



Education and the Narrative Aspect of Temporality

Byung-Chul Han's Views on Our
Challenges of Contemplative Lingerings

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Abstract

Byung-Chul Han (Seoul, 1959) establishes one of the most meaningful and deep understandings of the experience of the contemporary subject. In his view, temporality has suffered a radical atomization that translates into a fragmented life experience: a collection of isolated instants devoid of a sense of *duration*. As a by-product of this circumstance, we see our very way of thinking and learning changing accordingly. Where we used to find *knowledge*, we now see *information*. The aim of this paper will be to explore the transformative power of education in the context of our “broken” temporality.

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1. Introduction

In a recent interview, the South-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han asserted that in order to understand our digital times, we had to understand the current state and ontological form of information: “*Information* has very little currency. It lacks temporal stability, since it lives off the excitement of surprise. Due to its temporal instability, it fragments perception. It throws us into a continuous frenzy of topicality. Hence it’s impossible to linger on *information*” (Borcherdt, 2021)¹. Following his views, the current paradigm does not allow for the classical learning process to take place: “*Knowledge* is as time-intensive as experience. It derives its force from the past as well as from the future. Only through this linking up of temporal horizons does familiarity condense into knowledge” (Byung-Chul Han, 2017, 20–21). Instead, it replaces it with a constant-novelty system rooted on the atomisation of news and inputs. *Information*, the philosopher tells us, is the newly adopted form of what was known as *knowledge*, the former being a watered-down and downgraded version of the latter.

The quest for the causes of this shift will bring us, in the present article, to one of the main answers Byung-Chul Han provides in his work, that of the temporality regime and its consequences. During our exploration of some of the answers, we will visit his views, presented in “The scent of time” and other related texts. His work on the matter shows, *clairvoyantly*, that something has changed in the way the contemporary subject experiences diachronic time and duration in the digital era.

The ramifications of this shift are several and deserve, in our opinion, a great deal of attention. We believe that such an exploration will clarify the *status* of our experience of time, a fundamental point in analysing our next preoccupation: how can we re-establish a meaningful and serious practice of *learning*, given that *knowledge* is being more and more substituted by *information*? What can the role of education be in re-establishing the status of not only knowledge but life?

¹ Emphasis added by author.

2. Time and temporality

The experience of time, memory, and its impact and presence in the Subject has not always been the same. Following Han’s vision, we identify multiple periods of temporality that have regulated our place in the theatre of events and marked a different narrative in front of the *direction of things*. Let’s start by the *mythical* time and the *historical* time, the two basic models that have regulated the past Subject’s experience of temporality.

Mythical period in Han’s schema of temporality involves the view of time we would find in the classical Greek literature in works such as the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*: a world dominated by Gods and totally ruled by their powerful will, keeping and enforcing an order beyond our comprehension. In this world dominated by a determined order, “Events take place in fixed relations with each other; they form meaningful chains. No event is allowed to step out of line. Every event reflects the eternal, unchanging substance of the world” (Byung-Chul Han, 2017, 36). The time concept of this period is a *picture*, an immobile and eternally recurrent order we cannot change: time puts things that moved back where they belong.

To understand the *image* of time and temporality portrayed in the minds of the ancients, we find the words of Barry Powell, the Oxford translator of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* into English, highlighting that, in the ancient world, the power of the Gods was everywhere, and that all the events were understood as caused and motivated by them. Gods were the universal force driving the world to a certain direction, leaving some space for humans to interact, with free will, with their decisions:

“ Gods are behind everything. That’s the moral of the tale. In the *Iliad* this is especially clear: no matter what happens it’s all the doing of the Gods. So, in a way this makes men and women... like puppets. All they have is freedom of choice in this world completely governed by divine beings that are constantly interfering in their lives. In the *Odyssey*, this isn’t so strong, and in fact the point is made by Zeus himself at the very beginning: ‘everybody blames everything on us,

the Gods, but it is not really us, always, it's what people do themselves what cuts them into trouble'. (Powell, 2014)

If something left the way things were meant to be, time (with the action of Gods) would bring it again to its place. This way, Han defines the experience of time for the ancient Subject as a lasting present, where meaningfulness depends on Gods placing things where they belong, where there is nothing changing nor new, and following the structure of an eternally recurrent succession of events. Han calls this paradigm “pre-historic” as it does not include a progression or time advance.

But the experience of temporality for the Modern Subject is way different, for there seems to exist some sort of historical *progression*, a conceptual possibility of a way forward and a way backwards. We see this paradigm change invoked in the famous “madeleine” fragment written by the French writer Marcel Proust, where it is clear to us that the modern Subject is described as able to connect to a past that was different, namely, finds itself placed in a *continuum* with a past, a present and a future. In Proust's words:

“ Mais à l'instant même où la gorgée mêlée des miettes du gâteau toucha mon palais, je tressaillis, attentif à ce qui se passait d'extraordinaire en moi. (...) Et tout d'un coup le souvenir m'est apparu. Ce goût c'était celui du petit morceau de madeleine que le dimanche matin à Combray (parce que ce jour-là je ne sortais pas avant l'heure de la messe), quand j'allais lui dire bonjour dans sa chambre, ma tante Léonie m'offrait après l'avoir trempé dans son infusion de thé ou de tilleul. (Proust, 1987, 140)

In that sense, the Modern Subject is placed in a properly *historical* time, a linear progression that opens the door to change and breaks the chain of the *eternal recurrence*: “The past and the future drift apart. What makes time meaningful is not its sameness but its difference. Time is change, process, development.” (Byung-Chul Han, 2017, 30).

We find different temporality models of the historical paradigm in Han's presentation, such as the Eschatological Time, the Revolution Time –in the

classical sense of circle, in the same progression the seasons switch and come back–, and the Progress Time. In Han’s view, the first of them, the Eschatological Time, uses again the weight the presence of the Gods provides to orient the now linear time towards its end. In this case, there is a temporal *tension* provided by the finalist perspective of this time, as the Subject is *thrown* by this gravitational pole situated at the *end of times*, the ending of everything as provided by the Gods. As Han notes, “The human individual is not free; it is subjected to God. It does not project itself into the future. It does not project its time. [...] It is not the subject of history. Rather, it is God who judges.” (Byung-Chul Han, 2017, 30). This temporality regime finds a slightly different version in the Revolution Time, which does not have to be understood in the contemporary political sense, but rather in the modern seasonal and cosmological sense. In it, the Subject is not free either, and temporality is not defined by the Subject itself, but rather by the cyclical rhythm of *natural constants* such as the route of the stars or the seasons.

The large break with this temporality paradigm happens within the Enlightenment period, where the Subject separates itself from the former forces that *threw*/projected him, both God and the natural cycles, and defines itself as a free being. The Enlightenment Subject is not anymore thrown or moved in time by an external force, but rather by itself:

“ Time was rendered *non-factual* as well as *de-naturalized*; it is now freedom which determines the human relationship to time. The human being is neither thrown into the end of time, nor into the natural circulation of things. What animates history is the idea of freedom, the idea of ‘the progress of the human reason’. The subject of time is no longer a judging God, but a free human being that projects *itself* towards the future (Byung-Chul Han, 2017, 31)

In it, the Subject is placed in a historical framework devoid of driving force other than itself, without a gravitational pull towards a direction, but rather a projection towards a progressive future marked by the improvement of everything –the very idea of *progress*, with the future understood as a metaphorical salvation. But the days of the Enlightenment are long past, and

the “End of history” is, in Han’s eyes, not a literary way of referring to our period.

If Mythical time took the form of a picture, with no change or *time flow*, and Historical time was embodied in the shape of a *line*, Han considers that the end of those temporality regimes is the consequence of the development of the Subject’s sovereignty, grown into our current “End of history”² regime. With the *killing* of every large narrative system that gave a meaning and direction to History, the current regime implies the *disaggregation* of events into a tensionless, narrative-less, amalgamation of *present* instants, or points, deeply disconnected from past and future: *point-time*, or the advent of the information paradigm, where the experience of duration as we knew it crumbles down, and thus all its associated skills and virtues change drastically.

This new paradigm of temporality, after parting ways with the gravitational pull, or projection, of Historical time, renders impossible the activity of focusing our attention: “Due to the lack of narrative tension, atomized time cannot hold our attention for long. Thus, the senses are constantly provided with new or drastic perceptions. Point-time does not permit any contemplative lingering.” (Byung-Chul Han, 2017, 37) Therefore, and going back to the topic of education, *information* takes the place of *knowledge*, the latter needing the connective diachronic capabilities of Historical time and *duration*, whereas the former thrives in the point-time paradigm.

Duration, as seen by Han himself and some of his commentators, is at the core of some of the most important and deep experiences in life, such as tradition,

² We refer with this expression to our current temporality system, which would have ended with the Enlightenment model, following Han’s view. This shift has to be understood, in our interpretation of the original theory, as the consequence of the intellectual deconstruction of the large systems of thought that made sense of time and life, namely, which gave a direction to time. In our own view (not the original author’s), this deconstruction could be understood as one of the by-products of postmodernism and the current model of production that reigns around the world.

education, maturation, and whatever institutions that gave meaning and growth to the Historical Subject. In Andreas Dunker’s words:

“ Maturation and growth are among the slow phenomena that require another kind of time and rhythm. Rhythm and direction are what make time into real time – what Bergson called «duration» (la durée). Memory creates a consciousness of time that preserves the past in the present. In the same way that the continuity of a biography can orient the individual, the collective narratives help us to orient ourselves in history (Dunker, 2018)

With the disappearance of the large narratives that made sense of the flow of time, which gave a *scent* to the ticking of the clock, it is education, - understood as an activity rooted on duration and slow maturation of the internal world of a student - which as an institution is the most subject to deep structural changes.

3. Education and time

Duration, as we suggested earlier, was the experience of temporality in the previous paradigms. The *hermeneutics* (Mythical, Eschatological, Enlightened, etc.) of its time gave a meaning to every bit of “information” or event, placing it into a continuum by which the parts took the meaning of the whole, and vice-versa.

These large narratives allowed us to build meaningful experiences based on *duration* (Gardels, Nathan & Byung-Chul Han, 2022), on the ordered accumulation of past, present, and future, which finished by building what is known as *knowledge*. Information, as opposed to it, is based in an unstable and fragmented time experience where the context that united every part into a whole is not there, nor is there the capacity of duration that allowed for the connection between moments to happen. Thinking, in that setting, becomes a mechanical activity similar to that of a machine, as it seems to imply a simple transference of data with no real human footprint:

“ A world consisting only of information, where communication meant circulation without interference, would amount to a machine [...]. Compulsion for transparency flattens out the human being itself, making it a functional element within a system (Byung-Chul Han, 2015, 2)

This *flattening* of the human self finds one of its causes in the progressive disparition of the experience of duration. As said, the new paradigm of time, point-time, empties the human life of a sense of continuity, or progression, limiting everything to an experience of *now-ness* that breaks the possibility of a diachronic building of our internal world, what education strived to build. In our view, education used to take the form, and should try to keep the form of, rituals and ceremonies, which appear on Han's theory as irreducible to point-time and operationalization. In a setting trying to flatten out all human institutions and experiences to the level of plane data, or information, deeply rooted practices that need the presence of a human *spirit* or presence to *be*, can be understood as a form of resistance:

“ Rituals and ceremonies, in contrast, are narrative processes; they elude acceleration. It would be sacrilegious to seek to accelerate a sacrificial act. Rituals and ceremonies have their own temporality, their own rhythm and tact. The society of transparency abolishes all rituals and ceremonies because they do not admit operationalization; that is, they impede the accelerated circulation of information, communication, and production (Byung-Chul Han, 2015, 30)

In the same stream of thought, Han's interest on rituals and ceremonies, namely traditions, unveils its power as an element that could offer stability to life and time in our point-time context, as if somehow it was possible to throw an anchor to a past, stable, and meaningful time. Quoting him, “Rituals stabilize life. To paraphrase Antonie Saint-Exupéry, we may say: *rituals are in life what things are in space.*” (Byung-Chul Han, 2020, p.3). In that sense, rediscovering and reinstating the sacred meaning of education, not as a means *to do something afterwards* but rather as an end, seems to us a first step to

recover its nuclear experience, where duration and the diachronic construction of the internal world shall be the priority: an activity rooted in time meant to be the way in which the human spirit, or what we could call the character, is created, nurtured, and preserved.

As a double proposal, we may end this short contribution by defending the need to *sacralise* education as a means both to reinstate the importance of *knowledge* before *information*, first, and as an opportunity of also reinstating some meaningful experience of duration in our destabilised lives. Taking again Byung-Chul Han’s words:

“ (Rituals) They transform being-in-the-world into a *being-at-home*. They turn the world into a reliable place. They are to time what a home is to space: they render time *habitable*. They even make it *accessible*, like a house. They structure time, furnish it (Byung-Chul Han, 2020, 2)

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5. Short biography

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