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Future and Freedom: An Inquiry from the Philosophy of Culture

ENRIQUE ANRUBIA
CEU Cardenal Herrera University
enriqueanrubia@uchceu.es
ORCID: 0000-0001-7982-8190

HIGINIO MARÍN
CEU Cardenal Herrera University
higiniom@uchceu.es
ORCID: 0000-0002-8196-3970

Abstract: This paper inquiries the relationship between Freedom and Future. Initially, it examines the notion of the future as conceived within the Classical worldview, particularly through the idea of destiny, and differentiates it from the modern notion of the future. The contemporary linear conception of the future is predicated on two essential components of freedom: novelty and possibility – an idea originally introduced by Christianity. However, Modernity and Postmodernity have radicalized these concepts, resulting in a sharp dichotomy between the future and the past. The final section proposes a synthetic approach to reconciling the concepts of future and freedom.

Keywords: future, freedom, contemporary culture, presence.

Introduction

Oracles, soothsayers, celestial signs, numerology, final judgments, prophecies, heavenly realms, and paradises of the beyond – all of these suggest that humanity has never been content to dwell solely in the present or the immediate here and now. The desire to "know" the future is an almost universal imperative across cultures. Nevertheless, something fundamentally new has emerged in our time. We no longer merely seek to understand the future; we now aspire to control it (Martínez-Lucena 2023), to know it in such a way that we can anticipate and shape it. This aspiration has produced a paradox: the more we strive to grasp the future, the more opaque and elusive it becomes, for to anticipate it fully would require a degree of control that would, in effect, alter its very nature.

Curiously, this drive for anticipation has created a suffocating sense of urgency. Unlike previous eras, where the future was something to be divined, our contemporary cultural impulse to control it has transformed the future from a distant "later" into a pressing "pseudo-now". This "pseudo-now" constantly bears down on us, as if the future is no longer in front of us, but rather behind, propelling us forward with relentless force and incessantly challenging us. What has become unpredictable is not "tomorrow", but rather the very notion of the future itself. In other words, it is not the events that are to come that elude our understanding, but the very concept of "future" – a concept that now seems to loom over us, overwhelming and confounding us.

The philosophical inquiry into the Future is an inquiry into Freedom and, fundamentally, into the kind of reality that human being is. In a certain sense, the future is a unique invention (Geertz 1973) of West. Since the future is a cultural phenomenon, it can be assumed that most of Humankind has not had the same idea of the future as the contemporary individual possesses.

1. The Classical Hegemony of the "Coming Time"

The Ancient worldview conceived what we now call the future differently, as "the time to come", what is yet to arrive. However, the ancient future and the modern future, even with familiar and related features, are distinct. In fact, in Homeric times, the time to come does not have the form of what we understand as the future. For Homeric mythology, and also in its philosophical version for Classical and Hellenistic Greece, the future is the unfolding of what is prefigured in the past, particularly in a past that is the origin. The achievement of the Homeric hero is the fulfillment of an unfolding that was already prefigured from his birth, and for which the heroic deed was merely *a posteriori* proof and certification of his heroism (Jaeger 1962). A similar logical structure can be found in those thinkers whom Aristotle glossed as the "beginning of philosophy", when, with a rather unique intellectual approach among the contemporary cultural traditions, they questioned what the origin or *archê* of reality was. For the Greeks, reality is made of what its origin is and makes it be (Kirk et al. 1957).

Aristotle refers to the idea that reality is what is contained within its own origin as *physis*, or nature, which acts as the principle of its origination. *Physis* is the end that carries out the process of maturation from the beginning of each thing, and this originating principle that directs and organizes the fulfillment process is what Aristotle calls nature. In his words: "Nature is the end" operating from and as a principle (Aristotle *Politics*, 1252b). Thus, physis is the end making itself possible in its absence.

In this context, the "time to come" does not take the form of the future. Instead, the ancient concept of the future acquires the appearance known in classical Greece as destiny: what is yet to come is already present, though advanced in its principle.

Whether in the biographical events of an individual's life or in the unfolding of reality, the "time to come" in the Ancient World is not defined by the two elements that characterize the future in the Contemporary World. These two elements – *novelty* (the unforeseen or what was not

present at the beginning) and its presupposition, *possibility* –are absent. Instead, destiny closes the future as the realm of what is fixed: people are in their lives like grains of wheat whose development is predetermined from their birth and through the process of becoming.

Individual biographical diversity amounts to dilettantish or accelerated variations of a destiny that is already anticipated and governed from its origin. Just as every germinated grain will ultimately become an ear of wheat unless a disastrous fate intervenes, the variability among individuals and their different destinies or fortunes is where the possibility of creating epic, tragedy, or heroic narrative arises. Classical literary genres are ways of narrating the different fates of a human destiny, whether achieved or thwarted – one that leads to a heroic ending or another that ends fatally. The Greeks began to craft epic, tragedy, and lyric poetry from the various events that twist or straighten the lives of individually differentiated subjects, which ultimately distinguishes us from any other living form (Choza 1996). However, in that cultural framework, the concept of the future does not exist; rather, there is the determination of an origin whose uncertainties are seen as the gods' finger pointing to one place or another, and which the Greeks never regard as mere chance.

For the future to manifest as a cultural event and transform the consciousness of individuals and their conception of their own existence and their societies, and for collective human action to consider the future, the idea of an unforeseen *novelty* from the beginning must emerge. Therefore, it must be assumed that the future is the realm of *possibility* and not necessity. From the perspective of destiny, the future exists as an originating past or a past yet to be updated. Thus, interpreting the future as what lies ahead and the past as what lies behind does not make much sense in the Ancient Worldview. The linear direction of time from past to future becomes blurred because the difference between past and future pertains only to the viewpoint of the consciousness that considers it.

Therefore, the Greeks could say that there are other places and dimensions of reality where the future has already occurred: a book where destiny can be read, astral alignments that write it, the entrails of a bird that already predict the loss of a battle, etc. There, the future is

simply the observer's perspective on something of the same nature as the past, only it has not yet appeared from that perspective. In the circular unfolding of time, the line that ends where it began and encloses it makes the contemporary assumption that the past is merely what lies behind more difficult, as it is also, in a way, what lies in front. One could almost say that, in this view, times are diversified forms of the past, of what is necessary.

2. Future as Novelty and Possibility

This conception of time has a kind of residual presence in the history of Western thought whenever there is a desire for seemingly reliable predictability about the future. When it is posited that the future can be known with scientific rigor, a reformulated version of this ancient conception resurfaces, albeit with a different emphasis and momentum. For example, the nineteenth-century positivist historicism of Comte or Marxism hold that scientific knowledge provides social predictions of a scientific nature, which are almost like prophecies. In these predictions, the periods and changes in social systems they describe –such as those based on modes of production– are expected to inevitably lead to a conflict that will result in the self-awareness of the proletariat, which in turn is expected to take on the definitive and ultimate role in political history.

However, that is not "the future" but rather an emergent time defined as necessary and unavoidable. When necessity is established, freedom diminishes into a mere force or a variable that either acts as a catalyst or an obstacle to a preordained course of events. A similar phenomenon occurs when contemporary science endeavors to eradicate individual violence because it has supposedly identified a "violence gene" (Alsobrook et al. 2000) and believes it can be altered. This turns science into both a prophet and an advanced executor of a predictable future where perpetual peace would be achieved. The same can be said of the supposed predictions made by economists, which are often just projections based on the current state of affairs. As a result, they are rarely accurate, or their accuracy is typically only apparent in hindsight, when all the variables

present in a situation are known, and the influence of each variable can be assessed. Nevertheless, this is not truly the future.

Then, where does time appear as *possibility* and where does *novelty* arise? This time has a theological matrix linked to Christian soteriology. For Christianity, the figure of Christ represents an unforeseeable and unique novelty that is not part of a predetermined origin, as it does not follow from the initial conditions. It manifests as an unanticipated variable that is irreducible to the origin. The birth of Christ, God becoming man, is not an unforeseen event merely because it was previously unknown that within the germinal seed there was an unknown variant capable of unexpected activation, making it a novelty relative to the limitations of our knowledge. If it were simply a matter of the unknown, and if people had sufficient knowledge, they would have recognized it. Instead, the appearance of Christ and the Christian conception of time imply that history involves a novelty that also addresses another unforeseen novelty, namely that Adam said "no" instead of "yes". Both instances relate to the idea that there is a principle within particular individuals, and thus historical agents, such that the future cannot be predicted without this variable, which, as time progresses, is known as freedom.

Freedom presents the future as the time of possibility, where freedom itself becomes the place for individual decisions regarding destiny in terms of salvation or condemnation. Thus, the term "destiny" has now lost its meaning as an effect of a preordained self-destination. Christian salvation, as the destiny of Humanity, is not exactly the Greek concept of fate but a later and already desubstantialized version of it. In this context, "destiny" properly refers to self-determination among the new possibilities opened up by the redemption of the Christ. It concerns the unfolding of life towards a horizon, but with the fundamental variable of freedom not predetermined in its outcome. Christianity, in this regard, faces a situation similar to that of the ancients about the future: just as Christianity, when speaking of "destiny", is actually referring to "free self-determination", so the ancients, when referring to "the future", were speaking of "what is already fixed".

Vico argued that the earliest forms of religion were forms of divination. The Latin etymology of "divination" –*addivinare*– means "to seek or tend

toward the divine" (Vico 1995, 165), which is the attempt to gain knowledge of the gods regarding the future. "Divination" and "divine" share the same root. Religious practices were methods to obtain knowledge that the gods had about a part of the future to which only they had access, being at the very origin of what is to come. However, with the novelty introduced by Christianity, the uncertainty of the future no longer arises from the fact that humans are incapable of knowing it as those who know. Now, the future carries a new uncertainty inherent in the individual's own reality, who thinks of himself without knowing what will become of him over time. He tries to navigate an uncharted and unestablished path, seeking to understand who he is because he is a potential being, not predetermined or destined. Thus, reality itself becomes infused with possibility. The human being starts to perceive himself as something that may or may not be, and this very possibility initiates, on one hand, a discussion about reality and, on the other, the future begins to be seen as the intrinsic nature of reality in its new and open form. This intrinsic nature of the reality begins to be understood as Freedom.

This concept of Freedom is neither immediate nor complete but is part of a historical process of intellectual maturation. For example, Aquinas attempts to integrate the Christian notion of freedom with the Aristotelian concept of nature, despite the fact that the Aristotelian notion of nature represented an elevation of the Greek worldview of fate to the level of a "philosophical concept". This intellectual process of redefining freedom is first intensified when Christianity begins to understands itself independently of Aristotelian categories. In the context of Humanist Neoplatonism, discourses such as those of Pico della Mirandola emerge, which attribute to human being the possibility to "degenerate into lower beings like animals, [or regenerate…], according to [his] will, into higher realities that are divine" (Pico della Mirandolla 2010, 4). Here, freedom becomes a form of self-awareness regarding the uncertain nature of one's own being. To be free is to question not only what my destiny will be but also what and who I am. Both the Thomistic and Humanist perspectives have their limitations. The Thomistic view is constrained by a synthesis that cannot fully account for the new understanding of freedom, while the Humanist view is limited by its unrestrained notion of freedom, which

does not fully consider the biological constraints and the fact that humans are, though not exclusively, also animals and mammals (Marín 2007).

This dilemma is in itself an indication of the direction in which European philosophy will head: the affirmation of the future, and by extension, of freedom, conceived dialectically with the past. The apotheosis of the future occurs not through a synthetic effort between the past as form, that is, the necessary, and the future as the possible, but rather through a unilateral affirmation of the future as the possible, in open and exclusive contention with the past. For now, the past is seen as the source of necessity and thus of the withering of freedom.

3. The Exclusive Dialectic of Time: Future vs. Past

Undoubtedly, the most eruptive moment of this idea in European Political History is the French Revolution, which includes the assertion that everything related to the past has a conditioning nature. In contrast, the assertion of the individual as free requires –in order to shape their future as a free future– the complete eradication of any prefiguring antecedents. Whether it is the lineage that determines social position, the heritage that sets one apart, noble or guild status, or any other past condition, these must be abolished because they frame the future not as a realm of possibility but as the extension of an originating and prescriptive past. The notion that freedom only exists in and through a future that is in opposition to all past, transforms this conception of the future into an agent that judges and reconfigures the past in the same way the past had previously influenced it: it ultimately turns the past, which was once seen as necessary, into something possible, thereby dissolving reality into mere interpretation.

This reformulation of the past as a realm of possibility manifests as something perpetually interpretable and revocable, incapable of conditioning the future. If the past is now inherently revisable, it can no longer serve as a limiting or constraining factor, as we cannot even have a definitive awareness of it. In relation to the future and freedom, the past becomes the domain of speculative interpretation. Thus, the past

itself assumes a secondary status under the dominance of the future, becoming a sort of imperfect future: although it existed, it remains within the sphere of possibility. Consequently, our engagement with the past is purely interpretive, devoid of absolute truth, and all knowledge becomes a matter of hermeneutics or interpretation: language. Moreover, the past is redefined by the future, transforming it into a justification that every future provides for itself, making the past a justificatory precedent for future aspirations. The past is thus framed by a future that prescribes and legitimizes itself. This represents a shift from a past that constrained the future to a future that reframes the past as merely one of many possibilities.

Nevertheless, the French Revolution is just one political episode among many, preceded by an individual agent with an already established professional and social structure. In this context, lineage, property, and law do not possess a fateful character. However, it remains clear that the legitimizing logic of power in the *Ancien Régime* was genealogical -a system where individuals held their positions by virtue of their origin and birthright, much like the aristocratic lineages (Taylor 1991). Thus, affirming the future involves delegitimizing political subjects whose prominence was rooted in genealogy and historical justification. From this period, the generative logic that will shape the final chapter of this idea becomes apparent: the emergence of a human being without a relevant or determinative past, thereby possessing the entire future. This subject, characterized by having all the future and lacking a substantive past, will eventually become the political embodiment of the ideals of this future-oriented era: *youth*. To be "young" signifies having no past or a minimal past, and having all possibilities for the future. Moreover, this type of youth centers around an enduring sense of childhood. This defines the postmodern subject (Lyotard 1979), one of whose most distinctive features is an aversion to memory or experience, that is, to the past as a source of knowledge (Zweig 2012).

In contemporary society, every technological, material, or cultural invention must encompass an implicit pedagogy wherein all previously accumulated experience is rendered largely obsolete. Consequently, the individual best suited to novelty is the one with the least prior knowledge,

as they are least encumbered by previous constraints. Thus, the value of knowledge as a repudiation of accumulated experience provides an epistemological validation for the ontological discrediting of the past. What then constitutes the state of perfection that preserves the individual's freedom? It is characterized by inexperience, the absence of conditioning memory, and the skill to render all antecedents irrelevant. Knowledge of history, philosophy, economics, or religion of one's civilization is unnecessary because history itself becomes a burden and a matter of genealogy.

This new archetype is the "young person". This transformation was catalyzed in May 1968, when class unions observed in astonishment a revolution led by privileged university students (Cambronero and Merino 2018). At that time, Socialism had already been established as a right to equality for the impoverished – the Socialism of the Enlightenment and Modernity, which pertains to the dispossessed and those without a past, where the past is considered heritage. By May 1968, this was already accomplished. The "young person" embodies the ontological proletariat, where deficiency has been converted into possession – the possession of oneself free from any past, in other words, being as pure possibility.

However, this ontological youth, whose affirmation inevitably involves the negation of everything, including reality itself in a form of positive nihilism, identifies genetic and bodily heritage as the constraining antecedent to freedom. This reveals that our mammalian condition is genealogical in nature, that the species itself constitutes a lineage, and thus, the condition of *Homo sapiens* is replete with antecedents that restrict future possibilities. Therefore, the genetic and bodily aspects, both as individuals and as a species – as highlighted by Darwin in the 19th century-must be confronted within autonomous consciousness, for overcoming the past necessitates addressing the conditioning precedents inherent in our mammalian nature.

Without this nihilism, perpetual youth is unattainable. Merely asserting the future against the past is insufficient to suspend time; one must transcend linearity, the conventional form of time that progresses from one point to another. Time must assume the suspended yet dynamic form of play, and it is this transitive circularity that embodies the full

condition of a free subject, erasing any prior prefiguration. This represents the morphology of consciousness and time that we have uncovered in our era. More decisive than the aristocratic patrimonial regime, more significant than the economic inequalities that the state attempts to mitigate through fiscal adjustments, more fundamental than educational disparities, and more critical than all these conditions, is DNA – the basic molecular structure where our mammalian identity as male or female is encoded. Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement, "Biology is not destiny" (Beauvoir 1949), has become both a slogan and an axiom of contemporary thought. Biology is not destiny because to accept biology would be to negate freedom. All these negations occur within the ludic transformation of the substance of life's temporal experience.

4. A Synthetic Conception of Time: Presence

The conception of the future that diminishes the past arises from a specific understanding of freedom, in which it cannot be exercised over conditioning antecedents, because these antecedents prescribe (they are preformative) the script of a life, leaving individuals as mere actors rather than full authors of their own trajectory. Consequently, possibility is not only what lies ahead as achievable and to be realized but now also constitutes the very status of reality (Lipovestky 1987). If the future is viewed as open possibility, and the past as canceled and fixed possibility, then the past must also be seen as a mutable possibility available to the choice of freedom. In the actor-author dynamic of life, scripts must be capable of being rewritten in as many directions as possibilities permit. Any form of freedom that is inherently unconditional becomes a form of self-extinction, as all acts must be conditional for the subject's freedom to remain unconditional.

Nevertheless, and contrary to –but also emerging from– Modernity, the collective experience suggests that humans want to be what we are. Many of the constraints that Postmodernity aims to transform into choices available to the subject (such as biology, culture, language, etc. (Baumann 2005)) do not present themselves as restrictive limits but rather as

opportunities to realize the universality of the human experience through them. This reflects an experience of freedom that is not problematic, since freedom does not typically encounter conditioning antecedents as mortal enemies but as signs, indications, and impulses for its own expansion and realization. If this is the case, then a synthesis between past and future, where both are mutually preserved, acknowledged, and integrated, becomes conceivable and possible. This synthesis is termed *vocation*: the free synthesis between necessity and possibility, between past and future. It is possible to experience biology as vocation, meaning that the necessary aspects of our sexual condition are not merely or primarily restrictive antecedents but represent a possible way of being human for oneself, one of the ways to be a person. Similarly, this can be affirmed regarding a native sociocultural condition, tradition, or language. For example, speaking Spanish is not merely a restrictive imposition but a legacy that enables access to the universality of the human experience and its understanding, without requiring the denial of the antecedents that make it possible.

Certainly, one might experience the contrary; however, the attempt to suspend the prior dimensions of our freedom involves conceiving it dialectically – not just in relation to secondary aspects, but ultimately with respect to reality itself.

In this context, the core of European Modern thought fractures into dialectical impositions, where the belief is that to assert something, it is necessary to negate something else. Thus, the mission and task become the identification and negation of its antagonist. This dialectic has been a constant in European thought over the past four centuries.

Indeed, the suspension of a determinative past is central to Europe's and the West's major contribution to global traditions. However, the cost of escaping destiny is a plunge into a phobic freedom that is incapable of referencing anything in nature – a freedom that harbors an insurmountable enmity towards the past and any ontological elements that might condition it. Western societies have embraced this cultural perspective as contemporary common sense. Nowadays, the West stands as the only known civilization in history that believes its future can only progress through the revocatory cancellation of its past.

The free synthesis of necessity and possibility demands that the notions of novelty and origin be reconcilable, meaning that the origin must be a source of novelty, and that novelty must, in turn, fulfill what is *original*. There exists a concept that allows for the articulation –and contemplation– of this synthetic relationship between origin and novelty: *originality*. Indeed, what is original is new, but it is new precisely due to its renewed proximity to the *origin*. Freedom can be original, not merely in the creative sense, but in the fundamental sense that only that which originates from itself is truly free.

However, the subjective synthesis between past and future possesses a fundamentally present nature: it is about achieving presence. Only those who lack presence escape both the future in its postmodern incarnation and the past in its traditional form. Dispersions towards either the past or the future represent two forms of emptiness or inconsistency of the present. It is the present, characterized by its inherent freedom and coherence, that enables authentic syntheses – whether institutional, biographical, cultural, or philosophical. A philosophy of the present is evidenced by a subject who can offer something, that is, someone who can transform the present into an actual *present*, thereby establishing their presence within it (Alvira 1992). The present gains consistency as the temporal synthesis of past and future through the subject's full engagement in their work, which then becomes a pledge to themselves, or, in other words, *spirit*. As Hegel noted, spirit is that which can present itself as the content of communication. This is also the vivid experience of a full temporal reality where the subject's actions fill the present, preventing its drift towards the future or the past. When there is no inclination or surrender to escape, there is *presence*, and within that presence, the integration of past and future is both contained and resolved.

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