

Ontology

Friday, May 2, 2025



The 2002 text, "[The Improbable Miracle of Existence](#)," proposed a paradoxical ontology emphasizing the unpredictability of being, but it should be added that this implies a retroactive temporal structure, making time a radical exteriority that cannot be eliminated, any more than entropy.

Of course, it cannot be said that retroaction or hindsight have ever been ignored, being at the root of history and dialectics or natural selection, but we have not sufficiently grasped what this implies for our relationship to reality, to time, to the future, what we might figuratively call a **cybernetic ontology** that adjusts itself to the result *a posteriori*, acknowledging

the essential strangeness of a reality that always eludes us in certain ways, contradicting our linear narratives and our usual visions of time. We are living in one of those crazy moments of rupture.

At the origin of the Big Bang, we are told of a singularity or instability, which simply means that it should not exist. The world begins with an inexplicable anomaly that is already that of being. Then it seems that determinism regains its rights, allowing us to go back to the first seconds of the universe. Except that these laws, which predict the creation of as much antimatter as matter, once again mean that nothing should exist. The original instability must have resulted in a slight imbalance in favor of matter for there to be something rather than nothing.

All existence seems to slip through the cracks of physical laws, the transitions between levels of organization, their margins. We can say that the initial indeterminacy has been transmitted to the phenomenal level, but it must be emphasized that, each time, it is the improbable nature of being that constitutes it as a phenomenon, as an object for physics, which seeks its laws. It is never determinism or calculation that can establish any kind of existence, but the event in its singularity, as singular as the birth of the world.

Matter would thus be nothing but oddity, failure, singularity. We can never explain its existence itself, only its causes in reverse and its rigorous

consequences. We do not deduce the existence of planets (except by their influence on other planets); we observe their presence. This is what makes physics experimental.

The existence of the universe is a miracle (a singularity), the existence of matter is a miracle (a flaw in being), the emergence of life is the miracle that responds to the miracle of an improbable world. The indeterminacy of existence that constitutes our freedom precedes all determination, all matter, all life, all information, all meaning. Our world is a world of largely unpredictable events, life is a fragile miracle.

If existence is a miracle saved from nothingness, freedom and (relative) indeterminacy are indeed more fundamental to our temporality than the determinism of physical, biological, or social laws.

Indeed, when causality reigns, the end is given at the same time as the origin, and when finality is all-powerful, nothing stands in the way of its realization; time does not exist.

Not only are we in a universe of imperfect laws and relative indeterminacy, but there can be no other because, as we shall see, improbability is not only duration but also information, matter, life, and freedom.

We could not have lived in a world that was not imperfectly deterministic and therefore unsettling.

Information is the other side of our fragility, our dependence on an external reality that eludes us and that we try to understand and tame. Information is everything we do not know about existence, everything that surprises us, threatens us or saves us; it is the enigma of the world.

These conclusions thus took the opposite view of the usual, purely deterministic ontology, not that there is no determinism, but that deterministic laws produce **indeterminacy** through the collision of independent trajectories (Cournot), breaks in symmetry, and exponential divergences that are overly sensitive to initial conditions, as shown by chaos theory. We are far from a fixist onto-theology that gives eternal substance to beings under a divine gaze, when existence could rather be attributed to a **defect in being**, always exceptional in relation to the laws of the universe and infinite space. Instead of seeing it as a divine creation assigned to its place, we must see it as an anomaly, an error in relation to universal entropy, which would dictate that there should be nothing. The deterministic laws of modern physics (quantum, chaos, complexity) have thus had to incorporate an increasingly large degree of indeterminacy, or rather unpredictability, unable to reduce

everything to a single formula (wave function of the universe) but having to make room for the unexpected. We must go a step further and admit that it is **indeterminacy, the unexpected, and imperfection in being that constitute matter, life, freedom, and meaning**. In fact, all of this is implied by the function of information from the moment natural selection begins (selection *after the fact* based on the result).

The important thing is to understand that this element of unpredictability is **fundamental** to life, learning, and freedom—which does not proceed from metaphysical free will or the fear of death, but from anxiety about the unexpected, the unease of living beings faced with the inherent improbability of the universe, of a reality that escapes the usual laws and thwarts our goals, multiplying perverse or undesirable effects. Nothing is more capricious than the weather, as we know, and the freedom left by uncertainty is not omnipotence, which it refutes, but rather a tentative reaction—before great crazy ideas come to mind, disregarding all caution.

This is **our world**, not an ideal, disembodied world. It is not order that emerges from chaos, but chaos that emerges from the underlying order. This implies that reality can only be confirmed after the fact, *a posteriori*, whether or not predictions are verified. From then on, we can say that time is the true **exteriority**, a time that surprises and contradicts us. The improbable and changing nature of reality, despite its relentless determinism, is identified with the exteriority of time itself in its unpredictability and its after-the-fact sanction, forcing us to adjust our actions to their results and to constantly correct our course, steering in the direction of our goals rather than following rigid programming and blind planning. This is not merely an adjustment at the margins, as in cybernetics (it is therefore inappropriate and overly reductive to speak of a cybernetic ontology), but something that challenges our very being, disavows us, and changes our initial goals. Human time, which is active and cognitive, is not merely a project or a duration, but a dialectic after-the-fact that corrects and transforms us.

The exteriority of this uncontrollable reality should not be thought of as spatial or abstract otherness, but as the **structure of time** that historicizes it *a posteriori*—“for us” but against us—preventing it from closing and freezing at the end of history, where nothing would happen anymore, where we would be connected to the great Whole and freed from fear. This is the opposite of eternity. Despite poetic or religious intoxication, there is no direct access to the real that narratives cover up and techniques attempt to master, caught up in a dialectic that contradicts us, confronts us with failure, with the denials of the real, assuring us that there can be no conceivable end of time. It is this specifically historical dimension that must be integrated, and which can be said, in short, to be the opposite of millenarian ideologies, with Minerva's owl only taking flight at nightfall.

This temporality cannot be reduced to presence (Husserl), nor to duration (Bergson), nor even to the projected future, and even less to eternity. And, contrary to Hegelian dialectics, which recognizes this negativity of time, it is not simply a matter of internal contradictions and an implicit rationality that unfolds inexorably, but rather a **permanent adaptation to a radical exteriority, to the unforeseen as such, a true passage of time.**

It is not just a matter of admitting our finitude and limited knowledge, or even the irreversibility of time, because the element of **denial** in learning makes us ashamed of our former beliefs (true *hontology*) and of the false assurance of projecting ourselves into eternity (confused with the universal). Nothing like the actual experience of the collapse of empires, ideologies, and religions to feel the traumatic nature of history, which was well known to former communists but even more so to former Nazis such as Reinhart Koselleck (*The Past Future*), theorist of the "*horizon of expectation*" confronted with the "*field of experience*", one of the few to have been sensitive to this retrospective dimension of remorse and guilt in history, which can be its most unbearable aspect. Who am I, indeed, if I can deny myself? Yet this is what we do constantly, and fortunately so, in all reflection and learning, a fundamental infidelity of retrospective time that changes and judges us. While it is customary to swear fidelity, this is to promise more than we can keep, for the future does not belong to us, whatever our stubborn resolve—even if familiarity can strengthen attachment, which is something else entirely.

However, not knowing everything does not mean that we know nothing and can do nothing, only that we must follow advancing knowledge and the lessons of experience. It is not that we cannot develop a philosophy of history and the major stages of its evolution, which is always precarious and at the mercy of what is to come (cosmological, volcanic, pandemic, ecological, economic, and political catastrophes), always different in crucial aspects from what was expected. The (relatively) unpredictable nature of the future is ontological, even if this does not prevent us from making **predictions**, on the contrary, in a cycle of **anticipation → the unexpected → correction → revision of anticipations**. This fundamental retroactive structure of lived and historical time cannot be reduced to a series of isolated ruptures, but rather to our entire experience in different modes, despite habits and long periods of apparent stability that may seem to take up all the space, the absolute reign of the past. Almost anything can be predicted, but predictions are both indispensable and fallible (probabilistic). Real temporality remains that of an uncertain world where information relies on its improbability to temporarily reduce uncertainty before changing due to external causes, a temporality made up of projections into the future and their aftermath, which was unpredictable before—although the unexpected and the improbable are never irrational.

The fact that there are unforeseen events does not mean that anything is possible, including the most improbable utopia emerging from nowhere, but rather that material reality thwarts our predictions and brings us back to rationality (reality is rational, more rational than our reason). If the reversal of 1942 seemed like a **miracle** to those defeated by triumphant Nazism (such as Edgar Morin), it was only the end of the “miracle” expected by the Germans who were excited about a “*1,000-year Reich*” and the return to earth of these fanatics to a dreary, overly prosaic normality (“*I am forced to admit that everything continues,*” Hegel confessed). As with stock market crashes, it is the previous madness, its hubris, that creates these sudden reversals. If madness or some other unlikely anomaly regularly disrupts the established order, the order always ends up reconstituting itself, a new negation of wild hopes restoring rationality to a higher level, in a (re)constructive aftermath. The fact that existence is a miracle in itself should not make us expect miracles, because even if time is indeed constructive (particularly in terms of increasing complexity), it is more often destructive (external collisions or simple internal entropy). Reality does not disappear, which contradicts our voluntarism. The miracle of existence has already happened—there is nothing more to expect!

The probable always remains the most certain, but the existence of the improbable (including a possible fatal accident) nevertheless puts us in the paradoxical situation of being unable to project ourselves into a more or less distant future, and yet being forced to do so all the time, an incessant activity of living beings and their necessary goals—which of course generally end up in ordinary routine, without which there would be no life, but time is change, otherwise there would be no evolution. There is therefore much that we can predict, but not future developments and discoveries, and even less so the date of announced events and disasters. Let us repeat: it is not that the “improbable” becomes the most probable, but only that statistically, **ruptures** in probability occur, something unexpected (rarely positive), amid ordinary probabilities and countless possible improbabilities, but which changes the situation each time and brings us back to reality. Dialectics has taught us that all negation is partial, going beyond the initial one-sidedness. We are therefore always in a dialectic of prediction-unforeseen events, fidelity-infidelity, order-accident. Neither passive skepticism nor voluntaristic dogmatism, but **progress of knowledge, history.**

If history is only written **after the fact** and it is the after-the-fact that characterizes dialectics, the historical after-the-fact is not only subjective and contingent (as in Cournot), actualization in relation to the present, because it leads to a necessary evolution, selected by an effective reality, the emergence of the new or of failure, this final rationalization in any case calling into question previous projections, like all learning and retrospective reflection (even in the surprises of [music](#)). To avoid simplification here too, it is necessary to distinguish between **several kinds** of after-

the-fact, practical, cognitive, historical, and narrative, but all of which belong to the fundamental retroactive structure of temporality, of cybernetic feedback as well as natural selection or market sanctions, a temporality that is not linear, nor simply past, present, or future, but **failure, revision, correction, constant retroaction** in the face of the unexpected, which constitutes temporality as the radical exteriority of the real—not merely an exceptional discontinuity in a fundamental continuity, but a constant structure of temporality. This after-effect can be both objective (results, assessments, interactions, adjustments) and subjective (time to understand, *"quilting points"*, reinterpretation, reinscription, or repetition that makes sense). It is not always immediate when it concerns an economic or ecological collapse. Since economic determination is not mechanical but only imposes itself, as Engels says, *"in the last instance,"* it sanctions in the longer term political and ideological errors that no longer succeed in maintaining *"the production and reproduction of real life"* (of which communism will be the victim). This can be seen as a deferred constraint but is more a matter of non-linear causalities. Reality does not oppose even the most far-fetched ideas, but only their implementation—after they have had time to produce their effects.

To this ontological constraint must be added the inadequacy of our dogmatic thinking in the face of an incalculable future and its tendency to overstep the bounds, as evidenced by dialectics, which also reaches its limit in the aftermath of its confrontation with reality. Dialectics is indispensable for thinking about the ruptures and discontinuities we experience, even if talking too much about dialectics turns it into a preconceived abstract scheme that erases the shock experienced (*"proper historical understanding is sacrificed to the metaphysical scheme,"* Dilthey). Beyond the cognitive limits of a reality that eludes us, however, there are the omnipresent ramblings of inherited **narratives** and their false hopes, which can only collide with the *post-festum* reality (as Marx put it). By its very nature, **narrative language defies time** and speaks of what we cannot see, of what is not present. It deceives us while giving consistency and duration to things, but also to our lives and institutions, to a world common to the principle of the cultural development of humanity, which is no small thing! This narrative, which extends our episodic memory, is essential to learning and to our responsibility or identity, as well as to the construction of historical meaning from selected, memorable elements that are not insignificant—but detached from the multitude of real events and presented in an overly linear, simplistic, mythological form. We essentially learn to believe in things that do not exist and to lie sincerely, which is indeed imperative in society and for morale, but cannot be without drawbacks. It is impossible to do without stories; rumors fill the void when they are lacking, but here again, time sorts things out.

We must convince ourselves that humans have never had immediate access to

reality. *"What they perceive, they recount. What they understand, they construct. What they anticipate, they project,"* and reality regularly stands in the way of our projections, contradicts our stories, and forces us to make painful revisions. These observations should not be reduced to pure speculation when they have eminently **practical** consequences, notably the need for feedback, for adjusting to the outcome, as well as the sad realization that we only react in the face of disaster, when we no longer have a choice, calling into question the delusional ambition to change the world (which was the ambition of my entire activist life!), to dominate it through our subjective will.

Even if our goals and convictions constantly guide our actions and are mostly successful, it is not ideas that rule the world, but only those that are challenged. Causalities are ultimately **material**, massive, autonomous, and systemic. Even moral goals do not depend on our good intentions and cannot be achieved directly without mediation. This does not prevent morality and law from progressing toward universalization under the pressure of facts (the cunning of reason). It was materialism and science, not religion, that ensured the universality of Marxism (before the dictatorship!), while [fascist-like](#) identity ideologies divide us into contradictory narratives, opposing values, and conflicting desires. It is worth remembering all this at a time when it is no longer the extreme left but reactionary ideology that would have us believe that everything is ideology: social progress, ecology, and even science are nothing more than moral (atheistic) ideology and not a very material existential issue, progress of the universal demanded not by our excellence but by a complete digital, economic, ecological, and pandemic globalization. We never know how it will end, except that, in the long run, reason will eventually prevail.

*Jean Zin, "[Ontologie](#)", 2 May 2025
English translation by DeepL*

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