

Transformative Events: Time, Conversion, & the Messianic

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Course Meetings: TBD

Office Hours: TBD

Course Description: This course will ask students to consider the ways we frame and interpret transformative events in time. In particular, we will focus on ‘religious’ events that are taken to signal a decisive change in oneself or in the world. Our two guiding examples here will be: (1) conversion, as a religious event of personal transformation, and (2) messianic rupture, as a religious event of world-historical transformation. Our interpretation of both these kinds of religious events would seem to depend on what we take an ‘event’ to be in general.

In order to get at this category of transformative events more broadly, then, we will look at three distinct (though interpenetrating) traditions of Western thought concerning how change comes about in time. For the first half of the course, we will inhabit the ancient Greek debate about the possibility of instantaneous transformation, taking special care to relate this debate to the problem of conversion as conveyed so memorably by the Christian thinker Augustine. Doing so will allow us to see where the conceptual problem of temporal change touches the experiential question of religious transformation. This will give us our first clue that philosophy and religion are feeding into one another when it comes to the issue of transformative events.

In the second half of the course, we will turn to a similar point of intersection between philosophy and religion in the modern period. We will begin with the phenomenology of time and its rediscovery of the problem of the temporal instant. Special attention will be paid to Jacques Derrida’s critique of the notion of a “living present” as worked out by his predecessor Edmund Husserl. This should prepare us well to move beyond phenomenology and into the work of Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou, both of whom aim to retrieve a notion of messianic rupture and put it to work for new kinds of social change. Instead of drawing on Augustine or the Greeks, Agamben and Badiou go back to the letters of Paul, which they see as communicating more effectively the potential for a sudden and dramatic transformation of ourselves and the world around us.

Our goal here will be to sort out these different ways of framing, cultivating, or undermining the possibility of transformative events on the part of both philosophy and religion. Ultimately, we should end up being in a position to ask ourselves why, even among seemingly secular philosophers like Agamben and Badiou, there is still a tendency to express the possibility of such events in religious language.

Course Objectives: By the end of this course, students will:

1. have gained a familiarity with the basic debates animating the philosophy of time and change in both antiquity and modernity.
2. have reflected on the fundamental interconnections between religious thought and philosophical attempts to understand the world around us.
3. have developed effective writing and critical thinking abilities, in order to confront the complexities involved in questions of time and transformation.
4. be able to use these new skills to approach the ongoing interaction between religion and philosophy in a critically sophisticated and intellectually responsible manner.

Assignments: In addition to reading the assigned texts closely and participating in class discussion, students will be required to write two papers. The first paper, due during week six, will ask students to critically contrast the approaches to time and change taken by any two of the following authors: Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, or Augustine. The second paper, due during finals week, will ask students to compose a similar comparison between the phenomenology of time (as seen through Husserl and Derrida) and the discourse on the event (as seen through Badiou and Agamben). Further details about the written assignments will be disseminated during the quarter, but the first paper should be in the range of 6-8 pages, while the second paper should be 10-12 pages.

Grading Standards: Students' grades will be determined not only by the quality of their papers, but also by their participation. Thoughtful engagement with the readings and constructive input during class discussions will merit a high participation grade. Poor preparation and unexcused absences will result in a lower grade. The grading breakdown will be as follows:

Participation—20%

First Paper (6-8 pages)—30%

Second Paper (10-12 pages)—50%

The papers will be graded for compositional competence, argumentative clarity, and accuracy to the sources. No plagiarism will be tolerated, in accordance with university guidelines. For tips on how to avoid the pitfalls of plagiarizing, see the Writing Center's helpful webpage:
http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/but_what_if_you_get_stuck.htm

Required Texts:

1. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford UP, 2009).
2. Jacques Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. Leonard Lawlor (Northwestern UP, 2010).
3. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: a Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford UP, 2005).
4. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: the Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford UP, 2003).

Recommended Texts:

Short selections from some of these works will be posted for download on Chalk, provided that they meet the length regulations set out by the University of Chicago Libraries.

1. Aristotle, *Physics I-IV*, Loeb Classical Library vol. 228, trans. P.H. Wicksteed & F.M. Cornford (Harvard UP, 1957).
2. Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893-1917)*, trans. John Barnett Brough (Springer, 2008).
3. Plato, *Cratylus, Parmenides, Greater Hippias, Lesser Hippias*, Loeb Classical Library 167, trans. Harold North Fowler (Harvard UP, 1926).
4. Plato, *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles*, Loeb Classical Library 234, trans. R.G. Bury (Harvard UP, 2005).
5. Plotinus, *Ennead III*, Loeb Classical Library vol. 442, trans. A.H. Armstrong (Harvard UP, 1967).

6. Robin Waterfield, *The First Philosophers: the Presocratics and the Sophists* (Oxford UP, 2000).

Schedule:

Note: The pagination used below is for the versions of these texts listed above. If students wish to use another version, especially of an ancient source, they should first consult with the instructor, so that they will be able to maintain the same reading pace as the rest of the class.

Week 1: An Introduction to the History of Time

Day 1: General introduction; initial sketch of the categories of ‘temporality,’ ‘instant,’ and ‘event’ as they will be used in the course

Day 2: Time and change in Anaximander and Heraclitus
(read: *First Philosophers*, pp. 3-21, 32-49)

UNIT I – The Ancients on Time, Change, and the Instant

Week 2: Plato

Day 1: Time as the moving image of eternity in the *Timaeus*
(read: *Tim.* 27a-48e; pp. 47-113)

Day 2: Time, divisibility, and the instant in the *Parmenides*
(read: *Parm.* 151e-157b; pp. 283-301)

Week 3: Aristotle

Day 1: Time as the calculable dimension of movement and change
(read: *Phys.* IV.x-xi; pp. 373-395)

Day 2: The idea of ‘the now’ as necessary for calculating time
(read: *Phys.* IV.xii-xiv; pp. 395-427)

Week 4: Plotinus

Day 1: The difference between time and eternity
(read: *Enn.* III.vii.1-7; pp. 297-321)

Day 2: The soul’s fall into extended time
(read: *Enn.* III.vii.8-13; pp. 321-355)

Week 5: Augustine

Day 1: Time as the tearing-apart of the soul—a new definition
(read: *Conf.* XI; Paul’s letter to the Philippians, ch. 3)

Day 2: Conversion as a transformative event?
(read: *Conf.* VIII)

UNIT II – The Phenomenology of Time

Week 6: Husserl

Day 1: What is the phenomenology of time?
(read: *Phenomenology*, pp. 3-10; 21-46)

Day 2: Primal impressions and the living present of experience
(read: *Phenomenology*, pp. 47-75)

Week 7: Derrida

Day 1: What does time have to do with language?

(read: *Voice and Phenomenon*, pp. 3-50)

Day 2: The instant as the ‘blink of an eye’

(read: *Voice and Phenomenon*, pp. 51-90)

UNIT III – The Messianic Event

Week 8: Badiou and Paul

Day 1: Badiou’s appropriation of Paul’s messianism

(read: *Saint Paul*, pp. 1-39; Paul’s letter to the Romans)

Day 2: Subjectivity, faith, and the messianic event

(read: *Saint Paul*, pp. 40-85)

Week 9: From Badiou to Agamben

Day 1: Badiou’s messianic virtues—faith, hope, love

(read: *Saint Paul*, pp. 86-111)

Day 2: Agamben’s appropriation of Paul’s messianism

(read: *Time That Remains*, pp. 1-58)

Week 10: Conclusions about the Future of Time

Day 1: *Kairos*—the time for messianic transformation?

(read: *Time That Remains*, pp. 59-112)

Day 2: Agamben’s messianic virtues—faith, hope, love

(read: *Time That Remains*, pp. 113-145)