

Aristotle, Augustine and Ricœur's Aporetics of Temporality in Context

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Abstract

Questioning Ricœur's positioning of Aristotle and Augustine as the founders of the two mutually exclusive conceptions of time that dichotomize the Western tradition, this article suggests that what Ricœur describes as the aporetics of temporality is a product of the modern social time regime. Extracting Aristotle and Augustine's conceptions of time from this modern problem reveals the Aristotelian so-called "naturalist" view of time as one that rather unifies humans and their world through symbolic mediation, while Augustine's alleged "subjective" conception of time is read rather as expressing the subordination of time to divine transcendence.

Keywords: Aristotle; Augustine; Time; Ricœur; Time and Narrative.

Résumé

Questionnant certaines interprétations qui font d'Aristote et de Saint Augustin les fondateurs de conceptions du temps formant les deux pôles de l'aporie de la temporalité qui semble traverser la tradition occidentale, cet article suggère que l'aporie dont parle Ricœur est un produit du régime social de temps moderne, et propose une interprétation alternative des conceptions du temps d'Aristote et de Saint-Augustin en contexte. La conception "objective" du temps chez Aristote apparaît dès lors davantage comme décrivant un temps qui unit les humains et le monde, alors que la conception "subjective" du temps chez Saint Augustin est interprétée comme une subordination du temps à la transcendance divine.

Mots-clés: Aristote; Augustin; Temps; Ricœur; Temps et récit.

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Introduction

In his influential study of temporality and narrative, Paul Ricœur posited Aristotle and Augustine as the founders of the two main conceptions of time that run through the Western tradition.¹ While Aristotle's *Physics* gave the West its concept of objective, worldly, or cosmological time, Augustine's *Confessions* inaugurated a subjective, experiential or psychological concept of time. The Western philosophy of time has navigated between these two broad positions ever since. On the one hand, time is conceived of as a worldly phenomenon, as an objective datum of the world of things and nature, a fundamental category of natural reality itself. On the other hand, time is a product of the mind, either as a generic category of the human psyche, a "distension of the soul," or the fundamental structure of human consciousness, imprinting its own temporal categories or flux-like character on worldly processes and thereby tensing an atemporal world. Ricœur reads these two positions as formative of a theoretical dead end, what he calls the "aporia of temporality."² While these two broad conceptions have indeed structured numerous *modern* debates occurring in various fields, from contemporary philosophy³ to theoretical physics,⁴ this article criticizes the use of this aporetic lens to interpret *ancient* conceptions of time. The argument made here posits the aporia of time as a historically situated product of the modern temporal experience, and therefore superimposed on pre-modern contributions to the topic of time at the expense of historical understanding.

Ricœur and the aporia

The main structure of Ricœur's treatment of the question must first be briefly rehearsed. There are indeed, for him, two entry points into the philosophical question of time; movement (nature, universe, world), and soul (mind, consciousness).⁵ Ricœur goes on to diagnose the fundamental aporia of time when cosmological and psychological theories of time are seen to simultaneously *obscure* and *imply* each other.⁶ According to this interpretation, the dead end met by the Western tradition in conceptualizing time is not only a matter of Augustine's inability to refute Aristotle's arguments nor of the dynamics of philosophical debate and rhetoric. The dead end results from the fact that a psychological concept of time cannot be fleshed out satisfactorily without reference to notions of movement and succession found in the world, while a concept of worldly time cannot stand on its own without constantly referring back to the perceptive operations of a conscious mind. The main conceptual expression of the aporia therefore revolves around the "instant versus present" conundrum, in which the Aristotelian notion of instant points

to a naturalistic understanding of time, while the Augustinian notion of present articulates a subjectivist understanding of time. For Ricœur, the conceptual gap between Aristotle's indifferent instant and Augustine's particular and determinate present is nothing short of *unbridgeable*. While any instant can order a before and an after and create a succession, the truly temporal past and future exist only in relation to a definite (lived) present. In other words, present, past and future cannot be derived from a purely worldly objective *succession*. For Ricœur, this means that one can only leap from one side of the aporia to the other.⁷ The distance between the cosmological instant and the lived present, between world and consciousness, is irreconcilable in conceptual terms, an idea echoing Derrida's own view on the impossibility of defining time conceptually without presupposing it, making it "always too late to talk about time."⁸ This diagnosis of the limits of conceptual thinking with regards to time leads Ricœur to attempt a reconciliation of the aporia through an exploration of the narrative function in the construction of temporality itself. Ricœur has recourse to Aristotelian narratology to analyse modern *mise en récit* and its ability to "make time appear." Time, for Ricœur, will ultimately emerge from the very intersections of the multiple temporalities found in narrative emplotment.⁹

Although mobilizing Aristotle's narratology, Ricœur ultimately resorts to a more Augustinian experiential stance in order to pursue his endeavour. And while his attempt at reconciliation does emphasize that both entry points should be taken simultaneously, his reading of the history of philosophies of time is limited because it is performed, I contend, through an *a priori* aporetic lens. In Ricœur's reading, philosophies of time produce and reproduce the aporia notwithstanding their socio-historical contexts of formulation. In other words, Ricœur does not locate the root of the aporia of time in its modern social context, and instead sees it as a transhistorical phenomenon without socio-historical specificities or origins. This aporetic lens limits the interpretive avenues one can take when reading non-modern philosophies of time.

However, a historical reading of the aporia as it is expressed in its modern form might lead us to consider its specificities and articulate a new understanding of this so-called unbridgeable conceptual gap between lived and worldly time. Such an endeavour through a socio-historical reading of the aporia of time shows it to be an aspect of modern temporal regimes.¹⁰ Additionally, Aristotle and Augustine's contributions on the topic of time might reveal new meanings if also situated in different forms of time relations and experiences prevailing in their own socio-historical context.

The aporia of time and modern temporal alienation

I argue that the aporia between objective and subjective time is reflective of a historically situated experience of time in which a standardized, abstract, and impersonal time regime has reached a hegemonic position in modern social time relations. Here the term "social time relations" refers to a given set of conceptions and practices of time that shapes and organizes people's temporal relations with one another, with their world, as well as informs and shapes personal time-experiences. Societies organize their social time relations in time institutions and cultures which coalesce according to logics of power and property, and social time relations are traversed by struggles between different and often opposed conceptions and practices of time.¹¹ In this sense, time is a socio-economic and political phenomenon.¹² Such a social scientific approach to time helps

not only to situate the modern aporia of time in its context, but offers a way out of its aporetic dead end.

Based on abstract time forms introduced by the innovation of clocks in the Late Middle Ages,¹³ standard time developed historically in parallel with the emergence of market economies and later the rise of industrial societies in the modern period. This rise to hegemony of the modern standard time system is due to its fusion with processes governing the formation of value in market economies based on commodity production for exchange, private property, and market allocation of resources. In short, capitalist market processes of valorization depend on a form of time characterized by the abstraction and equalization of time-units.¹⁴ Modern markets have therefore found their temporal infrastructure in the abstract time-form of clock-time, perfected through technical developments in clock-making, and the spread of clock-time devices and practices since the early modern period in Europe and then globally. Abstract time forms, institutionalized and standardized, come to form a quantified, rationalized, and reified time regime, culminating in the late 19th century in a historically unprecedented “world standard time” system. In becoming global, world standard time subsumed local time systems predicated on unequal hours and concrete time-units based on cosmological occurrences, while forging an experience of time as an objective datum out of human reach – and out of sync with many subjective experiences of temporality. This abstract time system stands in opposition to concrete times, imposing its logic of productive valorization on human labour and activity – and natural processes and resources – while being met with resistance from lived concrete temporalities. As time is itself a commodity bought and sold on a market that systematically quantifies and abstracts time inputs, systemic temporal alienation and reification in contemporary social time relations reproduce the aporia between time’s objective worldly existence and lived subjective temporalities. It is this historically situated dialectics between the abstract time of market valorization, the modern – reified – “time of the world,” and the concrete times of lived realities and experiences, “lived time,” which is reflected in the aporetic conceptual structure identified by Ricœur. This modern aporia of time, rooted in social time relations shaped by market practices, has become an inescapable framework structuring philosophical enquiries on the question.¹⁵

Aristotle’s conception of time

Situating the aporia of time historically in modern experience frees up new avenues for interpreting Aristotle’s conception of time, as it does not have to be trapped in one or the other sides of the aporia. I contend that Aristotle’s views on time do not express the form of temporal alienation often found in conceptions of time rooted in modern social time relations, in which the “time of the world” appears as a reified object out of human reach. Additionally, Aristotle does not formulate a proto-Christian view in which time is subordinated to a transcendent and eternal Divinity – an illustration of which we will find in Augustine’s contribution examined below. Aristotle, I contend, can be read as expressing a *unity* between humans, time, and the world through a form of symbolic mediation.

Aristotle’s discussion of time – particularly in Books *iv* and *vi* of *Physics* – remains much debated to this day in scholarship. As one studies it, the apparently convoluted and sometimes contradictory nature of the overall argument seem to confirm the sentiment that Aristotle is here

“frustratingly obscure and elliptical,”¹⁶ and that some of his notions are “ambiguous and artificial.”¹⁷ Another reason for the apparent ambiguity might reside in the preliminary nature of the argument: one Aristotle scholar points out that the discussion as it stands is merely a collection of notes, especially chapters 12 to 14, and that Aristotle never actually wrote a final text on the issue.¹⁸ Then again, some find fault in the apparently random mentions by Aristotle of just about every aspect of what people say about time. Although these issues might very well lead to interpretive perils, it is possible to find structure in Aristotle’s thinking, as for example Heidegger did when he viewed Aristotle’s discussion to be coherent.¹⁹ I contend that the main reasons for the difficulty lie not only in the text itself, but also in how it is read. Indeed, much of the confusion that seemingly characterizes Aristotle’s conception of time arises from the retroactive imposition of a modern aporetic interpretive structure on his text. In other words, the question fueling modern debates about time, namely whether time is a natural phenomenon or a product of the mind – the very question underpinning the aporia of time – leads interpreters to pigeon-hole Aristotle in one or the other category, more often than not in the naturalistic camp.

As a result, an uncontroversial claim is that Aristotle’s theory of time, as articulated through his concept of the now, presents time as a quantifiable and measurable continuum, traveled by a moving now, a point-like present, that delimits as well as unifies time. Quite uncontroversial as well is the suggestion that for Aristotle, time is not independent from events *per se*, but independent from an observer, or a reference frame. Aristotle’s time is therefore read as a feature of the objective natural world. Ricœur’s reading, for example, for all its masterful erudition, proceeds from this anachronistic superimposition of an *a priori* aporetic lens, as he encloses Aristotle in the naturalistic camp,²⁰ as does Jameson,²¹ while Adam, interestingly, takes the opposite view and suggests that for Aristotle “time does not belong to the temporal world but was to be located in the eternal realm of soul and reason.”²² If we abandon the obligation to interpret Aristotle as *either* naturalistic *or* subjectivist, in other words if we refuse to read Aristotle through these modern categories, it becomes possible to recognize that Aristotle’s time does not fit quite neatly in either terms, and that Aristotle is actually uninterested in choosing sides. Indeed, the modern question does not find a clear-cut answer in Aristotle – and perhaps that is what renders his argument seemingly convoluted and unclear to modern readers.

Innovative interpretations of Aristotle’s conception of time are therefore possible, readings in which he is shown unifying stances rather than choosing sides or configuring a dead end. This reading strategy requires that one rejects *a priori* essentializing time and the obligation to locate this essence *either* in nature *or* in the human mind. For the purpose of this article, the discussion will be limited to three main features of Aristotle’s conception of time: the now, the number, and the relationship between time and change.

The ‘now’

Aristotle’s concept of the now is indeed difficult to flesh out from his discussion in the *Physics*. The now is, however, central, since while it is not time *per se*, it nonetheless *constitutes* and *is constituted by* it. The concept of the now fuses two different notions: the now as a limit dividing time into a before and an after – an instant – and the now that constitutes the unity of past, present, and future, the now as what holds time together – the present. Part of the difficulty lies in the fact

that these two notions, instant and present, already appear to modern scholars as “disparate concepts,”²³ or in Ricœur’s view, as opening up two mutually exclusive paths of conceptual endeavour: one into worldly time and the other into subjective time. This reading stems from Aristotle deriving analogically the instant and its concomitant “before” and “after” from magnitude and movement, therefore suggesting that succession is something that exists primarily in the world, and that the mind experiences it only derivatively in the temporal form of past and future. In Aristotle’s text, however, these two notions are not conceptually separated in any strict sense. Succession does come from nature in the sense that movement is “out-there,” but this in no way is the final word, as Aristotle points out that change, in its relationship to time, can also be something that occurs in the mind: “If it is dark and our bodily experience is nil, but some change is happening within the mind, we immediately suppose that some time has passed as well.”²⁴ Accordingly, although an instant might refer to nature and a present to mind, there is no clear-cut, let alone unbridgeable, separation in Aristotle’s discussion. The Aristotelian now can be *both* instant and present.²⁵

This is further illustrated by the functions of the now. First, the function of the now is to delimit time’s continuum into a before and an after. For Aristotle, the now is related to movement and magnitude, and his notions of before and after therefore derive from space.²⁶ Akin to a point on a line, the now divides time’s continuum by acting as the beginning of one part and the end of another. The now thus functions as a *limit*: no part of the past is in the future, and no part of the future is in the past. The now is the definitive limit of both. Note here that almost all references to before and after are accompanied by a reference to a subject noticing before and after, suggesting perhaps that Aristotle does not think the distinction is as strictly and obviously rigid as modern scholarship would have it. In its function of an indivisible and duration-less instant, the now collects and holds together all the various momentary events occurring in it. As such, “nothing moves” in a now.²⁷ This now-limit, for Aristotle, is always *different*, since it always – every time – divides time differently. For instance, stretches of time that were after are now before. It is in this sense that the now-limit is like an instant, a duration-less point, or a time-position. And it is in this sense that it is not itself time, which is rather, as discussed below, a measurable and divisible continuum.

Second, the now constitutes the unity of time’s continuum by holding a stretch of time together, by holding past and future together, and as such is an instant which is also *present*. In this function, the now is always the *same*: it always holds time together, or, in other words, the present is always the present, even if it is always situated at a different position in the series of instants. Like the now-limit, the present moment is instantaneous, and thus both are indivisible. Whereas the now-limit divided as well as unified time – by collecting together all the various momentary events occurring in it – the now-unifier also unifies time in relating all past events together in one order (the past), and relating all future events together in another (the future). As such, the now is much Janus-like, with one face looking to the past, and the other to the future. In this sense, and crucially, the now is at the same time an instant of the world, related to change and magnitude, and a present moment of the mind, since it must be accompanied by some operation of discerning, measuring, and perceiving of a being in the world.

Since the present always changes (future becomes past), Aristotle likens the now to a moving object. Both are *different* by being successively in different locations, and the *same* because

"the actual thing that is the moving object is the same."²⁸ Hence one can see why there is no contradiction when Aristotle says the now is always the same and always different. As Waterlow puts it,

There is change in the contents of the past, the present and the future, but not in the analytic truth that the present is that in relation to which the past is past and the future future [...] [T]he present, although different and different, is always the principle in terms of which everything past to it belongs to one order: and so also for everything future.²⁹

This fusion of the two notions of instant and present in Aristotle's concept of the now puzzles scholarship used to the aporetics of temporality perspective, and is often read as a confusion between two orders of time – objective and subjective. From this perspective, Aristotle is unclear because what would be necessary distinctions between the two seem not to be drawn out satisfactorily.³⁰ My contention is rather that Aristotle keeps the two notions cohabiting in *one* concept for the simple reason that his thinking is not trapped in the modern aporia of time and its rigid distinction between worldly instants and human presents.

Time and change

The discussions in book *iv* of the *Physics* tackle the question of the nature of time. First, as far as the form of time is concerned, Aristotle likens it to a divisible continuum. Indeed, a continuum is characterized by being divisible *ad infinitum*. It cannot be made of indivisible parts. This characterization of time as a divisible continuum stems from the analogy between magnitude, change, and time underpinning Aristotle's discussion. For the Stagirite, since magnitude is continuous, so then is change, and so then is time.³¹

In order to tackle the question of what time is, Aristotle begins by considering the argument that time is change.³² However, he notes that time cannot be the same thing as change. First, change happens in one thing or one place relative to others, while "time is both everywhere and present to all things." Second, while change can be fast or slow, time does not comprise speed.³³ But if time is not change, it is also true that time is not without change. Then, reasons Aristotle, if time is not change, but also is not without change, it must be an "aspect of change."³⁴

It is at this point that Aristotle's argument introduces the notions of before and after. As noted, before and after are "nows," here understood in the sense of instants, that are different: change has occurred in the stretch of time that lies between them. Again, such a *succession* is a relation founded in magnitude, which analogically is then attributed to change, and then to time. For Aristotle, when we notice a before and an after, i.e., when the difference – the occurrence of change – between two nows produces differentiated instants, before and after: time has passed. Hence Aristotle's definition of time not as change, but as an *aspect* of change, "when we notice before and after, then we say that there is time. For this is what time is: a number of change in respect of before and after."³⁵ What Aristotle seems to be getting at here is that time, as a number of change, is a measure of change. Indeed, he does mention that change is measured by time, and time by change. The relationship between the two resides in measuring. But time is not a simple set of measuring devices created by humans, a mere measuring device emanating from the human mind.

Aristotle states that time is the *numerable* aspect of change. This notion of number in Aristotle's account raises many questions. Indeed, Aristotle brings together time and number on numerous occasions, "time is the number of movement," "time is a number of change," or straightforwardly, "time is number."³⁶ This deserves closer attention.

Number, time and temporality

When Aristotle uses the word "number," he points out that it has two meanings. It is worth quoting him here: "Time is a kind of number. But 'number' is ambiguous: we describe not only that which is numbered and numerable as number, but also that by which we number."³⁷ Crucially for Aristotle: "Time is a number in the sense of that which is numbered, not in the sense of that by which we number. That by which we number is not the same as that which is numbered."³⁸ Aristotle is here establishing a distinction between numbers as a set of human-made measuring devices, and numbers as that which we number, i.e., worldly features on which we inscribe numbers in order to measure them. What makes the world numerable is that things-in-the-world can be counted. This, for Aristotle, is simply a fact. As Annas suggests, a detour through *Metaphysics I* sheds more light on Aristotle's view on numbers.³⁹ In his account of "one," Aristotle clearly rejects the Platonist idea that numbers possess an independent existence, as abstract objects, beyond time and space; rather, they exist insofar as things in the world are numerable; they exist insofar as they can be attached to things-in-the-world. As Annas summarizes, "Aristotle is always an uncompromising anti-Platonist about numbers."⁴⁰ Annas goes too far, though, in arguing that Aristotle's point is to relate time as closely as possible to the human activity of timing. She argues that time as a number is a means for Aristotle to offer an anti-Platonist account of time not as an all-encompassing idea, but rather as a human activity. She overlooks Aristotle's own distinction between two kinds of numbers, treating numbers as solely a measuring device, and not also as a feature of the world. Her reading thus presents an Aristotelian concept of time which is reduced to a human activity, and that loses its character of thing-in-the-world, or "that which we number." This apparently falls prey to the other side of the dichotomization of Aristotle's thought which pervades aporetic readings.

For Aristotle, things-in-the-world exist, but numbers do not have an independent existence in the same way. They are a product of the relationship between humans and their world. Hence, when he states that "time is number in the sense of that which is numbered, not in the sense of that by which we number,"⁴¹ he is highlighting that time is not only a mere measure. It is not merely a series, or an order, that humans design and use to measure the world they experience. Rather, it is also in the world itself, a series or an order of the world itself, that which is numbered, the worldly entity to which humans attach numbers. Number as that by which we number is a device to measure, to count. It is dependent on the human mind. In this sense, numbers humanize the world, in making it measurable, meaningful, workable.

But how does time get numbered? For the Stagirite, time gets numbered by humans precisely through the now. On the one hand, that the now is indivisible in both its functions is a feature that would prevent it from being in time, since time is a continuum and thus cannot be made of indivisible parts. (This makes the indivisible now the divider of time's continuum.) On the other hand, the key lies in how the now is also in time by virtue of being a number. It is the numeral

aspect of the now which makes it a part of time. "So in so far as the now is a limit, it is not in time (except coincidentally), but it is in so far as it numbers."⁴² It is here that one can grasp how present and instant are linked for Aristotle into one concept. Indeed, the link between the now and time, what makes each of them constitute the other, what makes them exist, is the fact that they can be related, put together, by their numeral aspect. While time is the number of change, the now and time are linked together through number. For Aristotle, the relationship between humans and their world is not severed; the time of the world and the time of the mind stand in unity.

The inextricable relationship between instant and present can therefore be read as a link between nature and mind. Not only are they linked together, but what is more, they are both *constitutive* of each other, since time as numerable and the now as numerator need each other to even exist: "it is also clear that if there were no such thing as time, there would be no such thing as the now, and that if there were no such thing as the now, there would be no such thing as time."⁴³

Here one can see that the now does not move in an already-constituted time continuum. Rather, the now *constitutes* the time continuum just as the time continuum *constitutes* the now. The now is such a number by which we number, but it is not independent from numerable things-in-the-world. Time, then, is therefore *both* in the world, and in "us": more precisely it *happens* in our relationship to the world. Time and the now occur between humans and nature. In this way, humans and nature are inextricably linked. Time might exist in the world, but it is not constituted without human temporalizing and tensing, while there would be no such thing as human temporalizing without time-in-the-world. Those two are not pre-established as isolated features that would come into contact. Rather, they are formed by a mutually constitutive relationship. Time and human temporalizing through the now are co-constitutive, just as the world and the mind constitute each other. Numbers, here, crucially, mediate mind and nature, human temporality and time.

In contrast to much of the literature on Aristotle's "objective" conception of time, and also to the dissident interpretations of his conception of time as subjectivist, Aristotle can be read as emphasizing the temporal co-constitution of mind and world. In other words, there would be no human temporality without the time of the world, but then again there would not be anything meaningfully temporal in the world save human temporality. Against accounts that put Aristotle either in the camp of experiential subjective time or of cosmological objective time, he can be read as unifying the two.

Ricœur is unable to free his reading of Aristotle from the aporetic stance. He requires Aristotle to take sides, and he is forced to conclude that Aristotle's time is the "time of the world," since time is analogically linked to movement and magnitude which are functions of the world. Ricœur therefore overlooks that mind and world coexist in the constitution of time. When he finally chooses sides, he revealingly mentions that Aristotle's definition is cosmological all the while conceding that the soul, throughout Aristotle's discussion, can never be ruled out. Aristotle ends up in the naturalistic camp, "despite drawing upon, at each phase of the definition, the operations of perception, discrimination and comparison, which can only be those of a soul."⁴⁴ When one lifts the veil of anachronistic aporetics, the Stagirite is found to argue that time is *both* a worldly phenomenon and a human perception, and he situates its fundamental mediation in symbolic forms (numbers). He thereby provides a conception of time in which the relationship between humans and their world is not severed, but actively mediated by human symbolic activity, even if

it must also be noted that it is difficult to salvage qualitative time relations from Aristotle's quantifying theory of time, just as it is difficult to articulate to it notions of discontinuity, rupture, or the multiplicity of times.

Nowhere is Aristotle's remoteness from the aporia clearer than when he directly asks whether time would exist if there were no mind to notice (number) it. He is led to an open-ended conception, a yes and no answer, that destabilizes the reader at first, but makes more sense in light of the present interpretation. His open-ended answer is worth quoting: "it is impossible for there to be time if there is no mind – except that there might still be whatever it is that time is."⁴⁵ Why does Aristotle not straightforwardly answer the question? On the one hand, he suggests quite simply that since time is an aspect of change, it is reasonable to assume that change might still occur even if there were no humans to notice it. Time in that sense would still exist "whatever it is." However, removing humans from the picture would at the very least alter what time is. It would leave "whatever it is that time is." Perhaps Aristotle is gesturing here at a time without meaning, without temporality, a block-time, or tenseless universe, which has as a matter of fact become one of the main world views of modern physics in which human temporalizing activities have been left out of the picture.⁴⁶

Aristotle presents many interpretive difficulties, but it is possible and productive to read his account of time as unifying humans and their world through the mediation of meaning (numbers). For Aristotle, it is as if time *happens* in the relationship between humans and nature, a relationship mediated by numbers, which are seen here as meaning giving interactions with the world. Aristotle does not posit cosmological and experiential time as mutually exclusive, or aporetic as Ricœur would have it, but rather as co-constitutive, as relational. It is not a matter of asserting here that Aristotle does not distinguish between two sides of the phenomenon of time – he clearly does – but rather that for him separating the two by an airtight wall, or choosing the side to which the essence of time belongs, is not the issue. In short, for Aristotle, time is *both* natural and human. Aristotle's conception of time does not display characteristic features of temporal alienation. The time of the world is not seen as something radically separated from human consciousness, or else a mere derivative of it, as it does in many conceptions of time rooted in the modern aporia such as Husserl's, Bergson's, or Heidegger's.⁴⁷

That Aristotle's thinking is free from an aporetic structure might be related to the fact that in contrast to modern societies' abstract standard time regime, Ancient Greek societies relied mostly on concrete time forms in order to temporally organize socio-economic and political activities. Abstract time did not pervade Greek city-states, nor did it impose its logics on everyday life and culture. The day was divided into three or four segments based on the position of the sun, which length varied with the seasons, and for civil use nighttime had no division at all. Time marking remained predicated on concrete natural processes, mediated through representational means such as gnomon and sundial technology, and calendar forms were specific to each city-state. Water-driven timers were used in civil institutions to limit the length of speeches for example, but outside of such more precise time-marking, Greek lives remained attuned to the concrete time of natural processes and cycles and knew not of abstract time.⁴⁸

Alienated time is therefore not a feature of Ancient Greek societies. Unlike capitalist societies, the reproduction of ruling or appropriating classes in Ancient Greece did not operate through market compulsion predicated on abstract time units. Of course, Aristotle the historical

man was not free from socio-historically specific class – or gender – interests, and neither is his thought. But these interests are not those of a group of appropriators that, in Aristotle's socio-historical context, reproduces their social power through the compulsion mechanisms of a standard abstract time regime, coupled with the buying and selling of producers' time on the market. The productive structure of the Greek polis is certainly characterized by alienated labour, slavery, and gender inequality, but the social interests to which Aristotle's thought might be related – the landowning aristocracy of Ancient Athens and the imperial classes of Macedonia⁴⁹ – do not specifically alienate the *time* of labour of producing classes in order to reproduce their social power or prestige or to consolidate their property. Social time relations, in Aristotle's context, do not systematically display the characteristic of temporal alienation, and his conception does not (re)produce the aporia of time in a systematic or *a priori* way.

Augustine

Aristotle's conception of time does not reflect or articulate social relations of temporal alienation, but this does not mean that his view of time is a-political. Similarly, conceptions of time, even if inscribed in a context of social time relations devoid of temporal alienation or abstract time, often reflect power relations, be it in subordinating it to divine figures, or by articulating claims by ruling groups or institutions to authority or domination over time-telling and temporality, for example in calendar making or historical myth.

As mentioned, social time relations in Ancient societies did not know of abstract time-units. One nonetheless witnesses different strategies, doctrines, and narratives deployed to order, organize, and control the times of producers and popular classes. These revolve around conceptions and practices of "official time" imposed on the concrete times of human reproductive practices, lives, consciousness, and bodies.⁵⁰ Religious doctrines are a common form of such narratives and practices which impose forms of official time. The example of the evolution and vicissitudes of calendars in the West illustrates this point. It is in his capacity of *Pontifex maximus* that Julius Caesar introduced the Julian calendar. Likewise, the calendar reforms during the Middle Ages and the early modern period were made by very select committees of dominant figures of the Roman Catholic Church, and their adoption by various rulers was also inscribed in a series of political relationships. Recall also how French revolutionaries aimed at performing a transfer of political and symbolic power from the Church to the Republic by introducing a new secular Republican calendar in 1793.

Augustine's conception of time is one very apt example of a claim by religious power to authority over time. Time for him is a feature of the temporal world, created by God and subordinated to He who is "the Maker of all time."⁵¹ Time is not seen as the product of any form of mediated human social interaction with nature or social activity. Time's very *passage*, which is the main mystery Augustine ponders in the *Confessions*, is a product of God's eternal will: "No moment of time passes except by your will."⁵² Augustine's famous ontological reasoning in Book 11 of the *Confessions* leads him to derive the extension of time into past, present, and future, from a distension, a swelling of the soul – *distensio animi*. The soul belongs to God who is also the maker of the mind and of intelligence.⁵³ In other words, for the Bishop of Hippo time is God's creation, and its extension as a lived succession occurs in and through the soul.

Ontological reasoning refers here to Augustine asserting that past, present, and future are not derived from the physical world, since the three of them, in their own ways, do not exist. The past is no longer, the future is not yet, and the present cannot be said to be since it has no duration. It is only through the mind that they come into being, albeit in different forms, respectively through memory (past), attention (present), and expectation (future).⁵⁴ Indeed, Augustine grants existence to past, present, and future only in so far as they exist in the mind, as they are *presentified*, i.e., *made present*, in it:

From what we have said it is abundantly clear that neither the future nor the past exist, and therefore it is not strictly correct to say that there are three times, past, present and future. It might be correct to say that there are three times, a present of past things, a present of present things, and a present of future things. Some such different times do exist in the mind, but nowhere else that I can see. The present of past things is memory; the present of present things is direct perception; and the present of future things is expectation.⁵⁵

Paradoxically, the ontological roots of present, past, and future are not to be found in the “temporal” world, but in the swelled souls which navigate it. Augustine’s ontological commitment is to a world which might be changing, moving, but not itself *tensed*. This argument about the non-existence of present, past, and future apart from the soul seems at odds with Augustine’s own distinction between heaven and earth, eternity and time, stillness and becoming. While he derives time’s extension from *distensio animi*, he also posits the human world as a realm which occurs and develops in time, while heaven, and God himself, are eternal. Eternity, “which is forever still,” is in sharp contrast with time, “which is never still.”⁵⁶ Is not the human world aptly called the “temporal world,” as it is characterized by becoming, by time’s passage, by the existence of time itself, while there is no time in heaven? Such a cleavage is found at work in Augustine’s rendition of creation, but also more specifically in his distinction between the eternal word of God – “you say all at one and the same time, yet you say it eternally”⁵⁷ – and the things created by God’s word, which are subject to time, which “do not all come into being at one and the same time, nor are they eternal.”⁵⁸ The human world, characterized by time, is subordinated to eternity, “which is supreme over time,”⁵⁹ and here Augustine’s debt to Neoplatonist ontology is clear. However “temporal” the human world might be according to Augustine’s distinction between world and heaven, it remains nonetheless a tenseless time, a pure, unqualified passage, according to his doctrine on time’s extension. We are left with what seems like a threefold temporal structure with (a) on one level a timeless, eternal God, (b) on a second level a world about which Augustine seems to formulate two apparently contradictory ideas: on the one hand time has no ontological existence in the world, while on the other hand the “temporal world” is, precisely, temporal and (c) on a third level a tensed and tensing soul.

As discussed above, Aristotle’s concept of the now encompasses both instant and present, nature and mind. The now constitutes, and is constituted by, time, making time and timing co-products of mind and nature. Augustine, for his part, makes on the one hand time a product of God’s will, while on the other hand he posits that time’s very extension is a product of the soul – though itself created by and belonging to God. This amounts to positing that the lived present resides in the mind, while the worldly instant – if it is even temporal at all – remains tenseless in and of itself. While instant and present were not conceptually separate in Aristotle (both are *in* the now, so to speak), Augustine’s discussion does introduce a conceptual distance between the two.

The undifferentiated worldly instant is left stuck between apparently ontologically contradictory statements, while Augustine focuses much of his attention on the question of the experience of time's passage.

Seen in this light, what is often read as the founding of a subjectivist theory of time appears as a theoretical expression of the idea that time is subordinated to God. The world, though itself becoming, ends up playing no significant part in the actual constitution of tensed time. Tensing belongs to the soul, just as meaning resides in God. Time does not belong to humans in their relationship with one another and with a socially mediated nature and environment, but is a product of God's will – and revocable, after Judgment Day. Temporal domination in Augustine posits time as subordinated to God's eternity, to the a-temporal world of God's eternal word, and ultimately to the authority of the Christian Church, which speaks for God.

Augustine's conception of time does not go off the beaten tracks with regard to his broader doctrinal principles. Separating instant and present and leaving the former caught in ontological limbo, while the latter is rooted in the soul over which, ultimately, God has the power of grace or damnation, is to submit time to God's will. In light of this reading, the essence of time appears to reside much more fundamentally in a transcendental than a subjectivist realm.

This subordination of time to a transcendental divine will does however raise the question of why, then, as Augustine advocates, Christians should obey "temporal" rulers, even of the ungodly type. Even if he argued in *City of God* against the view that the Roman Empire was God's providential instrument in propagating Christianity, an argument made famous by Eusebius following Constantine's conversion, Augustine's socio-historical context, marked by the decline of the Roman empire, was still or perhaps even more suitable to the formulation of doctrines of obedience to earthly powers. As Wood puts it, "Augustine was preoccupied with the immediate question of Rome's decline and how, in those conditions, to explain the need for obedience to a secular authority which could no longer be plausibly regarded as the privileged agent of God's mission on Earth."⁶⁰ Augustine had to reaffirm the notion of Christian obedience to political authorities – but also Roman deference vis-à-vis the Church – this in the face of historical circumstances challenging Rome's earthly power, reaching their apex in Augustine's context during the sack of Rome by Alaric in 410.⁶¹

The notion of obedience was thus key in Augustine's defense of Christianity against those who attributed the decline of Rome to its conversion to Christianity. After the sack by Alaric, Carthage, located in North Africa as was Augustine's Hippo, became a safe haven for aristocratic refugees from Rome.⁶² Those among them who were longing for Roman good old pagan ways in order to restore the empire had to be met with a counternarrative absolving Christians and Christianity from the responsibility for Rome's decline. Hence Augustine's thesis that there was no hope for true justice in the City of Man, not for Rome or any other state for that matter, and that Christians had nothing to do with Rome's decline. Augustine taught that the best one could hope for in this temporal world is some level of peace and order, to be enacted by temporal rulers – provided they could command obedience. Christians were under the obligation to obey temporal authorities, and as such did not pose any challenge to the authority of Rome, as Wood points out:

Every person and all institutions, the holy no less than the transparently unholy, must therefore subject themselves to the earthly powers whose purpose is to maintain peace and

order in this world – not a just and rightful order but a measure of security and physical comfort, to ameliorate the disorder that inevitably follows from the essential nature of the earthly world and the flawed human beings that populate it.⁶³

By submitting time to God, Augustine was therefore at the same time articulating a claim to authority over the temporal world on behalf of imperfect, but godly-appointed political authorities. As these contextual elements integrate the analysis, and the aporetic interpretation is set aside in favor of a historical reading, Augustine's conception of time shows a multiplicity of references and meanings invisible to the interpretive focus on finding a "subjectivist" theory of time in the *Confessions*, and just as Aristotle's contribution, can be read in new and productive ways.

Conclusion

Taking into account the socio-historical contexts of the roots of the modern aporia of time and of Aristotle and Augustine opens up a reading much different from Ricœur's. This article has argued that (1) the aporia of time is rather the product of the coming into being of modern time regimes rooted in market practices, (2) Aristotle's contribution articulates time as the co-constituted product of a temporal world and of temporalizing humans, and (3) Augustine's conception of time presents it as a manifestation of divine power and of a tensing soul that ultimately belongs to God, rather than merely as an "inner" product of the human mind or subjectivity.

- ¹ Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit III* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), 19-178.
- ² Ricœur, *Temps et récit III*, 24.
- ³ Yuval Dolev, *Time and Realism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 2-3.
- ⁴ John Polkinghorne, "The Nature of Time," in *On Space and Time*, ed. Shahn Majid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 278-83.
- ⁵ Ricœur, *Temps et récit III*, 24.
- ⁶ Ricœur, *Temps et récit III*, 25, 41-2.
- ⁷ Ricœur, *Temps et récit III*, 39-42.
- ⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 47. See also Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectics* (London: Verso, 2009), 475ff.
- ⁹ Ricœur, *Temps et récit III*. See also Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectics*, 486.
- ¹⁰ See Jonathan Martineau, *Time, Capitalism and Alienation. A Socio-historical Inquiry into the Making of Modern Time* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).
- ¹¹ Martineau, *Time, Capitalism and Alienation*.
- ¹² For similar sociological approaches to the topic of time, see among others Norbert Elias, *Time. An Essay* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Barbara Adam, *Timewatch: The Social Analysis of Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); Robert Hassan, *Empires of Speed: Time and the Acceleration of Politics and Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2009). The concept of social time relations also builds on Robert Brenner and Ellen M. Wood's concept of social-property relations. See Robert Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe," in *The Brenner Debate*, ed. T.H. Alston & C.H.E. Philpin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Ellen M. Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2012).
- ¹³ On the innovation of clocks, see David Landes, *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); Jacques Le Goff, *Pour un autre Moyen-âge, temps, travail et culture au Moyen-âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977); Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum, *History of the Hour: Clocks and Modern Temporal Orders* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996). On the uniqueness of abstract time and the distinction from concrete time, see Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- ¹⁴ On the relationship between capitalism and abstract time, see Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*; Stavros Tombazos, *Time in Marx. The Categories of Time in Marx's Capital* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Massimiliano Tomba, *Marx's Temporalities* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).
- ¹⁵ Martineau, *Time, Capitalism and Alienation*.
- ¹⁶ Ursula Coope, *Time for Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.
- ¹⁷ Sarah Waterlow, "Aristotle's Now," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 135 (1984), 104.

- ¹⁸ David Bostock, "Introduction," in Aristotle, *Physics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), xliv.
- ¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962). On this point see also Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectics*, 476.
- ²⁰ Ricœur, *Temps et récit III*, 21-42.
- ²¹ Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectics*, 480.
- ²² Barbara Adam, *Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 29.
- ²³ Waterlow, "Aristotle's Now", 104.
- ²⁴ Aristotle, *Physics* IV. 11, 219a4-8; trans. Robin Waterfield, 105.
- ²⁵ Waterlow, "Aristotle's Now," 104.
- ²⁶ Aristotle, *Phys.* IV.11, 219a14.
- ²⁷ Aristotle, *Phys.* VI 3, 233b33-234b9.
- ²⁸ Aristotle, *Phys.* IV 11, 219b17-18.
- ²⁹ Waterlow, "Aristotle's Now," 121-2.
- ³⁰ Waterlow, "Aristotle's Now," 104. See also Ricœur, *Temps et récit III*.
- ³¹ "[C]hange follows magnitude, and time follows change." Aristotle, *Phys.* IV 11, 219b15.
- ³² In book III, Aristotle defines change as "the actuality of what exists potentially, in so far as it is potentially this actuality." Aristotle, *Phys.* III 1, 201a10-11.
- ³³ Aristotle, *Phys.* IV 10, 218b13.
- ³⁴ Aristotle, *Phys.* IV 11, 219a9.
- ³⁵ Aristotle, *Phys.* IV 11, 219a34-219b1.
- ³⁶ Aristotle, *Phys.* IV 11, 220a1, 219a24, 219a14.
- ³⁷ Aristotle, *Phys.* IV 11, 219b5-6.
- ³⁸ Aristotle, *Phys.* IV 11, 219b7-8.
- ³⁹ Julia Annas, "Aristotle, Number and Time," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 99 (1975).
- ⁴⁰ Annas, "Aristotle, Number and Time," 99.
- ⁴¹ Aristotle, *Phys.* IV 11, 219b7.
- ⁴² Aristotle, *Phys.* IV 11, 220a21.
- ⁴³ Aristotle, *Phys.* IV 11, 219b33.

- ⁴⁴ Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative (volume 3)*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 16. In French: "en dépit du renvoi, à chaque phase de la définition, à des opérations de perception, de discrimination et de comparaison qui ne peuvent être que celles d'une âme," Ricœur, *Temps et récit III*, 25-6.
- ⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Phys.* IV 14, 223a25-26.
- ⁴⁶ On time in modern physics see John Polkinghorne, "The Nature of Time," 278-83; Robert DiSalle, *Understanding Space-Time. The Philosophical Development of Physics from Newton to Einstein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Roger Penrose, *The Road to Reality* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004).
- ⁴⁷ Jonathan Martineau, "Time in Modern Times: Heidegger's and Bergson's Conceptions of Time in Context," in ed. E. Lung *et al.*, *Time and Culture* (Bucharest: University of Bucharest Press, 2017), 431-46; Jonathan Martineau, "Edmund Husserl's Internal Time Consciousness and Modern Times, a Sociohistorical Interpretation," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 13-2 (2019), 216-34.
- ⁴⁸ See Robert Hannah, *Time in Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Moishe Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination, 202*; Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum, *History of the Hour*, 18-28.
- ⁴⁹ Neal Wood & Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Class Ideology and Ancient Political Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Citizens to Lords* (London: Verso, 2008), 28-98.
- ⁵⁰ On "official time" see also Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 1-32.
- ⁵¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), 263. 11.13.6.
- ⁵² Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.2.20.
- ⁵³ Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.5.
- ⁵⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.13-28.
- ⁵⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.20.1-4.
- ⁵⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.11.4-5.
- ⁵⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.7.11.
- ⁵⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.7.13.
- ⁵⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.13.13.
- ⁶⁰ Wood, *Citizens to Lords*, 163.
- ⁶¹ Wood, *Citizens to Lords*, 153ff.
- ⁶² Wood, *Citizens to Lords*, 155.
- ⁶³ Wood, *Citizens to Lords*, 158.