

Christophe Bouton: Temps et liberté

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Christophe Bouton's *Temps et liberté* [Time and Freedom] proposes to “locate, in the history of philosophy, the birth and evolution of the problem of the relationship between freedom and time” (25). This problem, which is sufficiently general as to warrant an *historical* method, (the author deals successively with Leibniz, Kant, Schopenhauer, Schelling, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Lavelle, Sartre, Heidegger and Levinas) characterizes what he calls the “practical” approach to time. The latter aims to throw “new light” onto the problem of time, beyond its *quantification* (Aristotle), its *subjectivisation* (St. Augustine, Kant, Bergson, Husserl), its *naturalization* (Plato, Aristotle), its *ontologisation* (Heidegger) and, in particular, beyond the *aporetic* approach. The aporetic approach, elaborated by Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative*, attempted to identify a “third time” in order to escape from the dilemma expressed in the opposition between two mutually exclusive conceptions: the cosmological and the psychological (which come back to a world-time versus a psychic time). The third-time is constituted by *narrative*, which according to Bouton, presupposes a *temporality proper to action*. Far from resolving the aporia, Ricoeur's development would instead open a *new problem* (the resolving of which is the aim of Bouton's book), namely the articulation of freedom and time, which is thus characteristic of the *practical* approach. We can now turn to the theses, advanced by the author, which make this work an important contribution to the history of the modern and contemporary philosophy of time.

The weakness of an historical approach resides in the fact that, often, basic concepts are invoked in the study of an author, without a foregoing *definition*. The mere fact that these concepts are present in certain determining texts is supposed to suffice in order to justify opposing them in the texts in question. Bouton does not escape this difficulty any more than others. Instead of clearly defining ‘freedom,’ ‘time,’ ‘possibility,’ etc., he constructs a debate between the philosophers who

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propose powerful theories centered on these notions. What does Bouton mean, for example, by the limitation to the “practical” sphere? ‘Practical’ is, for him, a synonym for “that which relates to freedom” (296). If the study proposes not a *theoretical* but precisely a *practical* approach to time then, apparently, this consists in attempting to understand the relationship between freedom and time. This “resolutely practical” question emerges as soon as we cease to limit the “interrogation of time to the conditions of possibility of the quantitative measuring of time in the various sciences of nature” (218)—which, importantly, permits us to sideline all arguments leading to ‘predeterminism’ (specifically the case, according to Bouton, of Leibniz and Schopenhauer [125]). But since the concept of freedom is not univocally defined, this idea of a ‘practical’ approach remains quite vague.

If, however, we concede this historical approach—a traditional current in the French University (and this is nothing negative)—then we can find a very interesting, three-step argument in this book, constructing a *dialectical* relationship between the terms freedom and time. (It should be remembered that Bouton is a specialist in time and history according to Hegel).¹ The “central thesis” of Bouton’s study is that time is the condition of human freedom (377). Time and freedom are thus in a relation of ground to grounded. In fact, they are mediated with respect to each other. This thesis unfolds in three steps: (1) originary temporality is the condition for being free (Bergson, Heidegger); (2) freedom is the source of time (Sartre, Heidegger, Levinas); (3) ethical time is accommodated by time in its *plasticity* (Schelling, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Lavelle, Sartre, Heidegger, Levinas). In order to explicate the sense of these three steps, we shall now comment on the decisive introductory statement of the first chapter on Heidegger (the author who occupies a central place in this book): “The overcoming of the antinomy of freedom and time implies the thesis of a plasticity of time [3], freed from the law of causality [1], and the thesis of a temporality of freedom that passes through a rehabilitation of the possible [2]” (295).

(1) Time is the foundation of freedom—a “new form of temporality” that Bouton calls precisely “*practical time*” (91). The latter is characterized by its “infinity,” i.e. by the “*overcoming of finitude*,” and by its primary orientation towards the *future*. In its infinity, this practical time concerns the duration of existence all the while being ‘noumenal,’ and this then delimits “the veritable place of freedom” (97). “Practical time is thus that which founds the realization of practical action, it is the condition that freedom gives itself, in order to respond to its duty and to thereby accomplish its destiny” (94).

This relation of foundation implies a *disconnection* of temporality and causality—which is in fact one of fundamental achievements of post-Kantian philosophy of time. Bouton dedicates admirable pages to this aspect. On the other hand, in our opinion, the analyses of the relation between temporality and objective causality are too summary. If, at the outset of chapter on Sartre, the author confirms the “reciprocal relation posited by Kant, between time and the principle of causality” (265), the chapter dedicated to the philosopher from Königsberg himself,

¹ See his first book *Temps et esprit dans la philosophie de Hegel* trans. *Time and Spirit in Hegel’s Philosophy*, Vrin (2000).

barely mentions the “unfailing submission of time to causality” (75), which precisely hides the *bi-directional* mediation between temporality and causal objectivity in various crucial places in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. But what is important above all else is the manner in which Bouton elaborates the “disjunction” between time and causality—first in Schelling’s *The Ages of the World*, and subsequently in Bergson and Lavelle. Schelling’s argument consists in saying that temporal succession is not subject to causality because there is no anteriority of the cause to the effect (and hence no irreversible direction in time). Bergson, for his part, establishes a correlation between duration and the free act, which comes back again to the disjunction between duration and causality. And Lavelle reiterates, in turn, the emancipation of time from deterministic causal structure.

(2) Now, in establishing practical time earlier, Bouton succeeded in showing that it is a temporality of *freedom* (which he will then call “ethical time”). This latter is fundamentally characterized by a novel sense of the “possible” and of “possibility.”

All throughout his study, Bouton takes care to exhibit the “renewal of the notion of the ‘possible.’” He does so first, in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, (“The possible are those things which we can realize” [34]). Then, in Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*, where he presents a “moral possibility” that is not formal but *real*, posited by the moral law: “What is proper to moral possibility is to transform itself immediately into moral necessity, it tends, by its nature, towards existence, that is to duty” (100). Then, twice to Kierkegaard, who (following Schelling) identifies the possible and the future (192) and roots the possible in human freedom while identifying possibility and *capability* (193). But it is above all Lavelle who must be cited here: *Against Bergson*, Lavelle identifies, for his part, the future and the possible (like Kierkegaard before him). It is this identification “that prepares the solution to the problem of the articulation of freedom and time, on condition that we add, now against Leibniz, the thesis of the indetermination of possibles” (246). Lavelle also presents the *origin* of the possible, naming it spirit [*esprit*]. This latter is “supreme possibility, or the possibility of all possibilities,” it is defined “by the idea of the possible or of the *possibilisation* of all the real” (*ibid.*). We come across this important idea of “possibilisation” in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (282), and of course in Heidegger (314). Finally, it is Levinas who draws the conclusions of this renewal of the possible and who clarifies the status of the freedom that lies at the basis of practical time (what translates into a foregrounding of the ethical according to him). He does this in introducing the notion of the ‘other’ or more precisely of “the future of the other [*avenir d’autrui*]” that has as its source the alterity of the other—and this ushers in “the thesis of the originary infinity of time” (366) (a thesis directed obviously against Heidegger). This time, at the basis of “practical time,” Bouton refers to as “ethical time.” He personally draws the ethical consequences: “I am responsible for the freedom of the other to the extent that I must do everything in order to guarantee, preserve and foster it, even if this freedom is situated well beyond the stretch of time that would allow me witness the fruits of my efforts. I am not my brother’s keeper, but the keeper of his freedom. Being free for the subject means freeing the freedom of other subjects” (370).

(3) It is in the final chapter, on Levinas, that all of Bouton’s analyses culminate. This double meditation—(“practical”) time as foundation of freedom, freedom as

foundation of (“ethical”) time—that had already organized the entire third part of the study (on Bergson, Lavelle and Sartre), is not the last word of this book. The author brings out a third moment, a sort of “moment of synthesis,” which carries the key concept of this book: that of a “plasticity of time” (a term that Bouton borrows from Catherine Malabou). This third moment crystallizes in the following simple formulation: “Time in its plasticity is susceptible of taking in the infinity of ethical time, without being completely confused with the latter” (378). What are we to understand by “plastic time”? Bouton finds some indications in the works of Schelling, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Lavelle, Sartre and Heidegger. It is the capacity of time to be transformed, configured according to diverse possible modalities, in particular, according to the mode of existence of the individual, or according to the choice of projects of freedom that themselves found different modes of temporality (161, 210, 235, 253, 267). This plasticity gives rise, in particular, to multiple modes of temporality (notably for Heidegger, but also for Schelling, to whom Bouton dedicates remarkable chapters on divine time and human times). If plastic time is not to be confused “completely” with ethical time, it is because the former is characterized precisely by the *reciprocal* mediation between practical and ethical time. Finally, contrary to “infinite” practical and ethical times, plastic time is “*finite*” because if it were unlimited, then freedom would be destroyed (255) and it would be impossible to account for the irreversibility of the past and the unforeseeability of the future (290)—two irreducible ‘givens’ that Bouton never renounces. The author places himself thus resolutely in a “finite” perspective, claiming forcefully a renewal of “time as time” (358), a notion that is translated on multiple occasions by the following transformation of Spinoza’s famous expression: “We sense and we feel that we are temporal” (262, 382).

Despite the richness of the analyses—of which we would mention the superb pages on ‘fecundity’ in Levinas, the analysis of the ‘instant’ according to Schelling, Kierkegaard and Sartre, as well as the presentation of the parallel de-ontologisation of temporality with the de-substantialisation of existence by Heidegger—there is however one great absence: Fichte. Indeed, Bouton’s study actually contradicts what he states at the outset, in his presentation: The relationship between time and freedom is no less studied via epistemology than through practical philosophy—if for no other reason than because freedom is a topic for one as it is for the other (the texts chosen by the author are convincing in this regard). Yet among texts that develop a transcendental genesis of time, it is *for Fichte* that time is the first inscription of the *Ought* [*Soll*] in the real (time is the supreme principle and the point of unity and disjunction of the theoretical and the practical). Indeed, Fichte is the great progenitor of the idea of ‘possibilisation,’ and he is also a foremost thinker of finitude. This is an absence that can only mark the importance and the vastness of the subject that Bouton has taken on. He has done so with great clarity, finesse and profound understanding.