

Falling out of Step with Time:
A Three-Fold Phenomenology of Time in the Anthropocene

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What is time then? If nobody asks me, I know; but if I were desirous to explain it to one that should ask me, plainly I do not know.

—St. Augustine, *Confessions* Book XI.

Preamble

If you have time to read this, please do so—I aim to be brief, so that you and I can swiftly move on to other pressing tasks. I will try to explain, if ever so quickly, why my life—dare I say *our lives?*—are falling out of step with time. This is a phenomenology of time in three steps, offering a response to Dipesh Chakrabarty's *One Planet, Many Worlds*. Are you ready? Ok, let's go!

1. Rushing to Keep Up with Time

- * 9:00 am: Book hotel Lisbon;
- * 9:00 am Rich fellow application;
- * 9:15 am Staff Meeting;
- * 11:00 am Meeting with Grant Officer;
- * 3:00 pm Staff Meeting;
- * 5:30 pm: Imma Soccer Training;
- * 5:30 pm Lars Volleyball Training;
- * 6:30 pm: Pick up Imma from Soccer

Take a random day in my Google calendar, say a Monday in March, and you will see something like this. I know people who completely fill out every part of their day on their Google calendar, but I do not—the sight is too overwhelming.

On the surface, this day looks doable, certainly between 12 and 3 pm, but that's not how I feel this day to be, for hidden in this timeslot is a separate

hand-written to-do list: email communication, grading, class prep, reviewing articles, you name it. Even while writing this, I am feeling a sense of rush—the rush caused by work-family-errands time, seeking to keep up with various Google Calendar events, which combine the schedules of four family members with a work schedule, and then the afore-mentioned hand-written to-do list.

While this Monday does not show it, on other days these schedules and my hand-written to-do list are intersected with a schedule that marks birthdays or deaths or special holidays. For birthdays I take some time—offering congratulations through Whatsapp or email or a phone call. And, if I have even more time, I try to acknowledge the dead: those who have left a mark on my schedule and my life but do not actively seem to meddle with my schedule or my life other than marking another anniversary of their being dead. I may feel sadness, I may feel gratitude, I may write a note connecting me to someone close, but before I know it, I hurry forward, propelled by time.

Philosophically, this sense of being rushed would perfectly fit Chakrabarty's description of "modern" humans (50-53), who in their self-centered rush to lift themselves up from fear and poverty, have conquered their so-called "state of nature" to do exactly... what? Work themselves through another Google calendar event that ties them down to produce a paroxysm of work and energy use that has tangible effects on the planet, and that destroys the planet? Emancipated from the original predicament of oppression from fear and poverty we have tied ourselves closer to another ruler: 24/7 modern clock-time.

Dictated by Google time, my Google calendar leaves me no time. And YES, I realize that much of my sense of rushing is written from a privileged perspective of a woman with a well-manicured family life, a loving marriage, a job, financial stability, and health; but still—time has a way of gnawing at my existence, pulling at its edges, pressuring me to feel its burden and asking me constantly what a so-called successful life that keeps up with Google-time is supposed to entail. Time that's hard to keep up with because.... There is no time to live? Heidegger may call this experience of time "fallen" or "inauthentic," as it does not bring the various horizons of time together but simply allows an all-consuming present to take over.¹

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. (Malden: Blackwell, 1962), § 68, 397-8, H. 346-347.

2. Disoriented in Seasonal Time

The giant red crabs usually migrate in October on Christmas Island, the newscaster tells us. Now, they waited until February because it had been too dry. Only with the recent rains did they feel their time had come. We see the camera following the crabs, who are enormous, and who are crossing the road in large numbers, aiming for the waters. I wonder: did the crabs feel a sense of disorientation as they waited and waited until this moment? Did they feel off, in the way that I do? What about that 60 degrees Fahrenheit weather in February, that confused me?

Time, as the ancients already had it, is marked by seasonal patterns. To index this seasonal importance, there were gods to mark the way times flowed. There were harvest gods and spring gods. There were parties to celebrate the solstice. Time was not ours to have. This was the time of the seasons, the time of nature, a time that Aristotle would associate with immanent development, with *goals coming into their own*, where goals could be reached across and in sync with processes of withering and growing.

Philosophically, the time of the seasons has been underdeveloped and under-appreciated, as Luke Fischer and David Macauley argue in their recent co-edited volume *The Seasons: Philosophical, Literary, and Environmental Perspectives*.² Precisely now, in a time where “modern technology has made seasonality marginal to our lives,”³ and where fresh produce can be made available through processes of refrigeration and transport, we are seeing the effects of that same technological modernity haunt us as we find ourselves disoriented in seasonal time. Is this what Serres calls the famous “backlash” of nature against us?⁴ That by

² Luke Fischer and David Macauley (eds.) *The Seasons: Philosophical Literary and Environmental Perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York., 2021). A seasonal understanding of time has many advantages for “an ecologically challenged world,” including improved self-understanding and connection to the sensuous and embodied world and improved sustainability practices (43–9).

³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, USF Workshop, February 22, 2024.

⁴ Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995) 12.

domineering and marginalizing nature (and marginalizing the seasons, we could say), we will undergo nature's vengeance so as to *no longer feel the seasons in the way we would before*? As I soak up the warm rays of the sun in this early February Spring weather, I know I have already started paying the price.

3. Grieving for Time Running Out

It's been raining every day. I mean every day, all day.

Or better said: every day, all day, all month.

The kind of rain varies: Heavy rain. Showers. Light rain. Drizzle. A plunge.

Cold rain. Warm rain. Thick drops. Light trickles.

I stare out through the windows through the rain and see the river.

Speechless, she is

Absorbing.

What I describe is not science fiction. It's a description of relentless, unabating, ever-present rain which went on for weeks and months this past fall in my new hometown of Nijmegen. It's one of those disconcerting experiences where both environment and humans seem to struggle for ways out: the river seeking a way out, overflowing meadows and quays and prompting extra vigilance and inspections from dike guards; and where I—like many, and especially the younger generation of humans—am seeking to find a way out of the doom and gloom of anthropogenic climate change: the feeling that, with every extra hour and day of rain and ever-rising river levels, we live in a catastrophic time. The feeling that with rising temperatures and melting poles, time is running out—the time to solve the climate crisis, time to bring things back to what we thought of as an equilibrium, time to stop the endless rains.

Not only does time seem to run out, but the true "moment for action" seems further removed than ever. Such a "moment of action" is what Aristotle called *kairos* – the perfect moment for the right action felt with the right disposition toward the

right object at the right place.⁵ The perfect moment for getting into action and enacting virtue? It seems so noble, so fortuitous, but also so far away, so inapplicable to our own time. Our time? It is over and done with. There is no time for action rather than to settle in the Anthropocene and embrace our fate.

Philosophically and anthropologically, we could argue that every generation feels a sense of doom. Plato feared the rising power of sophists and saw himself justified in the death of Socrates. Augustine saw the power of Rome and felt its corruption. Nietzsche diagnosed the mediocrity of European culture and smelled its decay. Our time seems no different. Still, this time of the Anthropocene, as Chakrabarty reminds us, brings about a certain sense of doom that is different than before, precisely because our current moment is straddling three different historical trajectories which we thought were operating at different paces and accordingly were treated as distinct: “the history of the Earth system, the history of life including that of human evolution of the planet, and the more recent history of industrial civilization (for many, capitalism).”⁶

Straddling three different historical strata at once, time in the sense of the Anthropocene causes *cuts*: it is “an experiment in dismembering,”⁷ Hartog says: the Anthropocene does not allow time to flow. But, I wonder, if this idea of a flowing time is not an illusion? Wasn’t Aristotle the first to say in the *Physics* that time as we use it is always based upon *counting nows*? Now-now-now: we count nows, we cut and make up time, we take stock of time: “[T]he before and after are in a motion, and insofar as they are counted, they are time.”⁸

Still, Hartog has a point. Because underlying those counts of nows, we always presumed that physical motion would continue, that there was something that remained aflow—an underlying sense of deep, environmental time? In other words, no matter our counting, no matter that we called this time, there was the suggestion

⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis-New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), Book II.6, 1106b20-24.

⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, 49.

⁷ François Hartog (2021), “Chronos, Kairos, Krisis: The Genesis of Western Time.” *History and Theory*, 60: 425-439. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.12218>, 437-8

⁸ Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Focus), IV.14, 223a28-29.

that our time was “nested”⁹ in something deeper, something more profound, that made the counting possible, and meaningful.

In the Anthropocene, our counting of “now” seems halted or, better said: meaningless: the slivers of time we call human “nows” have swollen and acquired geological gravity. And our current moment is so much in the grip of the planetary that, as Chakrabarty warns us with Faisal Devji, we stand to “lose the present to history” (71). Suddenly, what we call human time has turned into a geological epoch that lasts... forever? What happened to the innocuous human counting that presumed physical motion would continue? What the Anthropocene does is tell a story that is *way too coherent*. What it disallows, is seeing and living in a present that oozes meaning because it is connected to a deep past and an open future: a present that breathes and percolates.

Precisely because our current moment seems so geologically over-determined, dread is multiplying, as is grief. Grieving for time since time is running out of timely action? Because there is no future other than the past?

*** I have fallen out of step with time ***

⁹ David Wood, *Deep Time, Dark Times: On Being Geologically Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 12.