cut", "chew", "run".' PPF x.93.

my relation to myself. It changes me from someone who cannot differentiate between the truth and his belief into someone who can. My relation to the person that I *am* is different from my relation to the person that I *was*. I still am one and the same human being. But I have changed, and I acknowledge that I have changed by speaking in different tenses.

This change in my relation to myself needs closer scrutiny. It begins with something I maintain is true, for example that 'it is raining.' In maintaining this as true, I commit myself to an agreement with the statement that I make: I agree that it is true. But I also commit myself to an agreement with myself: I agree that it is I who makes the statement. That is what makes it nonsense for me to express my disbelief in what I say. My agreement with myself, so to speak, eliminates the only space where I could state my disbelief: the space between myself and the person making the statement not to be believed. My agreement with myself establishes that I am one and the same human being as the person who is speaking. It makes me the speaker of my words and thus secures my integrity as a human being.

Changing my mind about the truth therefore demands something besides the recognition that what I say is false. It also demands that I dissolve my agreement with myself. That may seem a simple thing to do. But there are some of us who find it difficult to dissolve our agreements with ourselves even when it concerns a matter as seemingly inconsequential as the rain. And most of us find it difficult when the truth in question is so closely intertwined with other truths that it cannot be doubted without doubting those other truths as well, especially if those truths have been confirmed by long-standing habit or profound conviction. Doubting such truths can make us feel as though we were being broken into pieces and hurled into a great abyss from which there is no hope of return. It poses a danger to our integrity as human beings.

The danger is sometimes called 'an inner tension'. But that is a misnomer. Tension is a physical condition, for example, of a bow when it is flexed. It does not involve commitments to the truth or to oneself. 'Cognitive dissonance' may seem more appropriate because that does involve the truth. But 'cognitive dissonance' is also misleading: The dissonance does not merely concern cognition. It concerns the whole human being whose cognition is in doubt. It threatens to divide me into two persons one of whom maintains as true what the other person doubts. Such a division is emphatically not a matter of 'purely logical' inconsistency. We are well known for the frequency and ease – and sometimes even the pleasure – with which we contradict ourselves without the slightest danger to our humanity.¹⁴ Nor should it be confused with any purely mental or psychological condition, at least not in the

14 'It is raining and it is not raining' is a contradiction. It can have all sorts of meaning: silly, funny, poetic, unintended and so on. But it poses no threats to anyone.

familiar sense of 'psychological'. The danger rather is grammatical in nature. It tests the *essence* of what it means to be a human being.

This test determines if we can change our minds about the truth without doing damage to our humanity. Because we cannot tell the truth without committing ourselves to an agreement with ourselves, we cannot change our minds about the truth without dissolving that agreement. Dissolving that agreement means entering into a disagreement with ourselves. If I am caught in disagreement with myself, I have to reckon with the possibility that two different beings are speaking through my mouth.¹⁵ As long as I must reckon with that possibility, I cannot give real meaning to my words. When we cannot give real meaning to our words, we cannot tell what we are saying. Because we cannot tell what we are saying, we can form no intentions. Because we can form no intentions, we cannot act. We enter the land where Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for Godot. Perhaps the best that we can do is to acknowledge the absurdity of our condition. We face the risk of speechlessness, impotence and even madness, both in the sense of rage and of insanity. We are threatened with a specifically human danger: not the loss of our lives, but the undoing of our humanity.

Undoing our humanity here means losing the ability to heed the grammar joining truth to commitment. That loss takes many different forms. It can be fast or slow, brief or long lasting, muted or violent, minimal or colossal. It does not have to take the form of a dramatic crisis. It can manifest itself as idle chatter and humdrum fecklessness ... and be all the more insidious for that. But when we make a firm commitment to the person we take ourselves to be and then are forced to change our mind about the truth of statements crucial to that commitment, the crisis can be profound. Take statements like the following: 'You are not your father's child.' 'Your spouse is leaving you.' 'Your fortune lies in ruins.' 'Your good name has been destroyed.' 'Your enemies have won.' 'Your country exists no more.' 'You have brought death upon yourself.' 'There is no God.' The effort needed to embrace statements like these can shatter us and turn us into ghosts or beasts. That is the danger posed by change over time.

3. Making a Break in Time

In principle the danger can be averted in what would seem to be two ways. One is to submit to the experience of time. I can say, 'It was not raining, but I believed it was.' In so doing I dissolve the two agreements to which I was

15 'One would have to imagine a kind of behaviour suggesting that two beings were speaking through my mouth.' PPF x.105.

committed when I said, 'It is raining': my agreement that the statement is true and my agreement that I am the person making it. In dissolving those two agreements I make a sacrifice. I sacrifice not merely my commitment to the truth I used to hold. I also sacrifice myself.¹⁶ My sacrifice divides myself into a past person committed to the truth I used to hold and a present person holding the opposite. I make the sacrifice by means of the grammatical distinction between the present and the past. In yielding to that distinction, I gain the freedom to let the old person go and take on a new person committed to two new agreements: one with the statement that what I once maintained as true was false; the other with myself, that I am the person making the statement. I have changed and can go on.

In saying, 'It was not raining, but I believed it was,' I thus do more than merely indicate that I have changed my mind, and more than merely tell the truth about the past. I also answer *to* the past and claim the past as *mine*. I meet a responsibility that I have to myself, both as the human being that I am and that I used to be. I acknowledge that the person who said, 'It is raining,' and the person who now says, 'It was not raining, but I believed it was' – the person sacrificed and the person born from the sacrifice – belong to one and the same human being. In that way I make the experience of time without undoing my humanity.

The other way of dealing with the danger that change over time poses to my humanity is not to sacrifice myself, but to assert myself instead.¹⁷ I can defy the threat to my humanity. I do so by making a break in time. A break in time is made by replacing the grammatical distinction between the present and the past with an imaginary line. In drawing such a line I turn the past from a matter of fact given to me by grammar into an object of my imagination.¹⁸ I imagine that the past leads an existence of its own, quite independently of what I know, or say, or do. When I imagine it like that, it seems to have the unique characteristic that it is gone. It seems to make up a timeless, immutable reality that lies beyond the limits of all possible experience. That is extremely reassuring. I can of course imagine that it has had effects that last into the present. But those effects can enter my experience only because they are present to me now. They constitute remainders from the past. I call them evidence of things that happened. I can subject such

16 It would be of considerable interest to trace the connections between this sacrifice and sacrifice as a religious ritual. That is not possible here, but cf. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Patrick Gregory (trans.) (Baltimore, 1977), and John Bossy, *The Mass as a Social Institution, 1200–1700, Past and Present* C, 1983, 29–61.

17 This paragraph and the following state, in a nutshell, the case I made at length in *Limits of History*.

18 Put differently, I engage in the kind of 'private exhibition' that Wittgenstein showed to be an illusion by analysing what it means to feel pain; see PI 311.

evidence to critical analysis and claim to possess objective knowledge of the past with the authority of a historian. But in so doing I do not claim the past as mine. I rather strengthen my attachment to the object of my imagination.

At the same time I claim a new kind of freedom. For I do not merely turn the past into an object of the imagination. I turn my self into an object of the imagination, too. Just as the past appears to be an object that is completely gone, my self appears to be a subject that is completely present. That subject is absolutely one and indivisible. It does not manifest itself in different persons or speak a human language. It rather has ideas and thinks. It is a thinking thing, a *res cogitans*. It has no commerce with the past and no disagreements with itself. It is completely free. Whatever remainders from the past have happened to survive into the present can have no claim on that subject now unless I approve the claim. At one stroke I have disowned the past and asserted my autonomy. I seem to have escaped from the experience of time by making myself the master of my experience.

But I can go still further. I can imagine that the past does not exist at all, not even as an object that is gone. I can imagine that I merely imagine the existence of the past. I can imagine that the remainders supposedly surviving from the past are nothing but raw material for representations of a past that never was. I can subject such representations to critical analysis and claim to possess objective knowledge of literary fictions with the authority of a critic. In so doing I also claim yet another new kind of freedom. I can imagine that I merely imagine my self to be a thinking thing, a *res cogitans*. I can imagine that there exists no subject, but only fragments of subjectivity, all of which conflict with one another and none of which can fall into a disagreement with itself. Thus both my past and my self turn out to be entirely fictitious. I seem to have escaped from the experience of time because there seems to be no time and no one to make the experience.

But none of this is true. A thing, an object or a human being can cease to exist.¹⁹ Caesar is dead. His bodily remains must still exist somewhere somehow in some advanced condition of dispersion and decay. But Caesar himself exists no more. That is precisely what it means to say that Caesar died two thousand years ago. But Caesar is different from the past. The past is not a thing. It is a matter of fact. It cannot cease to exist. It is something we *have*, just as we have a body, feelings and a mind: right now.

There is of course a lot we do not know about the past. But so is there about our body, our feelings and our mind. That does nothing to diminish their presence or their reality. We have our body, our feelings, our mind and

19 But even an object cannot simply vanish. See Peter Winch, *Ceasing to Exist*, in: idem, *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford, 1987), 81–106.

our past regardless of anything we do or do not know. They are inalienably ours. Like our body, our feelings and our mind, the past is something of which we cannot possibly be rid, though we do sometimes wish we could. We do of course have the ability to put an end to our life. But if we do, we do not actually get rid of our body, feelings, mind or past. We just make sure that there is no one left who could be rid of anything at all.

If there is any part of time of which it might make sense to say that it is gone, it is the present, not the past. The present is not something that we have. The present slips away from us in every present moment. The past is what we call the present when it is gone. Saying 'the past is gone,' is like saying, 'the present that is gone is gone.' It is to say the same thing twice about the present and nothing at all about the past. It is a piece of nonsense, not in the sense of babbling, but in the sense that Wittgenstein made the target of philosophy.²⁰ If it is frequently repeated in the erroneous belief that the past *must* be gone because it is obviously not present, that nonsense can grow to the dimensions of temporal metaphysics with seemingly profound significance. But it is nonsense all the same. It amounts to an illusion. It conveys no information. It merely thwarts our experience of time. And that, of course, is just what makes it so alluring.

A break in time may therefore seem to offer us a way out of our disagreements with ourselves that does not require us to sacrifice ourselves to the experience of time. But in fact a break in time does nothing of the kind. So far from solving our disagreements, it makes them more difficult to solve. We make a break in time from a desire to assert ourselves. But we unwittingly achieve the opposite effect. Without knowing what we are doing, we commit an act of violence against our humanity that makes us victims of ourselves. The violence is not physical or psychological or logical – though it has physical, psychological and logical effects for others and for ourselves. It is grammatical. It damages our essence. It is violence done to the human form of life. It splits our past in two: on the one hand, an imaginary object from which we believe ourselves to be entirely detached (because we imagine that it is really gone or totally fictitious); on the other hand, the past we actually have as a matter of known or unknown fact, but whose existence is concealed from us by its imaginary double. A break in time splits our selves in two as well: on the one hand, an imaginary self that seems to have escaped from the experience of time (because we imagine that it has made itself master of the experience or that it does not exist at all); on the other hand, a human self

²⁰ 'The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language. These bumps make us see the value of the discovery,' PI 119. 'What I want to teach is: to pass from unobvious nonsense to obvious nonsense.' PI 464.

that manifests itself in different persons but is concealed from us by its imaginary double, too.

In one sense a break in time is therefore real and in another it is not. It is not real in that it consists of an imaginary line. It does not really break up time – whatever that might be supposed to mean. It merely gives us the illusion that we can make the experience of time without having to sacrifice.

But in another sense a break in time is very real indeed. It leads us down a path that we would otherwise not take and gives us an experience that we would otherwise not make. It changes the course of history. At first it gives us the illusion that we have left the past behind and won our autonomy. But then it divides us into factions. Those factions are the conscious manifestation of the damage we have unconsciously done to our humanity by devoting ourselves to its imaginary doubles. Those doubles make up the substance of the argument. One faction claims that the object we have imagined for ourselves objectively exists. The other claims that it exists only in our imagination. Both run the risk of absurdity, tautology and violence. Neither can tell the difference between reality and imagination, much less imagination and imagining imagination. Neither can recognise the ties that bind them to the past or the illusion that unites them with each other. Because we engage in battle over objects of the imagination, we cannot stop the battle. Because we cannot stop the battle, our illusion turns out to be a curse. The curse compels us to re-enact the past we thought we left behind with growing violence, until we meet our doom. Then the illusion is destroyed. A break in time thus marks the beginning of a historical development that ends by forcing us to make, against what seems to be our will, the very sacrifice we had intended to avoid. It puts us on a different, longer, more exciting, more violent and more exhausting road to the experience of time.

4. The Individual and Society

Society may seem to be exempt from these considerations. Society might be thought to consist of individual human beings. Without individuals there would then be no society. If Europe, for example, may be considered a society, and Europe made a break in time, that break would have to be explained in terms of many breaks made by the members of European society. And then one would have to ask: *which* members of European society? The rich? The powerful? The intellectuals? Common men? Common women? The question, 'Did Europe make a break in time?' would seem to be misguided.

If that is how it seems, it is because the question is confused. Society consists of our agreement in a shared form of life. Such an agreement must be

distinguished from the human beings whose agreement it is. Society is neither a large group of human beings nor a collective subject. It can neither act nor think. Only human beings can act and think, exercise reason, distinguish true from false, disagree, criticise the structure and the foundations of society, make and break contracts and agreements, and, not the least, prevent us from exercising our rational faculties or subject us to force. But there is no such thing as purely individual human beings. To act or to think is to engage in social activity. Anything that we can do, regardless of how isolated we may be or feel, regardless of how firmly we may assert our independence or our originality, is social by definition – or else it is not human. Like the change from 'I believe' to 'I believed', whatever change we make changes our relationship both to ourselves and to other human beings. It signifies that the *essence* of our humanity consists of individuality and membership in society at one and the same time.

Society as such, therefore, can make no break in time. But not every break in time that one, or some, or many of us make – and perhaps not even every change that all of us combined can make – amounts to changing our agreement in a shared form of life. A break in the time of individuals or groups of individuals can therefore be distinguished from a break in the time of society.

A break in the time of society is made whenever we change our agreement in a shared form of life by drawing an imaginary line between the present and the past in order to avoid confronting disagreements we have with ourselves *about* our agreement in a shared form of life. In so doing we transform the past we have as members of society into an object of society's imagination, and we found our agreement in society on the illusion that our society has managed to escape from the experience of time. We commit an act of violence both against our past as members of society and against our agreement in society. Like acts of violence against the past and the self of individuals, the violence splits the humanity of society in two and gives it imaginary doubles. Those doubles are called 'history' and 'sovereignty'. History and sovereignty conceal the disagreements we have *with* ourselves as members of society *about* ourselves as members of society. In return for our loyalty they give us the illusion that the history we have is gone, and that an agreement we must accept as given can be replaced with an agreement we can make. Under the spell of that illusion we place our society on the same longer, more exciting, more violent and more exhausting road to the experience of time I have described above.

5. Oedipus for Example

Oedipus tells the story of a man who pays the price for having made a break in time.²¹ When he was young, a drunkard told him that he was not the son of Polybus, the king of Corinth (852–860). He knew the drunkard's charge was 'hardly worth the anxiety I gave it' (857). But Oedipus did not know then or later how to tolerate anxiety. He asked his parents for the truth. They said he was their son (862–867). Not satisfied with their response, he asked Apollo for confirmation. Apollo did not answer, but told him instead that he would kill his father and marry his mother (867–875). That posed a threat to his humanity too great for Oedipus to bear. So he defied the threat. 'I heard all that and ran. I abandoned Corinth' (876). He made a break in time.

The action of the play takes place after a lapse of many years. It opens when 'Thebes is dying' from blight, sick cattle, stillbirths and the plague (31–38). The people beg Oedipus to rescue them (39–69). Oedipus is at the pinnacle of power and self-confidence. He has killed his father Laius not knowing whom he killed, vanquished the Sphinx, become the king of Thebes and married his mother Jocasta not knowing whom he married. He says, 'Here I am myself – you all know me, the world knows my fame: I am Oedipus' (7–9). He seems to have mastered time.

Then he learns from the oracle at Delphi that Thebes will not be saved unless the murderer of Laius is found and punished (97–159). He vows, 'I'll bring it all to light myself' (150). He calls the prophet Tiresias (326–526). Tiresias, forced to reveal the truth over his strenuous objections, tells Oedipus, 'You are the curse, the corruption of the land' (401).

Now Oedipus faces a disagreement with himself similar to the one he faced when he was told that he was not his father's son. But this time he cannot run. He is the king. So he refuses to believe Tiresias and turns to violence instead. He rages against the prophet (402–492). He charges Jocasta's brother Creon with conspiracy (594–651). He wants Creon dead (698). He is even prepared to cross the line to tyranny and to divide his people (703–735). His marriage to Jocasta is the sole bond that can withstand the rage and paranoia provoked by his refusal to face the truth Tiresias pronounced (751–771).

Jocasta brings Oedipus to his senses (767–778). She tries to make light of Tiresias (778–800). She is convinced that the oracle foretelling that Laius would be killed by his son has proven false (936–949). But her desire to give courage to Oedipus leads her to mention details that have the opposite effect: they shake Oedipus' self-confidence. 'Ai – now I can see it all, clear as

21 I rely on Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, in: *The Three Theban Plays*, Robert Fagles (trans.) (Harmondsworth, 1984), 155–251, for all quotations and line references.

day' (830). He has to reckon with the possibility that he might be the murderer of Laius after all (899–923) – but he does not believe it yet.

At this point chance intervenes. A messenger brings news from Corinth that Polybus has died of natural causes (1012–1053). Jocasta and Oedipus are momentarily triumphant (1036–1040, 1053–1064). But then things turn. The messenger reveals that Oedipus is not the son of Polybus. The shepherd who had been ordered to expose Oedipus to die had taken pity on him instead and given him to the messenger, and the messenger had turned him over to Polybus (1096–1144). Jocasta realises that Oedipus is Laius' murderer and her son. But Oedipus does not. He wants to ask the shepherd what he knows (926–951, 1145–1175). Jocasta tries to stop him (1155–1171). But Oedipus will not be stopped (1160–1173). He still believes he has defeated fate (1183–1194).

With threats of torture he forces the shepherd to tell him everything (1228–1305). There is no longer any room for doubt: 'O god – all come true, all burst to light! O light – now let me look my last on you! I stand revealed at last – cursed in my birth, cursed in marriage, cursed in the lives I cut down with these hands!' (1305–1310). The chorus stands witness: 'For all your power Time, all-seeing Time has dragged you to the light' (1340–1341). Jocasta hangs herself (1364–1397). Oedipus blinds himself (1383–1414). Now he must make the sacrifice he has so long delayed: 'Oh, Ohh – the agony! I am in agony – where am I going? where on earth? where does all this agony hurl me? where's my voice? – winging, swept away on a dark tide – My destiny, my dark power, what a leap you made' (1442–1447). But he is not destroyed. Now that he has owned his past he can go on. 'I have been saved for something great and terrible, something strange. Well, let my destiny come and take me on its way!' (1596–1598).

This is not only the story of an individual, but also of Thebes.²² The story is the reason for the city's plague. It is what threatens Thebes with civil war and shakes the foundations of society. Thebes prays to the gods (168–244, 216–244). But its faith is sapped by doubt (550–560). Thebes vows never to abandon Oedipus (572). But it is horrified when Oedipus rounds on Creon (739–741). Thebes affirms the rule of the gods (954–963). But it also fears that 'they are dying, the old oracles sent to Laius, now our masters strike them off the rolls. Nowhere Apollo's golden glory now – the gods, the gods go down' (994–997). It is Creon who saves Thebes. He restores decency and order by separating Oedipus from his daughters/sisters and by removing him from power (1662–1677). Only then can the people regain their balance and make their peace with the experience of time, as they do in the famous

22 Cf. Bernard Knox, Introduction, in: Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, 131–153, on the degree to which *Oedipus* reflects conditions in contemporary Athens.

concluding lines: 'Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day, count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last' (1683–1684).

Oedipus reveals the grammar of change over time with striking clarity. The elements of that grammar include oracles announcing the time to be experienced (to Laius, Oedipus and Thebes); actions taken by individuals to escape from that experience (Laius' decision to have his son killed; Oedipus' decision to leave Corinth); false beliefs about the past resulting from such actions (Jocasta's belief that Laius' son is dead; Oedipus' belief that he is the son of Polybus); a crucial piece of ignorance (the identity of Laius' murderer); disagreements with oneself provoked by the experience of time (the anxieties of Oedipus, Jocasta and the people of Thebes); disagreements with others provoked by the refusal to enter into disagreement with oneself (the violence threatened by Oedipus; the scorn cast on prophecy by Oedipus and Jocasta); the 'dark power' of time (to haunt the present with the past); and the sacrifice demanded by that power (the substance of the entire play, from the plague on Thebes to the suicide of Jocasta, the disgrace of Oedipus' children, and the blinding and exile of Oedipus himself).

6. Europe for Example

To the extent that medieval Europe ever formed a single society, it was united by the certainty with which its members were in agreement on the truth of certain basic propositions. In the interest of simplicity, I will reduce those propositions to just one, namely, 'a good human being ought to be a faithful member of the Christian church', otherwise known as Christendom, *Christianitas*, *respublica Christiana* or *populus Christianus*. The members of medieval European society never agreed exactly what it meant to be a faithful member of the Christian church. But they were certain that it was something a good human being ought to be.

Their certainty was reinforced by three convictions that deserve to be spelled out. First, they were convinced they knew the means with which to find the meaning of 'a faithful member of the Christian church'. That means consisted of the word of God written in sacred letters. Second, they were convinced that theologians had the skills to ascertain the meaning of those letters with the precision and clarity of science. The most important skills were the ability to read the sacred letters and to subject them to logical analysis. Third, they were certain that the Christian church deserved to be defended against its enemies. Responsibility for that defence lay with the clergy under the leadership of the papacy with the assistance of the laity.

The understanding that medieval Europeans had of themselves therefore depended on the confidence with which they could distinguish Christians

from non-Christians, the clergy from the laity, and scientific knowledge of the word of God from error, heresy and ignorance. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries their confidence was great. That changed during the later Middle Ages. Theologians disagreed over the merits of Thomas Aquinas' *via antiqua* and William of Ockham's *via moderna*. The clergy were divided between secular clerics, monks and friars. And the foundations of the Christian church were shaken by the Great Schism. Meanwhile the laity began to rival the clergy in its understanding of the word of God and its determination to imitate the life of Christ. Late medieval movements of reform, Humanism, Renaissance and Reformation challenged convention and gave new meanings to Christianity. Those changes made disputes about the meaning of Christianity impossible to settle with the required certainty. And uncertainty about the meaning of Christianity led Europe into the kind of disagreement I have described above: a disagreement with itself about its agreement in a shared form of life. Attempts to solve that disagreement slipped out of reach when matters of fact became so thoroughly confused with forms of expression that they could not be told apart from matters of belief. Confronted with a threat that brought on fears of the apocalypse, and failing to recognise a past on which it could agree, Europe defied the threat instead.

To the extent that modern Europe ever formed a single society, its unity depended on the conviction with which its members were in agreement on the truth of certain basic propositions that stood in an emphatic contrast to their medieval equivalents. I will reduce those propositions also to one, namely, 'a good human being ought to be a rational member of civilised society', otherwise known as the Occident, the West or Europe. The members of modern European society agreed no more on what it meant exactly to be a rational member of civilised society than medieval Europeans had agreed on what it meant to be a faithful member of the Christian church. But they were equally convinced that it was something a good human being ought to be, and they maintained their conviction in similar ways.

First, they were convinced they knew the means with which to find the meaning of 'a rational member of civilised society'. The means consisted not of letters, but of facts. Knowledge of facts was what was needed in order to distinguish reason from mere belief and nature from civilisation. Second, they were certain that it took special skills to know the facts. The most important skills were the ability to gather accurate observations and to subject them to mathematical analysis. In the view of modern Europeans, people who possessed these skills could ascertain the meaning of facts with the same scientific clarity with which medieval theologians had formerly been thought to ascertain the meaning of sacred letters. Third, they were certain that civilised society deserved to be defended against its enemies. Responsi-

bility for that defence was given to sovereign states with the assistance of their citizens.

The understanding that modern Europeans had of themselves therefore depended on the confidence with which they were able to distinguish fact from fiction, reason from belief – especially belief in words that claimed to be words of God – and nature from civilisation. Human beings who could make these distinctions were to be counted rational members of civilised society. Human beings who could not were to be counted ignorant, insane or criminal, and needed to be educated, cured or kept under lock and key. Medieval Europe stood convicted of barbarism, ignorance and superstition. Antiquity was welcomed as an ally on the far side of the Middle Ages. And the rest of the world was going to be instructed in European science and civilisation. The past had been transformed into an object of the imagination. The present had been subjected to sovereignty. In order to escape from the apocalypse, Europe had made a break in time.²³

It took the entire span of early modern history, from modest and inconspicuous beginnings in the fourteenth century all the way to the end of the eighteenth century, for that break to be completed. It was not made in any single moment. It was made over and over by many different people in many different ways at many different times in many different places in one of the greatest bursts of freedom in European history. It was not until the French Revolution abolished the feudal regime, changed the calendar and established the cult of reason that Europe managed to give the imaginary line between the present and the past the clearest definition that it was ever going to receive.

For the same reason, the French Revolution marked a decisive end to the long rising tide of a new temporal regime and the beginning of its ebb. Precisely because it made Europe's break with its medieval past incontrovertible, it gave Europe a modern past that was as incontrovertibly of its own making. Thereafter, the break Europe had made no longer hid its disagreements with itself from sight. The past came back to haunt the present with the same violence to which Europe had tried to put a stop by making a break in time. The effort to perfect civilisation turned the illusion that Europe had won autonomy from the experience of time into a curse.

Europe spent the better part of the nineteenth century defending itself against that curse. It placed a temporary bet on Hegel's attempt to achieve a harmony of mind and matter with a philosophy of history. It hedged that bet

23 In my opinion this was the second break in time that Europe made. The first was made around 1000 C. E. in 'the first European revolution'. See R. I. Moore, *The First European Revolution, c. 970–1215* (Oxford, 2000). That is a crucial point because it helps to explain the virulence of European history. But I cannot pursue it here.

by giving scientists a chance to prove that Europe could be saved from having to face its past by restricting historical and scientific work to the accumulation of positive facts, all the way to the extreme of banishing the very use of the first person present indicative from scientific work in the logical, but mad, belief that silencing one of the persons in which a human being disagrees with itself might solve the disagreement. It tried to square the circle with social sciences like economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology and linguistics which were explicitly designed to gain a grasp on the external world and the internal mind at once – as if science could transcend the distinction between fact and belief without losing its meaning. It tried to keep playing the concert of Europe. It mastered technologies for dominating nature. And it went all the way in trying to dominate the world while claiming to civilise barbarians.

In hindsight it may seem self-evident that such devices could delay but not prevent the unravelling of the terms on which Europe had based its self-confidence. Once Hume had failed to find a self inside his mind and Kant had demonstrated that the mind could not conceivably gain knowledge of reality as it existed in itself, facts could no longer be distinguished from beliefs with the required certainty. The boundaries Europe had drawn to make up for its rejection of the *respublica Christiana* lost their solidity. First Marx showed the reality of conflict beneath the surface of liberal legality. Then Nietzsche recognised the will to power behind the pursuit of truth. Then Freud discovered an unconscious and barbaric id below the conscious surface of reason and civilisation. And then the game was up. Europe had lost the plot. The disagreements it had considered dead and gone returned with a vengeance that threatened humanity with annihilation.

The Republic of Virtue, the Terror and the reign of Napoleon are object lessons still admirable for the clarity with which they exemplify that vengeance. It spread from its point of origin until it had demolished every line Europe had drawn in order to define itself. It took the form of madness, terror and addiction. It blinded John Stuart Mill to the absurdity of justifying despotism with barbarians while claiming to endow the principle of individual liberty with absolute authority. It cast nations, empires and races into war with each other – and Europe into war with itself. It turned civilisation into the enemy of nature and nature into the enemy of civilisation. Its victims were not only Europe's subjects in the colonies, but also Europe's own citizens on the continent and in its settlements abroad, fighting each other and the world with unplanned ferocity and giving vent to nameless rage in massacres that did not reach their peak until the twentieth century. The vengeance was not exhausted until the distinctions between past and present, fact and fiction, nature and culture, barbarism and civilisation, humanity and inhumanity had been reduced to the absurdity that Kafka, Joyce and

Beckett tried to put into words. In the concluding words of Beckett's *What Where*:

V: Good.

I am alone.

In the present as were I still.

It is winter.

Without journey.

Time passes.

That is all.

Make sense who may.

I switch off.

[*Light off P.*

Pause.

Light off V.]²⁴

Today the past is staring us straight in the face and we do not know what to say. The Holocaust has made a mockery of our attempt to treat the past as though it were an object of the imagination, and yet we do not know how else it should be treated. If not so long ago it may have seemed as though the forces of irrational belief had once and for all been brought to heel by reason and civilisation, now reason and civilisation seem to be losing their authority to a resurgence of religious violence. We are left speechless by the apocalypse we have brought on ourselves in order to avoid the apocalypse that had been prophesied. Our speechlessness is often masked by information, garrulity and passion. But it is the condition of our time.²⁵

7. The Role of Historians

The role historians played in the history I have just sketched was never merely that of students of the past. From the beginning they were protagonists and principals in the campaign for the autonomy of Europe. They ridiculed as legend, myth and superstition what had formerly been counted as the foundations of society. They cut whatever ties of memory, understanding and tradition united medieval and modern Europeans in one form life. Like scientists, they were convinced that knowledge had to be based on facts. Like scientists, they distinguished facts of the internal mind from facts of the external world. By severing the history of the mind (philosophical history, intellectual history, history of ideas) from the history of the external world (political history, economic history, social history) they drove a metaphysical illusion into their understanding of the past itself. They cast a spell on

24 Samuel Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays* (New York, 1984), 316.

25 Cf. Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton/NJ, 2005).

their readers and themselves by fascinating them with spectacles to be admired or reviled, whatever the case might be, but always reinforcing the imaginary line dividing the spectator from the spectacle. They fed the illusion that the past was gone and Europe had reached the pinnacle of reason and civilisation.

Like the history of Europe, the history of Europe's historians can therefore be divided into two phases: one leading up to the French Revolution, the other thereafter. Before the French Revolution historians were united in a *respublica litterarum* defined by its distinction from nations, politics and the *respublica Christiana*. They studied the remainders of antiquity – Greek and Roman, Christian and Jewish, European and 'oriental' – with a devotion that brought them as close to breathing life into an object of the imagination as anyone ever came. They were certain that they were serving the cause of humanity and judged the past as they saw fit. Their judgement found magnificent expression in histories like those written by Hume, Voltaire and Gibbon.

After the French Revolution, historians began to struggle with growing doubts about the truth of their beliefs. In an attempt to make up for the criticism they had formerly aimed at the past, they turned their attention from classical antiquity to the Middle Ages, from judgment to understanding, from scorn to sympathy, and from enlightenment to historicism. They unleashed their criticism, not on the past itself, but on the evidence. They published primary sources in editions conforming to standards of unprecedented scholarly precision. They created monuments to the distinction between the history that 'really happened' and the history that was 'merely told' in works like those written by Ranke, Carlyle and Michelet. They equipped each of the European nations with an imaginary past on which to stake an imaginary identity. They tried to turn the study of history into a veritable science. They multiplied the subjects under historical investigation. They did their best to persevere in their devotion to the illusion that the past is gone.

But in the very act of doing the best they could, they made the best more difficult to do. They turned themselves into professionals and built an academic system dividing them from their audience. They formed national historical organisations and published the results of their research in journals that spelled the death of the *respublica litterarum*. They wrestled with the difference between the cause of their profession and the cause of humanity. They were alarmed to find that facts appeared to be contaminated with an unnerving dose of theory. They tried to sterilise their tools and immunise themselves by separating facts from values. But that seemed only to deprive the facts of meaning and turn the values into a matter of arbitrary choice. They entered into a crisis.

8. Conclusion

The character of that crisis is strikingly evident in debates about the conventional division of history into an ancient, a medieval and a modern period. Historians have long since recognised that this periodisation amounts to a profound misrepresentation of the past. But no one has managed to establish a genuine alternative.²⁶ True, Renaissance and Reformation no longer make for an obvious beginning of modern history. Many regard the French Revolution as a more fitting point for that beginning. Some say that modern history began in the eleventh century with 'the first European revolution'. The growth of early medieval history, early modern history and contemporary history has posed an explicit challenge to the conventional periodisation. Historians, in other words, have managed to move the imaginary line between the Middle Ages and modernity from its original location to other points in time, or widened it into a whole new period with boundaries of its own. But the old line in the new locations and the new boundaries of the new periods still lead to the same kind of misrepresentation as the misrepresentation they were intended to dethrone. The *grammatical* distinction between classicists, medievalists and modernists remains constitutive of the profession.

From the perspective adopted in this paper the reason seems obvious: The tripartite periodisation of history is more than a conventional way of structuring the past. It is an enduring symbol of the victory historians won for metaphysics when they convinced the world that Europe had really managed to make a break in time. It does double duty as part of the imaginary object historians attempt to grasp and as a form of expression they use to speak *about* that object. It leads them to divide into two equally misguided parties. One party claims that periods are matters of fact (as if the past were an object really existing in and of itself); the other counters that periods are products of the imagination (as if, in Wittgenstein's formulation, history could be false in some other way than by its *not* having happened as historians say it did).²⁷ But neither party can detach itself from the imaginary object historians invented when they first made a break in time. The periodisation of European history into three periods springs from that break. It constitutes the simplest, toughest and seemingly most innocuous precipitate of the illusion that the past is gone.

26 Cf. Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia, 2008).

27 Cf. PI 402, where Wittgenstein gives a compelling explanation of the conflict between these parties: 'For *this* is what disputes between idealists, solipsists and realists look like. The one party attacks the normal form of expression as if they were attacking an assertion; the others defend it, as if they were stating facts recognized by every reasonable human being.'

So long as historians keep doing more research in the belief that more research *must* be the proper means with which to disarm misrepresentations of the past that are as obviously contradicted by the evidence as the division of that past into three periods, such misrepresentations will keep rising from the grave in which historians have tried to bury them. They will keep rising from that grave because historians themselves condemn them to the life of the living dead. They confront historians with their own version of Moore's paradox, as if to say, 'the past is real and I do not believe it is'. They pose a riddle historians cannot solve unless they sacrifice their profession and say, 'we studied the evidence because we thought the past is gone – but we were wrong'.