The Past’s Presence

Essays on the Historicity of Philosophical Thought

Eds. Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback & Hans Ruin
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Preface

Hans Ruin, Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback

One way to define and diagnose the modern epoch of philosophical thinking could be in terms of its differing strategies for confronting the problem of its own relation to tradition and to history. Does genuine philosophical thinking require that all historical considerations be left aside? Or does it, on the contrary, call for a more thorough critical immersion in and confrontation with its past? Throughout the development of philosophy over the past centuries, differing strategies have been adopted toward this problem, oscillating between ahistorical and historicist conceptions of what philosophy is. Kant discarded mere historical learning as weakness of thought, whereas Hegel introduced once and for all a historical mode of reflection as essential to the very process of philosophical speculation. Yet, once we analyze more closely the apparent strict dichotomy between so called ahistorical and historicist conceptions of thought, we find that the distinction itself is never very clear. In the most ardent attempts to develop philosophy in disregard of historical context and motivation, we can detect an anxiety before and preoccupation with history, whereas in many historicist attempts to approach philosophical problems from the point of view of their so called historical context, one often meets a surprising lack of awareness concerning the historical and temporal conditions of thinking itself.

In October 2003 a symposium was organized at Södertörn University College, under the title “Thinking in History”, which gathered a number of researchers in philosophy, from Sweden and from abroad, to present material relating to the general problem of how philosophy conceptualizes its historical situatedness. The meeting was part of an ongoing research project funded by the Baltic Sea Foundation (Östersjöstiftelsen). Most of the essays presented in this volume originate from this meeting. Jim Jakobsson’s text is based on an earlier unpub-
lished paper which was reedited for this volume. Later on, the theme was taken up again in a research seminar with Marlène Zarader in May 2005 whose text dates from this event, and then by David Carr, who presented his text in the context of a panel organized by Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback as part of Filosofidagarna in Uppsala, in June 2005.

A focus for many of the contributions is phenomenology, and its development by Heidegger, in particular through his theory of historicity as a new way to conceptualize the historical nature of thought. Through his account the distinction is established between doing history and being historical. Historicity signifies a dimension of subjectivity, and therefore of philosophizing. What is ultimately at stake is the possibility of the autonomy of thinking, in view of its historical belonging. Another recurrent reference is Nietzsche’s critical analysis of historical consciousness. His seminal reflections on the advantages and disadvantages of history for life provide a path in the labyrinth of the relationship between philosophy and history. This shared phenomenological background unites the work of Critchley, Carr, Zarader, Ruin, Cavalcante Schuback, Wallenstein, in their very different approaches and conclusions. It constitutes an important element also in Jakobsson’s survey, which is a broad summary which draws from many different traditions. In the text by Jason Wirth presented here, the Nietzschean way of conceptualizing history is set into a dialogue with its modern Japanese reception. And in the articles by Spindler and Rosengren the problem is addressed from the point of Spinoza’s thinking on interpretation, and the modern political philosophy of Castoriadis.

October 2005, Stockholm
Phenomenology of historical time

David Carr

Philosophy has approached history with metaphysical and epistemological questions. The phenomenological approach to history differs from both the metaphysics of history and the epistemology of historical knowledge. Its focus is on *Geschichtlichkeit* (historicity or historicality), a term that has been used in the works of Husserl, Dilthey, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur. The question is not What *is* history? or How do we *know* history? but rather What is it to be historical? What is it like to exist historically? What does it *mean* to be historical? Dilthey wrote that “we are historical beings first, before we are observers [*Betrachter*] of history, and only because we are the former do we become the latter [...]. The historical world is always there, and the individual not only observes it from the outside but is intertwined with it [*in sie verwebt*].”

Phenomenologists want to know what it means to be a “historical being,” in Dilthey’s sense, and in what sense we are intertwined with history. They want to know how history is encountered, how it enters our lives, and in what forms of consciousness and experience it does so. In this essay I want to take up these questions, and sketch an answer to at least some of them. After that I shall make a few remarks about how they might relate to the standard metaphysical and epistemological questions.

These phenomenological questions make a couple of assumptions. The first assumption is that these questions can be answered by a description of first-person experience. This is, of course, the assumption of all phenomenology, which offers first-person descriptions of being conscious, of being spatial, of being temporal, and so on. But these descriptions are supposed to have more than first-person validity; they are supposed to hold good for all, or anybody’s, first-person experi-

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ence. The second assumption is that we all are historical beings, not incidentally but in some important way, just as we are temporal, spatial, bodily, conscious, social, etc. Thus the word “historical” is not used as it is when we say that Bismarck was a historical individual, since in that sense most of us are not historical; nor as it is used when we say that the storming of the Bastille was a historical event, since most events are not historical in that sense.

The validity of the first assumption can be established only by producing such descriptions and making them available to the critical scrutiny of others. If you hear such a description and think it needs to be improved, you are at least conceding that such description is possible. Similarly, the second assumption can be established by producing a description of historical experience that convinces us that historicity is indeed an essential, and not merely an incidental feature of our existence. In that sense both assumptions can be seen as hypotheses to be confirmed by the account that is offered.

The first thing to be said about historical existence is that it is closely tied to time and to social existence. Let us examine these two elements in turn.

I. Temporality

As phenomenologists like Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have maintained, human subjectivity instantiates a special sort of relationship to time. Just as I am not merely in space in the way that an object is in a container, so I am not just in time in the sense of occurring at a particular moment, or sequence of moments. To be sure, I do exist in an ever-changing Now, and my experience is a sequence of Nows, but it is much more than that. Nor am I merely a temporally persisting substance which bears the changing effects of time as its properties or predicates, like a thing. Nor yet do I merely accumulate “traces” of what passes, like footprints on a path. These traditional metaphors for dealing with the self in time contain some truth, but they are inadequate.

Like the Here in relation to the space I perceive and inhabit, the Now is a vantage point from which I survey a kind of temporal field encompassing past and future. Memory and expectation make possible an ongoing experience through which past and future form the horizon
or background from which the present stands out; together they give meaning to the present moment in which I experience or act. I hold onto a past as I project a future before me. These are essential features of human experience. It is not as if I exist in the present and just happen to have the capacity occasionally to envisage the future and remember the past. Rather, human experience just is a kind of temporal reach or stretch, as Heidegger called it. Husserl spoke of the horizons of retention and protention which constitute the continuity of experience, and are to be distinguished from acts of explicitly “thinking about” the future or “recollecting” the past. These latter elements of my experience may be absent; the continuity may not.

In space I am not just a passive perceiver but also an agent, moving and acting in the world around me. So too in time: the future I have before me is not merely anticipated or expected but also projected and affected by the actions in which I am engaged. Present and past are not merely passively given but are actively construed and interpreted as a situation conducive to and calling for certain actions. Like space, then, time is a practical field in which I maneuver and whose contours I shape by my action.

In this practical context the unity of the subject in time is not a given or a presupposition, nor is it a product of my past experiences, but is itself a kind of project or achievement in which I construct my identity out of the actions I perform. But I define myself not only in relation to my past and future, and my temporal coherence, but also in relation to others. And this is where we come to the other dimension of history, the social context. We move from our being in time to our being with others, from subjectivity to intersubjectivity.

II. Being with others

The first-person character of our description so far might suggest that the discussion of my relations with others would start with how the I confronts the Thou. Traditional accounts, phenomenological and otherwise, of the social aspect of human existence have taken their start from the situation in which I experience the Other face-to-face. They have asked questions about how the Other can be an object for me which is nevertheless a subject, how I can know the Other’s thoughts and experiences when all I perceive is the body, and more generally
how I relate and have access to a subjectivity which is not my own. These are perfectly legitimate questions, and they are especially important if one wants to consider also the ethical dimension of intersubjectivity. These questions lie behind the classic formulation of the I-Thou relation in Martin Buber; and even Levinas, who is critical of many aspects of this whole approach, arguably still takes it as his point of departure. But it should be recognized that this approach concerns only one mode of being with and relating to others.

Husserl and Heidegger actually took a different approach to being with others and this approach was integrated into their concepts of historicity. Heidegger begins with the everyday, precognitive, practical world, and this world is social through and through. But here we encounter others first and foremost not as objects to be known but through common projects in which we are engaged. The others are experienced as co-workers and co-participants in the ongoing undertakings which give meaning and structure to our common surroundings.

Husserl’s approach to intersubjectivity initially took its point of departure in the face-to-face or I-Thou situation as a phenomenological problem. But he discovers another approach to being with others in his late work when dealing with what he calls the crisis of European science. Husserl’s treatment of consciousness had from the start taken scientific cognition as a primary focus, asking questions about how we move from the world of perception to the scientifically warranted judgments that make up our theoretical disciplines, including humanistic and psychological as well as natural sciences. For the most part Husserl’s approach to these questions seemed to make the assumption that the individual subject, in pursuit of scientific knowledge, could simply transcend the limitations of its concrete social situation and somehow move directly to the truth. What he finally appreciated in his late work on the crisis of the sciences is that theoretical inquiry is necessarily an intersubjective affair. He recognized that, in the pursuit of theoretical truth, the individual always inherits this pursuit as an existing and ongoing activity of the society in which she or he takes it up. The problems and questions of science do not come out of the blue, but out of a tradition of ongoing inquiry. The individual not only inherits the questions but often builds on the answers already obtained by oth-

ers as the basis for further work. Even when the primary motivation for inquiry is criticism of the existing solutions to problems, rather than acceptance of them, as is so often the case in science, these prior solutions furnish the context and background for ongoing inquiry. Thus a cognitive endeavor like science, even though it is pursued by individuals, owes its undertaking in each case, as well as its forward motion, to the social context in which it exists.

These considerations cast science in a new light for Husserl, though they are not isolated in the philosophy of science. In fact, they resemble some of the insights of pragmatists like Dewey before him, even as they foreshadow later post-empiricist developments in the analytic philosophy of science. What is important for our purposes, however, is that they facilitate a new approach to intersubjectivity that parallels and complements Heidegger’s treatment of being with others. What is more, this approach turns out to extend beyond the realm of scientific inquiry, which can be seen as but one instance of a larger pattern.

How should we characterize one’s relation to others in a shared scientific inquiry? They are encountered as fellows, colleagues, co-participants in a common project. What counts about them for me is not their inner life or their total existence, but merely their engagement in an activity which is oriented toward a goal which I share. More is shared than just the goal, of course: there are explicit or tacit standards and rules about how inquiry is to be conducted; shared notions of what counts as a valid contribution to the inquiry, and much more. As we know from the case of science, the others are not confined to my immediate colleagues or lab partners, but include other members of the profession at large, especially other specialists in the same field. Clearly the standard terms for the intersubjective encounter do not apply here: the other as alter ego, autrui, appearing in a face-to-face confrontation, object of empathy or sympathy, returning my regard and putting me to shame or reducing me to an object, à la Sartre – all these terms seem inappropriate to the situation at hand.

III. “We” and the community

To correctly describe and fully understand this relation to others, characterized by co-participation or common endeavor, we need to introduce an indispensable new term, namely that of the group to which I
and the others belong. It is precisely as fellow members of a group that others are encountered in this way, and so we need to explore what “group” means in this context, to understand how it exists, how far it extends, etc. What we have in mind here is not merely an objective collection of individuals, united by some common characteristic like size, shape, hair color or complexion. The relevant sense of group for our purposes is united from the inside, not from the outside. The word most often used to convey this sense of group is community, Gemeinschaft (sometimes contrasted with Gesellschaft). These terms derive from the common or the shared, but this must be understood in a special way.

If the community makes possible a certain kind of encounter with others, how do I encounter the community itself? It too is not primarily an object standing over against me as something to be perceived or known, as if I were an anthropologist or sociologist. I relate to it rather in terms of membership, adherence or belonging. The sign of this relation is my use of the “we” to characterize the subject of certain experiences and actions. The possibility that the community can emerge as a “we”-subject affords a way of understanding not only the nature of the community but also the peculiar character of being with others that makes it up.

One thing to be noted is how such a community relates to the possibility of phenomenological understanding. Phenomenology is characterized, we noted, by the first-person character of its descriptions. By shifting our attention from the “I” to the “we,” it is not necessary to leave the first-person point of view behind; we merely take up the plural rather than the singular first person. This shift from the I to the We reveals an interesting connection between 20th century phenomenology and Hegel’s phenomenology, a connection that has always been murky and little understood. In the Phänomenologie des Geistes the author introduces the key notion of his work, that of Geist, by calling it “an I that is We, a We that is I,” in other words a plural subject. It is Geist that forms the true subject of the dialectical forms that Hegel describes in his phenomenology, and which later figures as the central concept in his philosophy of history. Hegel is often criticized for reifying Geist, giving it a life and a mind of its own independently of that of the individuals involved, and this criticism may in part be justified. But it is

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possible to have a more modest or restricted sense of the ontology of the We. It exists, we can say, just as long as its constituent individuals say and think “we.” In this sense it is entirely dependent on the individuals that make it up. Thus we can frame the very controversial notion of the collective subject in a way that avoids a dubious ontological reification and stays close to our experience of social existence. Here there is nothing more common in social life, and nothing more important, than the membership of the individual in communities of various kinds. This can be subjected to phenomenological description.

Such description involves reflecting on those occasions and experiences in which I identify myself with a group or community by enlisting, so to speak, in the “we.” It happens when the experience or action in which I am engaged is attributed not just to me but to “us,” when I take myself to be a participant in a collective action or experience. But the action or experience must be enduring or ongoing, and with it the existence of the collective subject, the “we.” To say that we build a house is not equivalent to saying that I build a house, you build a house, she builds a house, etc. The common project is articulated into subtasks distributed among the participants such that the agent cannot be any of the members singly but only the group as such.

To say that I enlist in or participate in such collective endeavors or experiences is to say that I identify myself with the group in question, and this sense of “identifying oneself” deserves our attention. As we said before, the identity of the subject is not a given but constitutes itself over time as a sort of project, and I identify myself in relation to others. This is often taken to mean that I gain my identity in opposition to others, but it is also true that one asserts one’s identity by joining with others. This brings us into the territory of “identity” as it is used in such phrases as “identity crisis” and “identity politics.” As an individual I identify myself with certain groups and thus construe my identity in terms of my belonging. Among these are family, profession, religion, nationality, culture, etc. “We are getting closer to a cure for Parkinson’s,” says the medical researcher, even though she may not be involved in this project directly. “We believe in the virgin birth,” says the Christian. “We landed on the moon in 1969.” And who are we, in this case? Here perhaps we speak on behalf of the human race as a whole.

This is the same sense of identity that has been a subject of some controversy between communitarians and liberals in political philoso-
phy. The former (Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor and others) proclaim the value for the individual and for social order of the individual’s rootedness in the community, and warn us against the rootlessness of modern society; the latter (e.g. Habermas, and more recently Anthony Appiah) defend the values of individuality, “post-conventional identity,” and cosmopolitanism against what they see as the closedness and conservatism of the communitarian approach. These debates are certainly relevant to what I am trying to do here, but it also important to see the differences. They are normative, for one thing, arguments about which forms of social and political organization best suit human needs. Both sides admit that community identification exists and plays an important role in human life, for good or ill. Also, as such notions as “post-conventional identity” and cosmopolitanism indicate, even the liberals envisage a form of collective identity and solidarity, as long as it is based on political principles rather than such traditional forms as ethnicity, language or nationality.

Thus individuals identify themselves with groups that range from small and intimate to larger and more encompassing. But it must not be thought that these groups nest easily inside each other like a series of concentric circles. Groups criss-cross one another, and I identify myself sometimes more with one than another, depending on circumstances. Furthermore, participation in one may not always be compatible with participation in another. Family may conflict with profession, class with country, religion with civic duty, etc., to name only a few of the classic conflicts. These conflicts can be personal and psychological, “identity crises” in which the individual is torn between conflicting commitments and allegiances; and through the individuals involved the conflicts can be social as well, pitting groups against each other in collective action and enmity. The intersubjective relations involved here take a new twist: I relate to my fellows as members of the same community, with whom I say “we.” And I relate to others not just as other individuals but as members of an opposing group: “them” versus “us.”

IV. Historicity

Much more could be said about various aspects and implications of the We-relation, but I want to turn now to its relevance to our topic. We
have been looking for a connection between time and social existence that could be described from the first-person point of view as the experience of historical existence. I want to contend that it is in the experience of membership in communities that time is genuinely historical for us. As a member of a community I become part of a We-subject with an experience of time that extends back before my birth and can continue even after my death. Since the We is experienced as genuinely subjective, it has the same sort of temporality as the I-subject. That is, it is not just an entity persisting in time, or a series of nows, but it occupies a prospective-retrospective temporal field encompassing past and future. Just as we attribute agency and experience to the We-subject, so we can speak of its expectations and its memories. History is sometimes spoken of as “society’s memory,” the manner in which it retains its past such that the past plays an enduring role in the life of the present. To put it another way: we noted before that the present is for the I-subject the vantage point which gives access to a temporal field encompassing past and future; likewise, for the We-subject, the present functions as a similar vantage-point. But the field which is opened up in this case is much broader. It is to this field that I gain access in virtue of my membership and participation in a community.

But there is more to it than this. Engaged in a community by using the term “we,” I enjoy a special relationship with my fellow members, as we have seen. But these fellow members are temporally differentiated in significant ways. Alfred Schutz spoke of the difference between contemporaries, predecessors and successors, but this distinction is much too simple. My contemporaries are further differentiated into elder and younger, distinctions which are more than just chronological. In family, ethnic and professional contexts, elders are traditionally considered more knowledgeable and more experienced, and act as parents, guides and mentors to the younger. Professional relations often mimic family relations, as in Germany, where the dissertation director is called the Doktorvater. Just as important as this benign relationship is the agonistic, indeed, Oedipal, struggle in which the young rebel against the domination of the old, break away and establish their independence. So often, of course, this classic youthful rebellion, instead of securing the emancipation of the individual from the group,

only reveals the individual’s deeper, inextricable dependence and adherence.

In any case, these intergenerational relations and tensions show that being a member of a community means belonging to a temporally continuous entity whose temporality exceeds that of my own subjectivity. With regard to the past, its reach gradually expands in a kind of relay-form from elders to ancestors and predecessors who came “before my time,” that is, before my experience and before my birth. One way of thinking of this relation is to think of the circle or sequence of acquaintances. This is the popular idea of “degrees of separation,” which are also degrees of indirect connection. Regarded synchronically, this connection relates each of us to contemporaries with whom we have no other connection; but it is also characteristic of our relations with members of the communities to which we belong. Seen in a diachronic frame, this circle of acquaintance extends very rapidly into the past. Living in the 21st century, I knew a member of my family (my great-grandmother), born during the American Civil War, who herself knew her grandparents, born in the 18th century. I am thus related by one degree of separation/connection, by indirect acquaintance, if you will, to my 18th century forebears. And speaking of my family, we emigrated along with other Presbyterians from Northern Ireland to the coast of North Carolina in the 1720s, where we were farmers and small land-holders until the mid-19th century, when we turned our hand to the ministry, the teaching profession and the law.

With these examples, and with such familiar uses of the term “we,” I hope to convey the sense in which, as members of families and other communities, we have a direct and lived relationship to history. To be sure, this direct relationship includes much more that this. It extends even to our physical surroundings, where the very contours of the land, the patterns of roads and streets, and many of the buildings we inhabit and often even the furniture we use, are older than we are. But even this physical world is part of the human world of overlapping communities with which we identify ourselves. One could say much more about the role of the past in ethnic and national identities, political and religious allegiances, which are such a decisive force, for good and ill, in the contemporary world. But the general point is that it is in solidarity, membership, participation with others in communities, that the past is most alive and vivid for us. It is here that it functions as part of our
identity as individuals and enters into our lives and everyday experience.

Obviously we are moving here in the realm of popular mentality and even mythology. But it is here that historicity is most vivid and efficacious in our sense of who we are. It operates with different intensity and in vastly different ways in different social and historical contexts. We Americans, as you may know, are blessed or cursed with a history than lends itself generously to popular mythology. Unlike many modern states we trace our identity to a fairly clearcut “birth of a nation,” itself mythologized in the early stages of cinema, our most enduring contribution to popular culture. We owe this birth to “founding fathers” – a miraculous birth indeed, since it seems to have occurred without the help of founding mothers. Or alternatively, but still with the aura of a family drama, our origins are found in an act of youthful rebellion against the “mother country,” leading up to the adoption of a written constitution that begins with the words “we, the people.” Four score and seven years later, we were engaged in a great civil war testing whether our nation could endure. Abraham Lincoln’s famous speech at Gettysburg in 1863, which I am paraphrasing here, uses the “patriotic we” in the grand tradition of political rhetoric which can be traced back to Pericles and Gorgias. The success of political leadership is the capacity to translate this rhetorical device into political reality. Wars and other crises, of course, lend themselves to the realization of the “we.” And when we have the sense of living through history, in traumatic and pivotal moments like the breach of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, or the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, we are communalized by the shock of the unexpected and the uncertainty of the future. No doubt the communities most galvanized by these events were the Germans and the Americans, respectively. But they captured such world-wide attention that their communalizing effects were felt far beyond those countries. There is no doubt that a certain international, communal solidarity was involved.

These examples remind us again of the temporality of historical existence. They reveal that such existence is often as much a matter of the future as of the past, as Heidegger argued. But we usually identify historicity with the manner in which the past plays a role in the present. What my analysis shows, I think, is that it is primarily as members of communities of various sorts that we experience the reality of the past in our present lives. It is here that such terms as “tradition,” “inheri-
tance,” “legacy” come into play. In the agency of the “we” the past is not just passively given; we take it over or, as Heidegger put it, we “hand down” to ourselves the legacy of the past. Communal existence is active in many ways, but a constant feature of its activity is the manner in which it appropriates its past. That this is an activity is evident from the varying forms this takes. We select from the past what we wish to take over and neglect what we wish to forget. Indeed, remembering and forgetting are central activities by which communities constitute themselves. Remembering leads to commemoration and memorialization, in which we celebrate our heroes and achievements in monuments and popular songs on national holidays. The silence of forgetting can seek to evade responsibility for evils such as slavery or genocide; but it can in some cases have the beneficial effect of overcoming past resentments and grievances. Some communities remember too little; others remember too much.

V. Phenomenology, metaphysics and epistemology of history

Before we summarize the results of our phenomenology of history, let us consider its relation to other philosophical approaches. We began by noting that philosophers had raised metaphysical and epistemological questions about history. How does the phenomenology of history relate to traditional philosophical questions about history?

One way to put it is this: In keeping with the phenomenological approach, we have been asking after the meaning of history, that is, its meaning for us. The classical philosophers of history, from Augustine to Hegel, Marx, Toynbee and Spengler, wanted to know not just what history means to us, but what it means in itself, independently of our experience and involvement. For these philosophers meaning in history was the direction and even purpose in history, the intentionality, if you will, of a divine plan or a hidden reason which functions independently of, and sometimes contrary to, human purposes. This sense of meaning was also linked to the idea of theodicy, in which the “slaughterbench of history,” as Hegel called it, had to be reconciled with divine providence and benevolence. Sometimes called the substantive or speculative philosophy of history, this approach went out of fashion in the 20th century, after being debunked by thinkers from Karl Löwith to Arthur
Danto to Jean-François Lyotard as religion-in-disguise, as conceptual confusion, and as totalizing *grand récit*. For our purposes the point to be made is that this approach is metaphysical rather than phenomenological. It asks not how history is experienced or given, but what it is in itself. Does human history consist in a disconnected series of events and actions, or is there an order to its progression? Does it constitute an advance toward some goal, a decline from a golden age, or does it move in a circle? Of course we would all like to have answers to these questions. Husserl, in *The Crisis*, writing in a time of personal, political and historical crisis, in the Nazi Germany of the 1930s, is no exception, and he seems to flirt with these questions in his last work. But these are not phenomenological questions, and I think he realizes this.

It is possible, however, that phenomenology can consider these questions, not in order to answer them but to cast light on why they are asked. I see a certain parallel here – one of many parallels, by the way – to Kant’s transcendental philosophy. For Kant it was just as important to explain why metaphysical questions are asked as to show why they could not be answered. He claimed that our reason demanded the kind of satisfaction that could be provided only by the ideas of God, freedom and immortality. Similarly, perhaps our sense of history calls for the kind of wholeness and closure that the classical theories sought to provide. We want history as a whole to “make sense,” that is, we want it to form a large-scale narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Given the temporality of our experience, it seems a natural illusion – perhaps even a “transcendental illusion” in Kant’s sense – that we view the past as a series of steps preparing the way for the present. On this scenario, the present is the culmination and conclusion of a process, as it was for Hegel. Or alternatively, in a more Marxist perspective, the present is experienced as a decisive turning point or crisis in relation to an imminent goal, calling for immediate action. The idea of the End of History retains its appeal. It was revived, briefly and implausibly, by Francis Fukuyama in the early 1990s. But those who dismiss this idea should beware: it is apparently still popular among some of the big thinkers of the Bush administration.

Thus the phenomenology of history does not itself engage in the substantive philosophy of history but reflects on it, in order to understand how its sometimes grandiose theories arise out of our experience.

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of history, that is, our historicity. In this it resembles the epistemology of history, also known as the critical or analytical philosophy of history. Here questions are raised not about history itself but about our knowledge of it. Since the days of Dilthey and the neo-Kantians, who explored the differences between the *Geisteswissenschaften* and the *Naturwissenschaften*, philosophers have asked questions about the status, scope, and objectivity of historical knowledge, especially as it compares with the supposed paradigm case of the natural sciences. The nature of historical evidence and inference, the distinction between explanation and understanding or interpretation, between the nomothetic and the ideographic inquiry, etc. were questions raised again in post-World-War-II analytic philosophy of history. What is the relation between the phenomenology and the epistemology of history?

The epistemological questions I mentioned are perfectly legitimate questions, but they lend themselves to a certain abstractness. For one thing, they create the misleading impression that the sense of the past and the role it plays in our lives is entirely the responsibility of the historical profession, that “our” knowledge of the past consists solely of what the historians tell us. This is parallel to the philosophy of science, where “our knowledge of nature” is conceived strictly in terms of the latest and most sophisticated physical theory, which most of us don’t even understand. While this approach may be acceptable in the philosophy of natural science (though I have my doubts there too), it seems to me entirely inappropriate in connection with history. As we have seen, in virtue of our historicity as human beings and particularly as social beings, we have a very full and concrete sense of what that past is in our own lives and in that of the communities we belong to. Our sense of who we are, whether as individuals, as families, as institutions, as societies or even as nations, is very much a function of our sense of where we have come from and where we are going. The lived history of memories, stories, legends and commemorations is our first and abiding awareness of the past.

If we are to understand historical knowledge, as philosophers, we must understand that it is only in the context of this lived sense of the past that there can arise anything like the cognitive and critical interest we associate with the discipline of history as it currently exists. This is the background against which questions can arise about what really happened and how and why it happened; this is the framework in which the methods, procedures and goals of an academic discipline
have been developed. Historians are too often conceived by philosophers as if their task was to construct *ex nihilo*, as it were, by reading documents or looking at monuments and heaps of ruins, a past with which they have no direct acquaintance. But as we’ve seen, awareness of the past always already exists in the form of the public or popular narratives associated with such issues as group, regional, ethnic or national identity. It is also found in the speculative excesses and *grand recits* that are encouraged by the rhetoric of political leaders. But this public or popular historical knowledge is heavily value-laden and derives its force from motives other than an interest in objectivity and truth for its own sake.

One way of viewing the historian, or the discipline of history in the modern sense, is as a check on the public memory. Part of the historian’s task may be simply to articulate the collective memory, to raise it from the level of tacit assumptions, even practices and attitudes, to that of an explicit account. But then it can be critically evaluated with a different motivation, an explicitly cognitive interest. The historian brings an attitude of skepticism and scientific rigor to the taken-for-granted interpretations of the past which are always there beforehand. This is a version of the idea that all history is revisionist history, since historians always begin not only with their predecessors’ accounts of the past, but also, more importantly, with the public, collective narrative it subjects to critical scrutiny. For non-historians and historians alike, the historical past is continuous with and alive in the things and persons around them, and in the implicit and explicit longer-term narratives in which present events have their place. In a kind of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, historians alienate themselves from this living past. They force themselves *not* to see what the rest of us see, to question the received interpretations of the past that come with our existence in a certain community.

Thus we can distinguish between the prescientific or naïve sense or awareness of the past, on the one hand, and the critical-historical knowledge of the past, on the other. But it would be a mistake to see these two as if they were simply at odds, motivated by completely different interests. It is true that the former seems to be somehow merely practical and ethical, an expression of our need as persons and as communities to have a sense of our identity, while the latter wants to be disinterested and objective, concerned solely with getting the story straight, discovering the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. But there is
also a sense in which society delegates its practical concern for the past to its historians, and they take responsibility for it. We – and here I mean the “we” of society at large, not we as historians – want our sense of the past to be truthful, not mythical or fictional. We want it to represent what really happened, not what we wish had happened. We know the difference between truthfulness about the past and the self-flattery of retrospective embellishment.

Thus the critical historical inquiry, as a result of taking its distance from the socially accepted past, can also have an effect on and even change the popular conception of the past. It can contribute to a new understanding of the past (e.g. questioning the traditional notion of the European “discovery” of the new world) and call to our attention a part of the past we would prefer to forget (e.g. slavery). This is not because the cognitive interest is superior to the practical, but because the cognitive is part of the practical. As Jörn Rüsen has argued,\(^6\) knowledge of the past is part of the human process of orientation. Just as we orient ourselves in space to establish where we are – both literally and metaphorically – so we orient ourselves in time to establish where we have come from and where we are going. Just as we need to know our spatial surroundings as they really are, not as we wish they were, so we need to know our temporal surroundings, especially our past, as it really was.

VI. Conclusion

Let us summarize the results of our phenomenology of historical existence. We exist historically by virtue of our participation in communities that predate and outlive our individual lives. Through the we-relation historical reality enters directly into our lived experience and becomes part of our identity. Our membership gives us access to a past, a tradition, and a temporal span that is not so much something we know about as something that is part of us. This is the primary sense in which we are, in Dilthey’s sense, historical beings before we are observers of history; this is the sense in which we are “intertwined” with history. The phenomenology of history does not address itself directly to the traditional questions of the philosophy of history, questions of what history is in itself and of how we know it, though it can, as we

\(^6\) Zeit und Sinn (Frankfurt/M: Fischer Verlag, 1990).
have seen, cast some indirect light on these questions. But it does ad-
dress the question of why we should be interested in the past at all.
The Event – between Phenomenology and History

Marlène Zarader

Paradoxically, I have chosen to examine the event not from a phenomenological perspective, but, at least partly, from the outside – precisely in order to be able to relate this perspective to a wider field of relevance evoked by the event.

This demands an explanation, primarily by way of a brief historical reminder. If we were to invoke a conceptual history, in the style of Gadamer, it would here be possible for us to reconstruct a history of the event as a phenomenological concept: this history commences in the ’20s, with Heidegger (though it might be said to have its “prehistory” in Husserl), continues, though somewhat quietly, with Merleau-Ponty, leaving traces also in the works of Gadamer – only to re-emerge in full force from the ’80s and onward, in the form of a phenomenology of the event, viz, a phenomenology that in the event discovers or rediscovers its own central theme. I am thinking here of Jean-Luc Marion, Françoise Dastur, Jocelyn Benoist, Claude Romano – and would obviously also have to include Henri Maldiney, even if he reconsiders the event in terms of the double perspective of art and madness.

And neither can we afford entirely to lose sight of the fact that the event became a key concept in non-phenomenological ways of thinking as well in the ’60s, for Deleuze and Foucault (whose main inspiration in this respect was less Heidegger than it was Nietzsche); and that it is today a key concept outside philosophy in the social sciences, most notably for the historians. And this is so to such extent that one could, beside the history of the event as a phenomenological concept, reconstruct with equal legitimacy a history of the event as a historiographical concept, where the latter is, moreover, more turbulent than the former. The milestones in this latter history are: the concept of
an event became important starting at the end of the 19th century, but in a positivist sense, as a reaction against historical theories of a Hegelian bent; then, from the ’30s and onward, it was criticized from two sides: on the one hand, from those who questioned its stature as the exclusive object for the science of history (Lucien Febvre and the l’école des Annales), on the other hand, from those who rejected its character of simple gathering of facts, and who tried to reveal how the concept itself had been constructed (Raymond Aron, who in this way came to add to the insights of the Historienschule and also introduce them in France). And finally, in a manner practically concomitant with its massive irruption on the phenomenological scene (which, as I already indicated, occurred in the beginning of the ’80s), we witness within the science of history a “return to the event” (the title of Pierre Nora’s famous article from 1974) – an event that could only “return” to the scene from which it had once been expelled after it had been redefined, radicalized and transformed into a “new” historical event (viz, the object for the so-called “new science of history”), whose possible links to the way in which the event (although in a different academic environment) has been re-invoked by the phenomenologists remain to be investigated.

At any rate, it is clear that we have today reached the summit of – and also the point of intersection between – these two genealogies of the event (and no doubt a number of others too), which has managed to make of the event an epochal term – the term of intersection in which movements of thought converge (without necessarily meeting), even scientific disciplines, whose motivations to use the concept may differ drastically.1

What I have decided to examine is precisely this convergence. Due to my own philosophical orientation, I will not be able to do this without a phenomenological bias. What I want to do, however, is to situate phenomenology – in relation to itself (while the term ‘phenomenology of the event’ may cover a whole set of different connotations), and also in relation to other contemporary ways of thinking. Because what I find most blatantly absent in the present flood of discourses on the

1 Though an epochal term does not obtain the same firmness as a concept, we should nevertheless refrain from viewing it as something simple or trend-related. When an epoch is in this way centered in a word through which it understands itself, this should generally be seen as indicating a question demanding its attention (and which is going to be confronted in a host of different ways: incantations, passionate standpoints, theoretical elaborations, etc.). It is this question that I find especially interesting to identify.
event is precisely a relating of tendencies to each other, that is, dialogue.

One might retort that the social scientists of today, who mainly speak of the event in historical terms, do not use the term “event” in the same sense as the phenomenologists – or, more radical still, that they really speak of two entirely different things. This may very well be the case. But the only way to decide this is to aim for a confrontation. Because even under the assumption that they are speaking completely past each other, we will still have to localize the chasms, measure the differences, and to endow them with a minimum of conceptual clarity. Why does the historian of today again focus upon the event, and what sense does he give to it? Is this movement related (and, if so, in what way) to the re-emergence of the event as a phenomenological theme? And, conversely, does the phenomenological thought of the event lead us to a certain kind (and, in that case, what kind) of historical thinking?

All these questions seem to me worthy of being posed, because they obviously remain open (i.e. unsolved). And I will have an opportunity to pose them as I structure my own views about the following two aspects of the event (there are others, naturally): its phenomenological aspect and its historical aspect. The first two parts of my text will be devoted to this.

I. The event within phenomenology

A preliminary, programmatic remark: it will not be my business here to advance new theoretical propositions, but only to clarify, i.e. to classify, what already exists. My one fundamental ambition is to bring order to my own interpretations. Why this necessity of arranging?

Because phenomenology treats the event in two distinctly different senses and according to two levels of depth – levels that, moreover, correspond to two distinct strata within phenomenological research. I will thus first try to distinguish these two ways of relating to the event.

(a) Distinction of levels

The primary level. Here, we proceed from events in their almost infinite variety: intimate events (the death of someone dear, a meeting, an
illness) or collective, historical events (the assassination of Jaurès, September 11th). What we encounter at this level is of an ontic order, taking place within a worldly or intra-worldly manifold. The participants in these events take a natural attitude to what happens: they experience an illness or September 11th as a reality to which they are subjected.

To clarify such concrete events without betraying them, i.e. to do it while respecting their proper mode of development, I can accomplish the reduction by considering the phenomenon as a phenomenon, in order to extract its proper phenomenality. To accomplish the reduction here means necessarily both of the following things: (1) No longer to search for, for example, what an illness would be in and of itself, but to describe the way in which those who are stricken with it experience it. (2) To search for that which is invariable, i.e. to question the events of someone’s death, an illness or September 11th with an eye towards trying to find out what it is that makes them events – rather than just things, simple facts, etc. This will lead us to extract a number of characteristic traits (singularity, excess, etc.) that will be explained in reference to the consciousness that constitutes them, which is what characterizes a phenomenological explanation of the category of phenomena we call events.

Such is the primary level. But today’s phenomenologists of the event only develop this primary level in close connection to a secondary one.

What, then, is this secondary level? Before we thematize it by itself, let us look at two examples, two analyses performed, respectively, by Jean-Luc Marion and Claude Romano. Marion’s analysis\(^2\) is one where the thought of the event as an eminently paradoxical phenomenon frequently recurs. The event is paradoxical because of its special modes of givenness: rather than being inscribed into the world, it interrupts it, rather than being outlined against an horizon, it shatters it, rather than being constituted by a subjective consciousness, it comes suddenly upon it, i.e. dismisses it, etc. The event is thus defined by its radical excess, its ability to overload.

In what context is this analysis brought forth? Within a redefinition of the phenomenon as such. Certainly, not all phenomena are events (Marion here maintains a distinction which will be effaced by Jocelyn

Benoist⁴), but on the basis of the phenomena that represent the structure of the event, we may have to reconsider phenomenality altogether, its relation to the subjective consciousness, the world, the idea of objectivity, etc. Marion’s analysis thus tries to make possible a redefinition of the phenomenon in general, which is henceforth to be understood as that which forces itself upon us and exceeds us, which thereby relativizes the faculties of the subject, and, at the same time, reveals the limits of all constitution. Once the phenomenon gets defined in these terms, it calls for a question concerning its pure givenness, understood as its original givenness.

Claude Romano⁴ elaborates and develops this perspective, but in a context of explicit resistance to the Heideggerian existential analytic. What interests Romano is the redefinition of temporality that the Heideggerian approach makes possible. His analysis, which is far more elaborated than Marion’s, thus strives toward a well-defined goal – which is less to redefine the phenomenon on the basis of the event, than to redefine Dasein and its specific temporality on the basis of the event. But this ultimately leads him, just like it did Marion, to the question of original givenness – to answer this question becomes the explicit objective in his last book⁵, where he confirms that he is speaking of “the beginning of appearance,” or, more accurately: “the emergence of appearance.”

In this way, we encounter in both analyses two different levels. On the one hand we have a set of phenomenological descriptions pertaining to certain phenomena, those that “upset our entire existence,” and that are called precisely events; on the other hand we have the reapprehensions of the phenomenon as such (Marion) or of existence as such (Romano) according to the aspects according to which they are simultaneously both determined within a structure of “eventicity” (structure d’événementalité) and rendered possible by an original event. In the phenomenologies of the event, the secondary level thus no longer consists in revealing the essences of phenomena, but in asking for the event (understood as a particular phenomenon) in the direction of a coming-into-being [fr. avènement] (understood as the coming-into-being of the phenomenality of all phenomena).

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These levels are both derived from phenomenology. Maybe they are inseparable. But inseparable or not, they must not be confounded, because the respective reasoning about the event that attends each is not at all identical – nor are the results obtained the same. I will thus try to maintain the distinction between their respective intentions, which I can do only by referring to their provenance.

In the first case, we try to think the essence of the event, by using the phenomenological method as it was left to us by Husserl. In the other case, we use the concept of the event to elucidate the origin of all appearance, in a phenomenology inspired by Heidegger. Why does Heidegger have to be mentioned here? Because the orientation toward the inaugural “it is” is only conceivable within the framework of a problematic that he bequeathed us. As soon as we orient ourselves toward eventicity in terms of original givenness, we may call it what we like – the event of appearance, the event of the phenomenon – it will still be the event of being that we are concerned with. For to ask for the appearance or the phenomenon in the direction of the act that inaugurates them – by the pure surfacing that enables their becoming – is to ask for the appearance or the phenomenon in the direction of their being, in the literal sense of that word.

When we move within the secondary level, we have thus reached the degree of originality or radicality at which phenomenology and ontology meet – which, by the way, is Heidegger’s very own contribution. Ontology, he claimed, is only possible as phenomenology. His heirs, whether rebelling against him or not, today tend to reverse this formula: for them, phenomenology can be fully realized only as ontology, i.e. in its Heideggerian version. Consequently, the concern that guides their understanding of phenomena is less the demonstration of their constitution within and by consciousness, than a reaching back to their conditions of being. And it is because their concern is of this kind that they can pass with natural ease from the event understood as a specific phenomenon whose essence we have to describe – to the event as the structure, or even the origin, of phenomenality as such.

But this “natural ease” calls for an explanation. Once the two levels have been distinguished, it thus seems suitable that we confront the problem of articulating them within the phenomenologies of the event. And this is the second point I will make here.
(b) Articulation of levels

The analyses just referred to expand the structure of eventicity (as indicated by certain phenomena) to make it cover phenomenality in general. This expansion is not without justification. But *if we want to think the event*, a second, indispensable task remains: to stop such an expansion from becoming, quite simply, a generalization (of the kind: all phenomena are events), we will have to go back from eventicity (understood as the structure and origin of all phenomena) to the particular phenomenon of the event, by clarifying the distinguishing features according to which it is classified as event. This second task is *not* realized by any of the different phenomenologies of the event. It should be, and it could be, in phenomenologically rigorous terms, but in fact it is not. And this has lead certain critics\(^6\) to assume that the phenomenologists *use* the event (in service of their own problematic, viz the origin of all appearance), but that they do not *think* it, do not contribute to its elucidation. This criticism is not unfounded. In fact, if we rise toward the origin of all phenomenality without specifying the conceptual means of returning down to the phenomena themselves (returning, we might hope, a little bit richer than we were on the way up), we have only accomplished part of what we aimed for.

What I am doing here is to move along the perspective of the phenomenologies of the event (as their faithful secretary), to find out what their response to this question would be, purporting to make explicit something that remains implicit in them.

The point of departure is thus the following: we have passed from the event as a particular phenomenon to eventicity as the structure and origin of all phenomena. This movement I called an expansion. On the basis of this expansion, a whole series of questions arises, or should arise:

*The first question: who experiences* this generalized eventicity (by which term we should understand not only *the* original event, but also the event qua that which accompanies *each and every* phenomena)? Who lives this structure of perpetual novelty, of worlds being born, of continual virginity?

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\(^6\) The best example I come to think of is a lecture delivered by François Zourabichvili during a conference under the title “*L’évenement contre l’histoire,*” Paris, 2002.
Obviously not the consciousness that perceives things according to the natural attitude\(^7\). Another way of saying this: the eventicity of phenomena – this eventicity that we postulate at the origin of all phenomena – is not discernible among them. Instead, we are facing something that is the opposite, something that even the phenomenologist as well admits: the eventicity is that intra-phenomenality which is kept away from our view. What is given or becomes manifest – what is experienced by consciousness – is not things in the miracle of their surfacing, but things in their already given presence (in their Vorhandenheit).

Therefore: when we reach to the expansion, when we start speaking of the eventicity of all phenomena, who is it that speaks, and about what? The one who speaks here is the philosopher, in this case the phenomenologist, and what he speaks of is the origin of all appearance, not the appearing things themselves. On the contrary, on the level of appearance, on the level of phenomena as they present themselves before consciousness, he sees very few events (even though there persists a small number of them, as we will soon discover).

The second question: why are there so few events? Or, generally stated: why doesn’t the structure of the eventicity of all phenomena become manifest? It is in Heidegger’s work that we find the conceptual means for answering this question. The answer has two elements:

The phenomenon in general (which does not become manifest as a phenomenon) is characterized by the concealedness of its being (i.e. the concealedness of the event of its becoming manifest). As it is given and received in the natural attitude, the ever-recurring miracle of its surfacing is occluded. It is occluded because it is per definition the same as that which (within any appearance) has already retreated out of sight.

This miracle is likewise occluded by the specific structure that governs everyday phenomenality and works against eventicity: habit, repetition, handiness. We say accordingly that (the majority of) phenomena are not given as events because they are captured in structures that conceal their fundamental eventicity (though without effacing it).

It is only when the structures lose their grip and falter that something like an event can become manifest. It is then that it is lived. But it is lived as an exception.

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\(^7\) By “natural attitude” I don’t mean here a naturalist attitude, but that of consciousness in general, plunged into what the later Husserl called Lebenswelt.
We are here faced with two kinds of phenomena: first we have phenomena that are events “by general right” (as Marion puts it), though their structure of eventicity remains concealed; and then we have events, meaning the very specific set of phenomena that themselves make manifest their structure of eventicity.

The third question: once this distinction is established, in what way does it serve us here, in what way is it relevant to our over-all question? Well, it seems to allow us, firstly, to narrow down the essence of the event, and then, secondly, to understand its privileged position within phenomenology.

Firstly, its essence. What is it that characterizes, uniquely, the phenomena we usually call events? Well, what characterizes them (if we stay within the logic established so far) is that the original structure of eventicity, which is usually concealed, and toward which the gaze of the phenomenologist must again be lifted – that this structure, in the case of the event, is given and received within the natural attitude itself: it intrudes directly upon that which appears, thereby qualifying it as an event. Which is the same as saying that the only means to define the event in its differences and relations to other phenomena, i.e. to phenomenality in its entirety, is to distinguish between concealed eventicity and manifest eventicity.

On the basis of this very definition, the event can get to be assigned an extremely precise and also precious function within the phenomenological framework, where an event would then be the particular phenomenon that reveals the (usually concealed) structure of all phenomenality. Representing what can hardly be recognized as anxiety, its function would thus be one of phenomenological reduction (in its Heideggerian version, viz the reduction understood as the reduction from beings to being). In “What is Metaphysics?”8, anxiety was the emergence, in the heart of beings, of being (i.e. of something other than beings). But here, the event is the emergence, in the natural world itself, of a usually concealed eventicity. And this is actually what enables the phenomenologist to use the event in order to reascend toward eventicity, i.e. to accomplish the movement of expansion that served as our starting point. But he cannot carry this movement through legitimately if he does not support it with the adequate conceptual distinctions.

The fourth question: Is the phenomenologist the only one that could reveal, under the phenomena, their hidden eventicity? Certainly not. At this point, he encounters the artist. Not the artist in general, but in any event the painter, or rather precisely the painter as he has begun to understand himself from impressionism onwards, and as he found expression in the voice of Cézanne. For the painter as for the phenomenologist, the smallest thing is large in the world that it discloses, the most insignificant of all phenomena, in the miracle of its appearance, is the birth of this whole world. All this happens as if the artist adjusted his perception to the origin: this is the famous “gaze of innocence” of which Monet spoke. But the gaze of innocence is a discipline. Far from being innocent, the natural gaze is by nature encumbered with impressions: we have to purify it to be able to distinguish, in the seemingly motionless things, the trembling of their becoming and the miracle of their reaching the surface – i.e. their disclosing themselves to be seen or their “ascent into the visible.” To be able to discover what was hidden, the painter uses a method, just as the phenomenologist does.

If we were to state plainly just that “all phenomena are events,” or that “all consciousness can be assimilated to that of the painter,” we render invisible the differences that necessarily apply to the methods used to underline, i.e. to construct.

Which leads me to my fifth question. If we do not establish the distinctions just made, to what dangers are we then exposed? Well, to a whole set of disastrous consequences. The first, evidently, is that it all gets confused, so that nobody knows what they are talking about. The second – this one is highly embarrassing for a phenomenologist – is that we substitute, for the actual givenness of beings, the way in which they would give themselves had they not been concealed. And this amounts to rendering abstract the fact that concealedness is in itself a kind of givenness, and, as a consequence of this, to no longer respect phenomenality at all – regulating its laws, as one then does, solely in terms of how it should be. The third consequence, finally, which is the most serious of them all, is that the object we wished to think disappears. In fact: if all phenomena are events, then the event in itself ceases to exist. And this is no return to a coarse common sense, but to an irrevocable, phenomenological demand. The event is given in the modes of excess, rupture and discontinuity, i.e. as an exception. Such is its proper phenomenality. But if we universalize this rule of exception, we will no longer have any means of distinguishing the specific
phenomenon of the event from other phenomena. We believe that we are multiplying the event *ad infinitum*, but in reality we are annulling it, by effacing the very place where it could have existed.

Having passed here through a specific number of divisions, I would like to insert a sort of summary before I close this part of the text.

(c) Summary

What I have strived for so far is to establish two distinctions – two distinctions which, moreover, are connected to each other. These I will now briefly recapitulate:

*The first distinction.* It is important to maintain the difference between the following two levels: on one hand, we have the level of eventicity *presumed by the phenomenologist* to exist at the very origin of all phenomena, but which – and this he is unconditionally bound to admit – *is not given or experienced in the natural attitude*; on the other hand, we have the events that are themselves *given* in the natural attitude, and that the phenomenologist will then have to *describe* – describe precisely in their difference from other phenomena – otherwise their specific nature is forfeited.

*The second distinction.* It is important to maintain the difference between two versions of, or tendencies within, phenomenology: one that aims to *describe the phenomenon/event*, the other that *makes the event the origin of all phenomena*. The former, of course, does not restrict itself to pure descriptions; it, too, takes upon itself to reach back to the origin of phenomenality. In its Husserlian version, however, it traces this origin to the transcendental consciousness, *which is itself not an event*. Only the Heideggerian version of phenomenology can make the event the origin of all phenomena, because it localizes this origin within the “evential” character of being. Naturally, it might be said against this second version (the event as origin of all phenomena) that it doesn’t free us from the task of the first version (the elucidation of the phenomenon/event). And if we wish to accomplish both these tasks – i.e. simultaneously elaborate the event eidetically as well as by a kind of event-centered ontology – it will remain absolutely necessary for us to show in what way the two tasks diverge (which was the objective of my first distinction). If we confound them, we are left with nothing: neither one of them – only an inconsistent hybrid.
When the event is in this way distinguished from general eventicity, what happens then to its relation to history? This is a question seldom posed by the phenomenologists outside of the perspective of a history of being, where the event itself is asked for only in relation to its origin. The question I pose here is much more trivial. The world, by which term I also include the spiritual world, is peopled not only by phenomenologists, and we should at times take it to be necessary to speak to others about common concerns – concerns such as the event, which precisely has become such a concern today. In so far as the event, within other kinds of discourse, is not related to the origin of all appearance but to history, what have we to say of it? In what relation does our event – the event thought of in the phenomenological sense, and even conceived of today as the very core of phenomenology – stand to the events of the world, especially its historical events? And, likewise: in what relation does it stand to the event (whatever we may think of it) such as it has become the interest of historians and social scientists? How does our event get inscribed into their history? And since their history is also ours (the one in which we are all firmly stuck), we will also have to ask: how does what we call event get inscribed in history?

(Or, at least: if it does not get inscribed at all, how is this exception possible? Even though we must remember here as well that it wouldn’t evaporate just by being excepted). Thus: to what kind of historical thinking – or non-thinking – does the phenomenology of the event lead us?

This problem does not get solved by any of today’s phenomenologists of the event, but for very different reasons. Partly because it is not posed as a problem, due to a restriction to individual events – death, encounter, separation –, which means the putting aside of all collective or political dimensions (this applies to Romano and Dastur), partly because the problem is posed but in terms inadequate to it (in my opinion this is the case with Jocelyn Benoist⁹). Nobody has solved these problems, nor has anyone contributed to their elaboration.

It seems to me that if we wish to do more than simply speak as phenomenologists to other phenomenologists, we will have to raise these

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questions – and this is what I will try to do now, in the second part of the text.

II. The event within history

Again, we must proceed by way of some preparatory remarks. Hence, I begin by posing three questions that will be indispensable for my whole analysis: (1) What is it that historians call an event?; (2) What is it that they call history – i.e. what is it that they today designate thus?; (3) What relation do they establish between these two concepts?

(a) What is it that historians call an event?

The notion of an event does not have the same connotations today as it did earlier, when an event was to be understood as a given, historical fact (while it is judged naïve today to believe that historical facts actually are given, and also argued that they have mainly been so constructed by the earlier historians themselves). Rather, we see today an entirely new concept, that the historian uses partly to be able to think the contemporary history as such (Pierre Nora10), partly to be able to rethink history as a whole.

How, then, is this concept defined by the historians? Well, the determinations given it may vary in certain details, but they all agree on the essence of the event, which one will encounter in whoever of them one chooses to read. The principal traits of this essence are: the singularity (as soon as the event is upon us, it presents itself as something incomparable: it is unlike everything else); the cessation, i.e. the faculty of separation (because of the event, a hitherto significant totality disintegrates and makes way for a new configuration); and, finally: the distortion or rupture of the intelligible (where all sense is as if suspended). From a descriptive point of view, then, the notion of the event thus involves the same essential characteristics whether it is described by the phenomenologist or by the historian – even if they do it within different conceptual frameworks and with different theoretical goals in mind. But there is no speaking past each other here: phenomenologists and historians alike are really concerned with the same “thing,” and

precisely because they are faithful to this thing, they describe it in analogous terms.

And it is not only the definition of the event that they have in common: they share also the recognition of the event as a critical faculty in regard to the discipline that invokes it. The science of history has today become preoccupied with the event (in the stronger sense of the word, the one that I just defined), even though it no longer defines it as “event-ual.” But far from being contradictory, these two changes are directly linked to each other. For today’s historical science, the event is no longer its natural building material (which it was as long as it was understood in the weaker sense) – rather, it has become its problem: it is understood by this science itself as that which radically upsets it. And, in fact, how could it do otherwise when its essence as defined by today’s historian (through and beyond its determinations as singularity, cessation, etc.) is the fundamental discontinuity itself? It thus seems that historical science can reject, in terms of this discontinuity, the (still metaphysical) categories of unity and totality – but can it really reject continuity? Or, to speak at an even more basic level, can it reject processuality in general? Isn’t processuality its very own object? How will it be able to preserve its object if it lets itself be touched (read: attacked) by the event?

One last remark in passing: the historian’s interpretation of this critical faculty of the event corresponds exactly to the phenomenologist’s interpretation of it. In both cases, the event is welcomed into the centre of a discipline as that which is about to shake the ground on which the discipline stands, the frameworks it has constructed, etc. – viz. as that which forces the discipline to redefine itself.11

To understand how history is to meet the challenge of the event, we have to proceed to our second question.

(b) What is history?

What is it that historians – and our contemporaries in general – today designate by the term “history”? This is where the philosophers (at least some of them) have sometimes had difficulties in “adjusting,”

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11 This property has doubtlessly part in what may explain the primarily “epochal” character of the event: being an epoch in crisis – which is its own definition of itself – it is bound to privilege such critical concepts as may serve it in its fundamental project – which is to constantly question its own foundations and to identify its own limits.
which has also had some obvious impact on the results of their analyses.

A certain definition of history dominated for more than a century (roughly speaking from the middle of the 19th century until the end of the 20th), one with which we are especially familiar since it was the one proposed by the philosophies of history (the Hegelian philosophy foremost among them). These philosophies conceived of the historical process as a unity (a conception that, moreover, found its semantic support in the rise of Geschichte as a collective, singular term, which has been demonstrated by Koselleck in his reconstruction of its conceptual history12), a unity whose form was that of a (beginning and ending) totality, and which was governed by a unique, motivating force (progress or, inversely, decline – which of them matters little.) This is what was for a long time called “History” (with the above determinations explaining its capital H). The model for this way of conceiving history was in fact very much older, as Hegel showed, but it was not enough to enable us to think History as such. It was only from the 19th century and onward that the model in question was used in order to think an object that up till then had been understood as lacking internal substance: History.

This definition – that for a long time was considered as one corresponding adequately to its object, and actually even to the historical future – lost its authority after almost 150 years: it begun to be questioned somewhere in the mid 20th century. And thus, if we want to try to think today the relation between event and history, this will not be accomplished if we stick to the old definition. We cannot elaborate a new concept of the event with which to challenge an old concept of history13 and claim that we are thereby contributing to the present, i.e. preparing for what is to come.

I thus repeat my initial question: what is it that is today called history, how is it that the contemporary historiographer understands this term? Which boils down to the question: how does the historian define his object?

If he understands it in another way than he has ever done before, it is because he understands it in the light of some new concepts – of

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13 Which it seems to me that Benoist does, notably in “La fin de l’histoire comme forme ultime du paradigme historiciste,” pp. 7-15.
which the event is one. For the historian, certainly, there is not only the event. There is also, for example, the structure. And up till about the ’70s, the general tendency was still one of emphasizing the structural element – the long-lived braudelian heritage, the description rather than the narration. But what really characterizes today’s historiography – and what reveals the immense difficulty of its task – is that it no longer admits of alternatives[^14]. Surely, for today’s historian, there are structures as well as events. It is known today that the demand to take structure into account obliged history to cease to be “event-ual” in the old sense of the term. But to what will history be obliged, inversely, when it is demanded of it to account for the event? The event will oblige history, on the one hand, not to limit itself only to structures, but to let the singularities manifested by the event intervene; and it will oblige it, on the other hand, not to limit itself to the unrolling of a thread of continuity, but to let the discontinuity indicated by the event intervene.

How can the historian let the event intervene? Not by denouncing processuality (which he surely cannot avoid), but by no longer identifying history as a simple process. And this will lead him to render his scientific discipline more complex, to admit of equally valid, coexisting histories (in the plural), and to define his field of research by its internal plurality: it will be constituted by a manifold of series open to alternative interpretations (as opposed to a unique series constituted by progress), and it will entail heterogeneous levels of reality and discourse that will be for the historian to articulate.

The meaning of all this is that the new concept of the event flows back into history to let it be defined as just described – and to such an extent that it might finally be redefined, from an epistemological perspective, as having the intervening spaces for its only objects (which is Michel de Certeau’s paradoxical yet stimulating suggestion[^15]).

My analysis has so far been restricted to definitions, i.e. definitions of what the historians of today mean by the terms “event” and “history.” Before passing on to my third and principal question – what relation do they establish between these two concepts? – I’d like to linger for a moment on the provenance of these definitions. Has the

[^14]: I here wish to refer to Koselleck, see the illuminating chapter entitled “Representation, event and structure,” pp. 133-144, in Vergangene Zukunft

historian thought his object (history) and that which has upset it (the event) exclusively within his own field of research, or has he tried to gain support from other conceptual models (and which ones, in that case)? This leads me to the third point of my argument.

(c) Note about the provenance of some concepts

From where do they come, then, the concepts of the event and of history that today’s historian uses? Even if he has revised them, it was from philosophy that he first got them. Not primarily from phenomenology, but rather from philosophies that remained concerned about articulating their thinking in relation to the social and political world, i.e. primarily to praxis. And the philosophies to which the historians thus owe their concepts are those of Deleuze (for the event) and Foucault (for history).

Let us cast a quick glance back on Foucault’s theory (such as it is presented, e.g., in the article *Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’histoire*[^16]). He too proceeds from the event as an irreducible singularity outside of every process. But he sees it neither as the end of all history and world (as a certain post-modernism does), nor as the intact origin that keeps reemerging throughout history and the world (as a certain phenomenology does); instead, he perceives it as a sign of the heterogeneity of worlds, spaces, perspectives. And it is this that leads him – on the basis of the event – to rethink history, which he will do by replacing the (up till then unquestioned) category of continuity with another category, that of “systematic dissociation.” It is this other history, henceforth fragmentary and devoid of centre, that he will call *genealogy*. And it is in the spirit, thus, of Foucauldian genealogy, among other inspirations, that the new historians have reconstructed their object – i.e. that they have reconstructed it into its fundamental, plural form.

As far as Deleuze[^17] is concerned, he has provided historians with two important ideas: the first is that the event is nothing but an (incorporeal) divide at which history and future float apart; the second is that the paradoxical sense of this divide – constituted as it is by the singularity of the event – will be to still render series possible. In connection

[^16]: This article was first published in *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite*, Paris, PUF, 1971, and then reprinted in *Dits et écrits*, part 1, Paris, Gallimard 1994. Later, it was again reprinted (in a reedited version), *Quarto*, 2001, pp. 1004-1024.
with this, historians have also taken up the tasks of constructing relevant series (Alban Bensa and Eric Fassin\textsuperscript{18}) or operational series (Michel de Certeau\textsuperscript{19}), i.e. series by which the event is retroactively endowed with a sense, or even with a certain “inexhaustibility” of sense. It is on the basis of the event as such cessation that the historian may define series that close or series that disclose, and it is at the same time on the basis of these series that he may qualify the event.

The perspectives of Deleuze and Foucault have thus enabled the historian to answer some of the questions he is facing. But not all of them, and perhaps not the one that is principal among them. We have witnessed hitherto how the event, in its flowing back into history, has been able to redefine and to pluralize it. But we have not seen, as of yet, how history, even thus redefined, would be able to integrate the event without betraying it. In other words, the new historian wants to respect the event. But the event cannot be totally respected by the historian, and this he knows very well. The events need to be reduced in some way to assume their place within history, or within a history, if only as that which upsets that history itself. How can today’s historian succeed in formulating this respect and this reduction? How can he, while still respecting the event, nevertheless re-inscribe it into the structure of history, be it into its fragmentary and manifold version?

This leads me to my last question:

(d) What kind of relation between event and history does the historian establish?

To resolve this terrible paradox, the historian leans on a distinction which is seemingly quite simple.\textsuperscript{20} He distinguishes between historical agents, for whom there are events (this is also called “the indigenous perspective”!), and historians, who must certainly take the perspective of historical agents into account, but who must also articulate the event’s levels of interpretability after it has taken place.

\textsuperscript{19} M. de Certeau, “L’opération historique.”
\textsuperscript{20} I here let the historian stand in the singular, because most historians use this distinction. If I were to be more specific, I’d point to the remarkable thematicization of the distinction that occurs in the article, already quoted, by Bensa and Fassin. See also A. Farge: “Penser et définir l’événement en histoire. Approche des situations et des acteurs sociaux,” in Terrain, pp. 69-78, notably p. 71.
This will amount to the establishing of a distinction between the event as it is *lived* (this is the perspective of agents), and the event as it is simultaneously *described* and *interpreted* by the historian. We note in passing that the true originality of the new historian lies in his affirming that the event can only be correctly interpreted if it is first of all described, and described as it is lived.

In proposing this apparently simple distinction, the historian orders into a certain hierarchy — perhaps without clearly knowing it — three different ways of relating to the event. If it was permitted for me to render this hierarchy in another language, I would express these three different ways as: (1) the natural attitude; (2) the phenomenological gaze; (3) the hermeneutical activity. Let us again clarify these three levels.

*The natural attitude* is that of the historical agents, the attitude of the consciousness that lives the event and that, surprised by its faculty of dislocation, experiences its presence within the event as though benumbed. There occurs something that shatters what I thought was the world, and during the span of time that I inhabit this fracture, I believe it to be *real* (viz to be the sum of what *is*).

*The phenomenological attitude* (at least as I understand it) is the attitude of describing the event in terms of how it unfolds, and then as a *phenomenon*, without any preconceived notions about its being. The phenomenologist, thus, has no part in the belief of the historical agent — rather than saying: “the world is shattered, time is suspended,” he would say: “for the consciousness that lives through it, the event consists of experiencing the world as being shattered and time as being suspended.”

By saying this, the phenomenologist does not wish to imply that this is the ultimate truth of the event (an assumption to which he would have no right whatsoever), but that *there has been* (fr. il y a eu) an event, and he shows what the singular form of “there is” (fr. il y a) means in connection with the event.

*The hermeneutical attitude* does something else and goes further than the phenomenological one. And it is because he takes responsibility also for this latter attitude that the historian thinks today that he has more to say about the event than both the historical agent and the phenomenologist. What the historian wants to do is actually to qualify the event on the basis of but also beyond the recognition of its phenomenological aspect, as he takes upon himself to define, not only what the
event “is,” but also what it opens up, what terminates with it, etc. This he cannot do without transcending the phenomenological attitude in the directions of before and after. Transcending it in this way, his real activity starts, which is that of weaving and unweaving the structure of sense.

And this he does today with elegance, because he assumes the third attitude only in taking into account the other two: even though the perspective of the historical agent (the first level) has been accounted for and described in terms of how it is experienced (the second level), it will ultimately be reinstalled at its original place, though now it is no longer (and can no longer be), something absolute (this is the third level). The historian thus believes himself to have done justice by the phenomenon of the event, in the same process whereby he has come to understand it (i.e. by subjecting it to contextualization). But is it really possible to contextualize a phenomenon of this kind? Does there not remain within such a phenomenon (within precisely such a phenomenon) some power of resistance?

Hence the third step of my argument. After having tried (in vain, no doubt) to act the “faithful secretary” of the phenomenologists and the historians, I would like to state what I prefer to retain from their respective beliefs, and to explain why I feel in no way tempted to choose between them. It in fact seems to me that the they both announce a truth, that they both “are right” – even though the reasons for their beliefs are perfectly irreconcilable.

III. Phenomenology or history?
(a) The event as phenomenon

Let us first return to the phenomenon of the event to in order to specify some basic traits.

(1) It is the phenomenon that becomes the object to describe (at least at a certain stage within their procedures) for all the thinkers that are concerned with the event. This goes for the phenomenologists, naturally, but also for Deleuze, the historians, etc. If they all – almost in the detail – describe the same “thing,” it is precisely because they are all referring to the phenomenon. They may very well feel disinclined to regard themselves as phenomenologists, or even define their views in direct opposition to phenomenology, yet the only legitimacy
they can claim in describing the event the way they do will still be that of relating to the event as to a phenomenon – i.e. to the event as it is presented to the consciousness that experiences it. And so when Deleuze, for example, defines the time of the event as a time of split or disjunction, he evidently refers to the event as to something lived. If he understood the event differently, his talk of an interruption of time wouldn’t make any sense at all (there is no interruption of objective time). And then, when he goes on to assign such and such a function within the structure of his problematics to the event, he surely transcends the phenomenon, but his arguments will still be based upon it. And this applies to all those who write about the event.

(2) The phenomenon (of the event) is unanimously described as having certain basic traits, of which the principal ones are singularity, exteriority, excess, discontinuity, etc. I have not deemed it necessary to develop any of these traits further, because they are today repeated almost to the point of being worn out. But I want to stop for a moment to ponder over one of them, precisely because it deviates from the unanimity. This exception concerns the relation between the event and its sense. It seems to me, namely, that if we proceed from the event in order to describe it as it is given, i.e. within the limits of its givenness, we are bound to admit that by the event all sense, including the very sense of the event, is suspended. The event is not accompanied by its own sense – what happens is actually the opposite: the event is the instant where sense begins to float, i.e. to dissolve. It is only retrospectively that the event can be reinvested with sense on one hand, and understood radically as a source of sense on the other.

But Claude Romano seems, for his own part, ready to affirm the event as inseparable from its own sense21 (F. Dastur, as we have seen, follows him in this). And in order to be able to do this, he re-inscribes the retrospective mechanism of revision into the event itself, whose domain he thereby expands. One may certainly expand this domain (as the limits of domains are fleeting), on the condition that one then makes clear that the domain thus expanded is no longer that of the phenomenon (as the limits of the phenomenon are by no means ambiguous, being the exact limits of what is lived). The revision is the event repeated in a configuration of sense, a repetition in which it has already ceased to be what it was as lived. To describe the phenomenon of the event is thus to describe something unfinished – which we may

21 C. Romano, Il y a, pp. 106-107, and above all pp. 286-289.
actually define as a *waiting for sense*. But if we start, already here, to present the sense to come and the world that will rise with it, we will lose contact with the event as *phenomenon*, and from this point and on we will also have abandoned the *phenomenological way of looking at the event*, which means describing it the way it is given in the moment in which it is given, i.e. within the proper limits of its givenness. Another way of saying this is that we must not confound or assimilate a *phenomenology of the event* with a *hermeneutic of the event*.

(3) Beside this primary, essential characteristic of the event, we should add a second one which is closely connected to it. Confronted with the (disastrous or enchanting) event, I am not only unable to incorporate it, but I live it as *un-incorporable*. And that is what may explain its sharpness.

If it can be lived in this way, it is because of its specific temporality, which has often been described in the following fashion: the event comes upon us as if from outside of chronological time, it opens us up toward an elsewhere, interpretable as a “non-time” or as another time, and in both these interpretations we will have to recognize that the event is foreign to the natural succession of time (past-present-future). But this means that the suspended time of the event is *a present with no other horizon than itself*. The event is lived in a temporality which knows of no future (we could imagine a future only by reentering into chronological time). The development commonly associated with time is here replaced by the contraction of its three dimensions into a present *without end*, i.e. a present lived as *endless*.\(^{22}\) And this is the actual reason why the event, as given in and by itself, is already beyond all consolation.

To the different modes mentioned above – singularity, rupture, excess – we must thus add another one: *resistance*. The event is obstinate: actively contesting all that is structural, refusing to let itself be re-inscribed into any structure, it comes forth as *the irreducible*. The author who has captured and described this in the most precise manner is

\(^{22}\) To avoid any of the confusions that may arise here: first, there is the time of the event as the span of time during which the experience of it is lived by the consciousness precisely as an event – after that, it will be lived in other ways because it will then be re-contextualized. This time is measurable and occurs within chronological time: it may last for a couple of minutes or for several years. But then we have the way in which time as such is lived or experienced during the time of the event. Here, we specified that it is lived as an interruption, i.e. as out of contact with any imaginable future.
Maurice Blanchot: what he calls the *other* night\(^\text{23}\) is not only the night as the abyss into which we fall in the fracture of a process, but the night that gives itself as impossible to processualize – as the refusal to accept any “relief of the watch.”

If resistance is really one of the essential traits of the event, the question of its relation to history will appear in a different light. It will no longer be sufficient to say that the event interrupts history. Rather, the event rises *against* history, as a contestation of its basic principle, while it is given precisely as an exception *from* history. Actually, it is an exception from everything: language, world, time ... . Its givenness is inseparable from a certain claim: the claim of being something absolute. The claim is in itself unreasonable, but this is still how the event unfolds, and how it is lived.

Let us summarize. What our epoch is given as an object – and as a problem – in the name of the “event,” is the event as phenomenon. Once it has been exposed in its essence, the event entails, as we have seen, a dimension of *irreducibility* (it belongs to its proper mode of givenness neither to let itself be reduced to something else, nor to let itself be re-inscribed into a process). Which must inevitably lead us to ask: is what presents itself as irreducible here *really* irreducible? Or in other words: is what consciousness lives as something absolute *really* absolute?

If I ask this question, *it is by no means because I want to answer it.* I only want to draw attention to it. And that is for three reasons: (1) As soon as we would answer it, we would no longer relate to the event as to a *phenomenon*, but settle only for its *being*. (2) *Everybody* already does answer it, the phenomenologists as well as the historians. (3) It seems to me that even though they do answer it, they do it without having clearly formulated – or even identified – the question. Analyzing the event, they all refer to it as to a phenomenon. If their views diverge, it is exclusively in terms of the ontological status they are willing to ascribe to the event. Clearly stated: the conflicting attitudes assumed in regard to the event are derived directly from the diverging responses to this unique question, even though it remains implicit within most texts on the subject. It is this question, thus, that we must unconditionally elucidate if we want to understand anything of the

\(^{23}\) Cf. e.g. *L’espace litteraire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1955. And I also permit myself to refer to this point as it is being made in my own study: *L’être et le neutre. A partir de Maurice Blanchot*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 2001, notably pp. 47-86.
present debate concerning the event, i.e. if we want to identify its (real, even if implicit) object. And this leads me to the second part of this section.

(b) About the being of the phenomenon and some philosophical conflicts concerning it

Let us imagine them together, for one last time, the phenomenologist and the historian.

In the case of the question just asked, there can be no doubt as to the response of the historian: “the indigenous perspective” means living in a stupefaction which the hermeneutical activity will have to reinvest, precisely, with interpretational possibilities (if possible in the plural). Or even, as Alban Bensa and Eric Fassin have expressed it: to be an historical agent means to live “in the epiphany of the moment,” i.e. in a present which it will be for them, in their turn, to “historize.”\(^{24}\) In this historization, the agent’s perspective is not overruled, but set into a certain position (that of the lived) where it cannot and will not have the last word.

Then, how does the phenomenologist answer the question? Well, he doesn’t have to respond at all, as I will try to show you in an instant. But if he does respond (which is the prevailing attitude today), he tends to assert that what gives itself as irreducible really is irreducible, for the simple reason that phenomenality is for him the only measure of being real. What really is or what is in reality, well, that’s precisely the event in its pure singularity, making all the rest (by which he in this context particularly means the process) appear as a mere construction, viz as nothing but a convenient fiction. Earlier, historians believed in history as a unique and directed totality; today, they believe in history as a process – but this, too, is still too much for the incandescent truth of the event.

These two answers are perfectly antagonistic, and the reason for this is that they both lay a claim to defining being. Here, the historian and the phenomenologist have already transcended the phenomenon, one of them because he considers it to be distinct from being, the other precisely because he identifies it with being. And so we stand today before an irreducible philosophical conflict – provided, of course, that

\(^{24}\) Bensa and Fassin; “Les sciences sociales face à l’événement,” p. 15.
we don’t take a stand: either for history against the event (meaning we reject the *prerogative* of the event), or for the event against history (meaning we reject the prerogative of history).

Which leads me to the last part of my text.

IV. Return to the prerogative of the phenomenon

Personally, I don’t feel that this opposition engages me. I do not subscribe to any of its two claims concerning being, as none of them feels more *constraining* than the other. The only distinction I regard as substantial is the one that differentiates between what is lived and what is not. It seems to me that we here rather have to do with two levels, each of them legitimate, even though irreconcilable. I do not feel at all tempted to choose between them. Quite the contrary – as either choice would only *mask* the difference in levels. I thus restrain myself to the inaugural act such as Husserl conceived it: I accomplish the reduction, I suspend all claims about the world, I consider the phenomenon as it is constituted by consciousness. I want to remain faithful to him, and my fidelity means taking in earnest his own kind of radicalism: pure interstice, disclocation, indetermination of sense. This indetermination is not a mere subjective or psychological appearance possible to overcome, but the very content of the phenomenon. What I retain from the phenomenological approach, thus, is its descriptive uprightness, which has the merit of doing justice by the lived, to recognize its prerogative, to accept its demands.

And so we see that the limit of this approach is the lived itself. But the lived is neither the only possible level in which to situate the event, nor the only possible perspective from which to regard it. Coming upon me from nearby, death as event is unincorporable already when it is happening to me, and given in modes important to describe without distortion – but it is *also* the most natural thing in the world. It is inscribed into the world without troubling its course, and this aspect must *also* be accounted for. In other words: it will still be necessary for us to think a continuity, one that continues to maintain its prerogative, someplace else, on another level.

I think of the passage in Dostoevsky, in *The Possessed*, where Shatov is present at that bewildering event, a child being born under the supervision of a feminist midwife – she is even a bit of a nihilist – who
bursts out laughing as she observes his ridiculous state of emotion. That which for him is an absolute experience is for her only a habit – or, worse still: it is a decimal in the statistics. What I ask myself (knowing full well that the question is naive) is this: why should the childbirth, such as it is lived by the mother or by Shatov in the role of empathic spectator, why should that childbirth, in terms of being or truth, have priority over the same childbirth regarded in a statistic way, i.e. repeated in a series which is here only numerical, but which might as well have been temporal?

As we bring this priority into renewed questioning, we realize that the different phenomenologies of the event ought to be called *philosophies* (in athetic sense) of the event, in the same way that we speak of philosophies of history. And certainly, they are strictly opposed to one another. But there will be no winner in this combat. To the proponent of history, we may legitimately oppose the event. To the proponent of the event, we may as legitimately oppose history. The reason for this is that each of them affirms his object as something absolute, and the only difference between them relates to the way in which they conceive of the object: to their absolute totalizations (in the image of a circle), we oppose an absolute profundity (in the image of a point of concentrated infinity). What I want to do is to fully respect the point without thereby negating the circle. And the condition for the accomplishment of this aim is to regard none of them as being itself. Consequently, it seems to me perfectly legitimate and productive to rethink man, the world and time on the basis of the event, as long as we remain within the structure of a certain perspective: that of the lived, i.e. that of phenomena – and, more precisely still, that of specified and limited phenomena. And then also on the condition that this specified domain is not transformed into a unique domain of truth.

Speaking in this way, I fully realize that I retreat into an acceptance of a phenomenology which is neither the most radical, nor the most original, and which actually, on the deepest level, is quite ontologically poor (or neutral). But it is the only phenomenology I truly understand, and it is the only one that seems binding to me. It don’t feel tempted, in order to welcome the *phenomenon* of the event, to adhere to a *philosophy* of the event, be it of the phenomenological kind. And to tell you the truth: in choosing between the philosophy that emphasizes history and the philosophy that emphasizes the event, I think the latter is even more problematical. I continue to believe, with Hegel, that thinking is
mediation, and that it has thus always already transcended the innocent otherness of the event. And yet, with Blanchot\textsuperscript{25} against Hegel, I would like to do justice to the lived and to its special claim to the absolute. I have found no other means to accomplish this than to use the phenomenological method.

What I have tried to demonstrate above is that the problematical character of the event is precisely what has made our entire epoch so obsessed with it (without always admitting it and even, sometimes, while denying it). In fact, we would only have to adopt a position transcending it, and it would again become something accidental, something that would no longer “call us.”\textsuperscript{26} In this sense, the phenomenolo-

\textsuperscript{25} And also with the female protagonist of Patrice Chéreau’s \textit{Intimité}, as I have recently tried to demonstrate in “The Event of Desire,” in \textit{Etudes phénoménologiques}, 36, 2002.

\textsuperscript{26} Which could lead us to ask a new question: why have we become so reluctant to assume this transcending position? And this question is of vast consequence, because it manages to ask, in a profound manner, what determines the surfacing of a whole epoch within thinking. In the case of the event, the primary answer would seem to be: the reason for our reluctance is partly that certain of the events of our century (symbolized most obviously by \textit{Auschwitz}) are irreducible to the point of resisting all our previous efforts of integration (they bring to a halt the tendency to re-inscribe them into the structure of history), partly that thinking no longer strived for integration and thus wanted to regard these events as irreducible. I am not certain that the problem of Auschwitz is even correctly posed. I feel inclined to think that even Auschwitz cannot escape the hermeneutical activity to which all human events will eventually get subjected. Our epoch, just as any other, has turned around – true, it did it with a certain delay, but then again that’s always the case – to study the events that seemed unintelligible to it. Among these, it has picked out a singular event as the Unintelligible. This is to say that Auschwitz was integrated into history, and by history, only as its very limit: as that which it could never repeat or contextualize. The activity of re-imagining has functioned well, but its specific manner of being realized has been to pronounce itself un-realizable. Just as a trauma is a failed hermeneutic, one could say that our relation to Auschwitz is a rejected hermeneutic. And hence the importance of the theme of remembrance in relation to the destructive workings of history. Remembrance is the indispensable correlate of the event: it is remembrance that wants to maintain within it the event exactly as it came about, preserve the memory of its unique character, welcome it without turning it into a process. In the last analysis, we may actually have to interpret Auschwitz as something of a model for the paradigm of the event such as we deal with it today. But this paradigm is not only historical, it is also, perhaps most of all, hermeneutic. Another way of saying this: it is not because history is “really” interrupted that we have begun to fail to think of it as a continuity. My hypothesis would rather be the following: while history was for a long time thought of as a continuity, it has certainly always been lived as interruption. Our epoch will begin when thinking can no longer, will no longer, treat the lived as a negligible quantity: when it lets itself be concerned – to the point of vertigo – by the radical nature of the phenomenon understood as a specific mode of givenness.
gist’s claim that his discipline is the one most likely to think the event, that the event is his object par excellence, is perfectly well-founded. Because in fact, the event can have no other legitimacy than that of phenomenality. It can become the battleground for thinking only if we take seriously its becoming as becoming, i.e. according to the how of its becoming. This means that there is no event at all unless it is related to a consciousness (or to a manifold of consciousnesses) that lives it as such, that can only live it by having constituted it, i.e. by having constituted it already here and now and as the limit of its own faculty of constitution. Or, to say the same thing in another vocabulary: there is no event at all unless it discloses a paradoxical temporality, a mode of time which we must unconditionally understand as lived time, but then, also, as time lived by a consciousness (or many) that has become unable, precisely, to accomplish the synthesis of time. All thinkers, whoever they may be, who today focus upon the event (if only to criticize the exaggerated enthusiasm it has provoked) relate to it as to a phenomenon in that sense; if they would relate to the event otherwise, they would immediately fall to the side of the object of which they try to speak. Under these conditions, I think the total denial of the importance of the phenomenological approach would be a high-risk project indeed.

But as we have seen, all that happens is that the phenomenologist, who is the one best equipped to describe the interstice and fracture indissociable from the event, assumes the position of the interstice only in endowing it with ontological substance. And from that moment on, he will almost inevitably feel an urge to render irreal all immediate existence (i.e. the natural perspective) and to consider as derived all chronological time27, thereby becoming unable to consider historical and collective life in any kind of positive fashion (this applies e.g. to Heidegger, for whom all such things belonged to the level of an inauthenticity which he recognized as necessary, but in relation to which his theory nevertheless represents a structure of flight). What I have tried to show here is that if phenomenology finally looses contact with history, it is not – as one would be tempted to believe – because it has

27 A tendency which even Deleuze seems unable to escape. Cf. F. Zourabichvili’s note on “Aion” in The Vocabulary of Deleuze, Paris, Ellipses, 2003: “Deleuze is not content with a dualism time/event, but searches for a more internal connection between time and what is outside of it. What he tries to show is that all chronology is derived from the event, that the event is the original instance that gives rise to chronology as a whole.”
welcomed the event: it is because it has delegated it to being. Similarly, but inversely, the historian is only doomed to loose contact with the event if he renders history absolute. What I feel becomes questionable in today’s endless discussions about the event is thus not at all the event in itself (which is really given too much attention), but rather the status accorded to its phenomenality – perhaps even, in more general terms, the status accorded to phenomenality as such. As a consequence of this, I really do not think that those who today “side with” history in order to “save it” from the event have any adversaries – due to the lack of sufficiently discriminating reflections on the part of the phenomenologists.

When it comes to the other phenomenology – the one that, having accomplished the expansion, then concentrates upon the inaugural event understood as the coming-to-being itself – it clearly and explicitly speaks of something quite different from the events of the world. And this marks its justification as well as its limitation. Its justification, because this is its own way of doing what philosophy always does, which is to go back to what is most principal (if only to deny it this latter determination); its limitation, because it becomes doubtful if it may develop any further on the basis of this one, fundamental move. Husserl considered phenomenology as an infinite task, but if we have gone back to the very first word, we will also have pronounced the very last, and there will be nothing more to say – other than in the mode of tautologies (this is of course also possible to assume).

Conclusion

Because I let myself go in the last section (in a very incautious manner, certainly) and admitted myself to present some personal thoughts about all this, I will conclude this text by saying something even more personal.

What initially attracted me to phenomenology was the return to the things themselves, the concretion, the rich differentiation of the modes of givenness, the fidelity towards the given (towards the lived as it is lived), the rejection of fantastic, formal categories afterwards stamped

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28 I think this is the case e.g. in two articles, by the way highly stimulating, by B. Binoche: “Histoire, croyance, légitimation,” in Etudes théologiques et religieuses, 75, 200/4; and “Après l’histoire, l’événement?,” in Actuel Marx, 32, PUF, 2002.
upon the phenomena. The fundamental reason for my attraction, the one that sums it all up, was that phenomenology admits of phenomenality in its irreducible variety.

I admit to feeling less at home in a phenomenology that has become oriented so exclusively towards the origin that it no longer goes back to – in order to elucidate it – the genesis of a specific givenness, but only to the undifferentiated origin of all givenness. I believe that this exclusive orientation towards the event of being (towards the inaugural “there is”), this orientation whose fertility stems from its ever nourishing and renewing our faculty of enchantment, also poses a risk: that it may turn us away from the rich manifold of phenomena, just as the stubborn obsession with the origin in general may end in turning us away from the complexities of history.

Translated from French by Johannes Flinck
In recent decades, the question of the relevance of the history of philosophy for philosophy, and the question of the right way to go about writing the history of philosophy, have become objects of an increasingly lively discussion. The background for this could perhaps be sought in the fact that the attempts to liberate philosophy from history initiated at the beginning of the preceding century seem to have met with difficulties surprisingly hard to overcome. A marked tendency in early 20th century philosophy was to leave the concern with earlier philosophy to historians and instead try to establish a presuppositionless knowledge with the help of new-found philosophical tools: logico-linguistic analysis and/or phenomenological research into essences. Nevertheless, the history of philosophy has in several ways continued to make itself felt: proponents of these new directions have still found it important to relate their projects to the history of philosophy, whether it be in order to interpret and re-write it on the basis of their own presuppositions, or in order to question in a more thorough-going way the historical conditions of their own age and their own philosophical perspectives. In this way, philosophy, compared with other areas of knowledge, has come to display an unusual and also distinctive concern with its own history, something which may be discomforting given the original goals of founding a historically untainted discipline. Whereas in the natural sciences and aesthetics it seems possible to make a clear and relatively unproblematic distinction between the present-day practice of the field, on the one hand, and, on the other, research into its history, the study of earlier philosophy has, in contrast, remained an integral part of present philosophical discussion and concerns. Finally, this state of affairs has become the occasion for debate and more systematic reflections concerning the conditions and prob-
lems specific to philosophical historiography. My purpose in this essay is to review and examine what I consider to be the most important aspects of this discussion, in order to be able to determine more precisely what may be specific to the relation between philosophy and its history.

I. The history of philosophy in history

An initial, trite observation with which we can begin is that views of the history of philosophy are not historical constants: rather, different epochs and philosophical directions possess a most telling characteristic in the way they relate to their predecessors. There is no need here to delve into the details of this history of the historiography of philosophy, which in turn has now become the object of considerable efforts of learned historians, as well as critical and suspicious analyses. However, a brief historical recapitulation may be helpful, since the issues prevalent today might best be understood as the climax of a gradually emerging concern with the relation to the philosophical past within the philosophy of the modern epoch.¹

To simplify somewhat for our present purposes, one could say that it is not until the modern epoch that philosophy actually acquires a history, in the sense that earlier philosophy—or at least certain names in earlier philosophy—no longer have an unquestioned presence and binding force. Without exaggerating the traditionalism and reverence for authority of the Middle Ages, philosophical thinking during this epoch could nevertheless be seen as dominated by a conscious striving to preserve and harmonize what was considered to be already firmly established knowledge, either through revelation or pagan wisdom: the attempt to make a fresh start and seek the truth without relying upon traditional presuppositions, which marks the breakthrough of modern philosophy, represents in itself something new, be it successful or not.

¹ A brief, schematic overview of the history of philosophical historiography is given by Passmore (1967), whereas Guéroult (1969) in a brief exposition makes many valuable observations. Rée (1978 and 1985) and Kuklick (1984) have analyzed the philosophical historiography of the modern epoch as a gradually emerging construction, the formation of which has been determined in a decisive way by the needs of philosophical self-legitimation and contingent changes in evaluations. In my conclusion, I will offer a suggestion as to why this may not be the whole truth. I thank Staffan Carlshamre for his remarks on an earlier version of this paper.
In thus establishing distance from the tradition, or perceiving a break in relation to it, the modern epoch faces the problem of how to consider and evaluate the philosophical past and its claims to validity.

Here it is possible to discern two main lines of thought. The first, and dominant view is that the philosophical field consists of a fixed set of competing schools or movements: a limited number of possibilities are given to the philosopher to choose among, now as well as in the past, as answers to certain fundamental, questions as timeless as the possibilities offered. This view, which can be traced back to late antiquity and Diogenes Laertius, becomes associated in the very first historians of philosophy with a critical evaluation of philosophy as a deviation from divinely inspired original wisdom. Within philosophy itself it constitutes the backdrop for both a positive and a negative stance to the tradition: on the one hand, it inspires the alleged rebirth of different ancient “schools” during the Renaissance, as well as the later eclecticism of the Enlightenment; on the other hand, it motivates attempts to break new philosophical ground in order to overcome the skepticism that looms in this plurality of competing viewpoints, basically by founding metaphysics upon a critical return to the human subject of knowledge (Descartes, Hume, Kant). The second perspective, which may be seen as a reaction emerging out of this basically ahistorical and “particularist” view of history, consists in a more “evolutionary” understanding of the history of thought, where the different doctrines and schools of philosophy, as well as the phases in the history of human culture in general, are all given a relative justification as necessary components in the gradual development towards a more complete grasp of the truth (Condorcet, Comte, Hegel).

Against this background, something radically new is represented by the idea of the historical sciences which emerge during the 19th century as distinctive disciplines with the goal of providing objective and non-evaluative knowledge of the past. This neutral, “disinterested” approach to history, which eventually also comes to be applied to the history of philosophy, is clearly different from the perspectives characterized above, even as it brings together elements from each of them. Firstly, there is a striving to discern the unique, individualizing characteristics of persons and events in history, based upon a skepticism towards more overarching and a priori philosophical constructions of history (as in Hegel, for example). Secondly, this nevertheless does not signal a return to the ahistorical view of philosophy as divided into
timeless “schools”: instead, one insists upon the necessity of considering philosophical systems within their historical context. Finally, and most importantly, one abstracts from the question of the truth or falsity of the teachings investigated, thereby for the first time consciously adopting what we might call a strictly historical attitude, which differs from all earlier history of philosophy in virtue of its methodologically reflected claim to neutrality and objectivity.2

This new historical consciousness—and conscience—brings to the fore a conflict which is sometimes considered to be inherent in the very concept of a history of philosophy, given that philosophy is seen as a discipline claiming to provide an absolute, timelessly valid truth, and history as a science about that which is past, which, in the case of thought, signifies that which is obsolete. As the Hegelian attempt to overcome this opposition increasingly comes to be felt as problematic, and as historical research continues to enlarge our knowledge of the history of philosophy, the question of the purpose and use of all this historical knowledge becomes ever more acute: if the philosophical doctrines in history are no longer seen as representing a unitary and authoritative tradition (as in the Middle Ages), nor as merely different aspects of an absolute knowledge (as for Hegelianism), what interest do they have apart from the purely antiquarian? The historical attitude also tends to develop into a relativist historicization, which instead of suspending the question of truth, presupposes that all philosophy, no less than other aspects of culture, is tied to its historical background or author in such a way that the question of its truth outside of this context is not even meaningful—which in practice means that all earlier philosophy is, for us, irrelevant or invalid, if not simply false. The objectification of philosophy within the historical sciences thus runs the risk of being completed via its mummification.

As a reaction against this historical supersaturation and its relativist tendencies (not unlike the situation at the beginning of the modern epoch), the beginning of the 20th century witnesses the emergence of different attempts at a radical liberation from the philosophical tradi-

2 As the first typical proponents for this objectivist historiography in the area of philosophy I would name Dilthey and Renouvier (cf. Smart, Philosophy and its History. La Salle, Ill, 1962, ch. 3). However, a tendency in the same direction can be found earlier, in the historiography of philosophy inspired by Kant, and the somewhat diluted Hegelianism which dominated the steady flow of histories of philosophy in the German language during the 19th century (cf. Rée et al, Philosophy and its Past (Hassocks, 1978).
tion. On one level, these attempts to break away from the past can, themselves, be said to belong to a modern “tradition” (or perhaps a nearly traditional anti-traditionalism): proclaiming the death of all (earlier) metaphysics and founding a new philosophy upon new and better foundations is, of course, something of a leitmotif of modern thought. However, an important new aspect is that in this case, the reaction is not primarily directed against any specific philosophical tradition considered to be obsolete, but rather against the historical thinking which threatens to engulf philosophy as such—i.e. against historicism rather than history. One might read Nietzsche’s ruthless diagnosis of his times in the essay *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1873) as a premonition of these philosophical liberation movements. The radically ahistorical attitude which is here recommended as a cure for the disabling hysteria of collection and recollection characteristic of contemporary education and culture may be said to find its surprising philosophical realization in the projects of phenomenology as well as in linguistic analysis, insofar as one here, with a certain scientific gaiety, practices an active forgetting of history—no matter how alien such a connection might be for the proponents of these movements.

II. Philosophical history of philosophy

With this, we have reached the two extremes in current attitudes towards the history of philosophy, which can be seen as complementary opposites insofar as they agree in their rejection of or at least disregard for the possibility of an essential connection between past and present philosophy. On the one hand, we have the purely historical discipline, which continues the “objectivist” project of historical science by pursuing a kind of basic historical research, suspending questions concerning the present-day relevance and validity of the truth claims of the philosophy studied. On the other hand, we have those schools or directions within philosophy which continue the effort to build upon virgin soil, and consider the study of the history of philosophy as a waste of time or mere hindrance. Both of these attitudes raise interesting problems, but since they leave aside our guiding question—i.e. that of the specific relevance which history seems to have for philosophy—I will address them later, when I return to the idea of a “pure” history of phi-
losophy and the much-debated question of the “interest” or even possibility of such a philosophically innocent historiography. Instead, the difficulties of realizing the second, un- or rather a-historical project provide a suitable starting point for our discussion. The suspicion is that the stubborn return of the past into philosophical discussion is an indication that in some way or other, philosophy after all needs its history—or at least has prematurely broken off the analysis of its relation to it. We will therefore concentrate on the different motivations which have been offered for continuing to take a philosophical interest in the history of philosophy.

In order to further delimit our question, we may also put to one side the less weighty, ceremonial references to historical “predecessors” which are often made in philosophical literature in order to situate one’s own position in a space of marked out by historico-philosophical coordinates. We shall also put aside the use of the history of philosophy as a pedagogical tool for introducing basic philosophical perspectives and problems. My question here concerns rather the possible grounds for the kind of turn to the history of philosophy which aims at being both philosophically and historically serious, i.e. that aims to do justice to the gravitas of both past and present philosophy. I think one may discern two main motivations for such an occupation with the history of philosophy, both regularly associated with a certain conception of the nature of philosophy. As compared to the “objectivist” historiography of philosophy, they may both be characterized as “interested” or as relating to the present, insofar as they share the idea that we cannot, or at least should not, let the past reside within itself, its own context, but need to see it in relation to the questions, perspectives and knowledge of our own time. They differ, however, in that one may be said to understand the past beginning from the present, whereas the other wants to interpret the present philosophical situation from the perspective of the past. I will characterize each of these further.³

³ My typology here may seem coarse in comparison to others offered in the literature. However, it should be noted once again that, here at the beginning, I’m leaving aside the purportedly “neutral” research into the history of philosophy, including different “externalist” models. The heuristic function of this kind of ideal-type construction is of course always paid for with a certain rigidity of description. My divisions are partly inspired by the models found in J. Gracia, *Philosophy and its History* (New York, 1992), Chs. 3 and 5, J. Passmore’s encyclopedia article “Philosophy, Historiography of,” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. P Edwards, Vol VI: 226-30 (New York & London, 1967), M. Mandelbaum, “The History of Ideas, Intellectual History, and the History of Philosophy,” in *History and Theory*, Beiheft 5, 1965), H-M. Sass, “Philoso-
The first alternative, which is often called “problem history” (or *Problemgeschichte*), may be called an *actualizing* form of historiography. Its starting point is a more or less reflected belief in the existence of certain objective philosophical problems, in regard to which we have now reached clarity concerning what they are and how they should be formulated. These problems, even if they cannot be eternal in any substantial sense, do at least have a certain timelessness, which in some cases allows us to read earlier philosophers as if they were our contemporaries; but even in cases where the problems have had to wait until our time to become clearly worked out and liberated from extra-philosophical concerns, they may be discerned in history as vanishing points of sorts, in the direction in which philosophers have tended. By making “rational reconstructions” of these tentative efforts, and charitably disregarding their lack of articulation and historically conditioned mistakes, we are therefore capable of bridging the philosophical distance here as well, and thus of establishing a trans-historical present for philosophical dialogue. However, this in itself does not mean that the philosopher of today will necessarily have to devote much interest to the history of his discipline: only insofar as we are actually able to find anticipations which can be reconstructed as interesting contributions to our own discussion do we have reason to look back.4

In contrast to this view, the other direction may be described as a *historicizing* attitude. This approach may take several forms, but a common denominator is a striving after an awareness of the historical preconditions of the contemporary philosophical situation, originating

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4 Many of the proponents of such an “actualism” or problem history can be found within analytical philosophy: examples would be Wedberg’s (Western philosophy, Plato), Russell (Western philosophy, Leibniz), B. Williams (Descartes), Strawson (Kant), Bennett (Kant, Spinoza), Stenius and Barnes (the Presocratics). However, the problem-oriented history of philosophy within Neo-Kantianism could also be included here (with Windelband at the fore), as well as Husserl’s “critical history of ideas” and Jasper’s conversations with “the great philosophers.”
from a certain skepticism concerning the alleged timelessness of philosophical “problems.” At one end of the spectrum, we may place historical relativism in a pure form, which does not leave any room for a new philosophy that would so to speak move at the same level as those which are historically given: philosophy today must instead be transformed into a critical meta-philosophy or a supra-philosophical “historical consciousness,” and in this way be absorbed into a kind of history of philosophy. More cautious is the position which holds that we cannot without further ado take “our” philosophical problems as given, but must trace them back to their historical origins in order to truly understand them. Philosophical problems and doctrines are, on this view, neither timeless nor hermetically locked within their own historical horizon: they may undergo significant change and development which transforms not only the answers but also the manner of questioning itself, but nevertheless leaves a certain commonality of interest and theme. At least when we are concerned with Western philosophy, this historical process includes us as well, and in trying to understand earlier philosophy it is therefore necessary to take into account both the historical specificity of the philosophy and the fact that we ourselves are already a part of its “effectual history” (Wirkungsgeschichte, to use Gadamer’s word)—we are rooted in tradition even before we start conducting the history of philosophy as a particular discipline. However, this does not rule out our finally also engaging in a more immediate dialogue with our predecessors; rather, it is only through such a complex hermeneutical process which we may establish a common horizon within which both the past and our own time come into their own.

5 As examples of relativist historians of philosophy and culture in this sense one might mention Spengler and Collingwood. Perhaps no clear division should be established between this more explicitly relativist approach and the “neutral” history of philosophy, which because of its lack of a standpoint might be said to carry a relativist seed within itself; to this extent, Dilthey and Renouvier may also be added to this strain of thought.

6 As the classical proponents of such a non-relativist historicism (in the sense here indicated) one can point to Heidegger and Gadamer; perhaps Croce as well may also be said to belong to this line of thought. In more recent literature, Taylor and Gracia (op. cit.) have seen the real relevance of the history of philosophy for philosophy in the uncovering of deep historical preconditions which may otherwise be difficult to discover; for similar motivations, see Ch. Taylor, “Philosophy and its History” (in Rorty et al., Philosophy in History. Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy (Cambridge, 1984).
For the first of the above, actualizing standpoints, it is thus contingent whether the history of philosophy is of any relevance for present philosophy, something which follows from the assumption that we now know what the genuine philosophical problems are. In any event, history on this view is not important for philosophy as history, if this means something at the same time familiar and strange, the encounter with which may transform our own manner of raising philosophical problems—the past is basically of interest in virtue of its similarity to the present, either as a constructive contribution or as a classical, paradigmatic example of a common philosophical error. It is of course desirable that a positively oriented reconstruction of earlier philosophy should be possible, especially when it concerns what we intuitively (an intuition more or less guided by tradition, of course) perceive to be “great philosophers”: the claim to have found and understood the fundamental problems of philosophy will otherwise seem less credible. But there is nothing to prevent the necessity of written off much what has traditionally been included in the canonical history of philosophy as philosophically irrelevant or at least obsolete. This actualizing form of the history of philosophy thus resembles the ahistorical conception in earlier philosophical historiography; it is also the form which has been most closely associated with the attempts to establish a historically innocent philosophy, to the extent that history here has continued to play any visible role.

For the second, historicizing attitude in its various forms, philosophy is on the contrary essentially historical: if we are to reach genuine insight into what the philosophical problems really are, historical reflection is necessary. A philosophy which disregards its own historicity and reduces the history of philosophy to a timeless philosophical dialogue is likely to degenerate into a fruitless pursuit of badly understood problems. The supposedly immediate contact across the ages which problem history seeks to establish all too easily falsifies history by simplifying the picture of the past, and thereby blocks the self-understanding which a more radically historical perspective might yield. In other words, we lock ourselves up within our own horizon by reading the present into the past and refusing to consider seriously anything going beyond or against this perspective. The historicizing interpretation of the history of philosophy thus shows greater similarity with the “neutral” historiography, in that it insists that the past must be allowed to be speak on its own terms, which sometimes may mean
something radically different from our own perspective (at least to start with, and perhaps also in the final analysis). However, it also differs from this historical objectivism through its roots in a Hegelian, teleological view of the history of philosophy, which can be seen in the goal of reconstructing larger historical connections.⁷

To discuss the justifiability of these two approaches to the history of philosophy at a general level is difficult, since they are based upon different conceptions of what philosophy is or should be: they have different views of the possibility of objective philosophical knowledge, valid beyond the historical situation, or at least they differ with respect to the difficulties involved in any attempt to establish such knowledge. A debate concerning the principles of the history of philosophy in which the participants take their own views on this matter for granted therefore seems destined from the very start to end up in aporias, and must instead be transferred to a metaphilosophical level: to that extent, the view one has of philosophy determines in advance the relation to the view of how the history of philosophy should be written. At the same time, it is obvious that a certain historical orientation is an integral part of both of these positions, and that their ability to make the history of philosophy intelligible from their own perspective is an important aspect of how one would judge their general plausibility. Because of this, concrete examples of philosophical historiography might even constitute a possible arena for the confrontation of philosophical perspectives which otherwise tend to ignore or quickly dismiss each other: it is possible to begin communicating about a common, to some extent objectively given historical “object,” not in order to put one’s own view of the nature of philosophy aside and do “pure” history, but precisely in order to muster all the resources of one’s own perspective in the effort to develop a philosophically fruitful interpretation. But with this, we have moved from the meta-philosophical level to the ground level of concrete exercises in the history of philosophy: to what

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⁷ The problem-oriented history of philosophy often contains as well a more or less marked and recognized teleological element, insofar as one here reconstructs earlier philosophy with guidance from present-day discussion. The model for this form of teleology, however, is not so much Hegel as it is the Aristotle who in the first book of the Metaphysics reconstructs the history of the gradual discovery of the different causal factors by earlier philosophers. To try to put the elusive difference into a formula, one might say that the actualist sees history as a development leading up to the truth, whereas the historicist may see the historical happening itself as the very unfolding of truth.
extent the one or the other position may be fruitful for our understand-
ing of the history of philosophy is a question which seems almost im-
possible to settle in principle—it can only be decided through actual interpretations.\textsuperscript{8}

III. The problem of understanding: objectivity and relevance

So far I have deliberately omitted one factor complicating the picture of the different approaches to the history of philosophy, namely the question of the possibility and interest of objective historical understand-
ing, i.e. to what extent the classical principles of the program of historical objectivism, to understand the past \textit{sine ira et studio} and “wie es eigentlich gewesen,” can and ought to be applied in studying the history of philosophy. Even if the approaches characterized above, as philosophically “interested” and present-oriented, deliberately tran-
cend the limits of purely historical understanding, they are compatible and may be associated with either objectivism or relativism as con-
cerns the \textit{possibility} of such understanding—which means that it may not always be possible to draw the limits between the different posi-
tions as sharply as I have tried to do here.

Within so called problem history or actualizing history, the pre-
dominant view would seem to be that it may very well be possible to reach an understanding of earlier philosophy which is in some sense independent of our own philosophical horizon, but that we need not let ourselves be restricted by this: if we find an interpretation which to us

\textsuperscript{8} Such a \textit{gigantomachia} concerning the history of philosophy may of course be said to exist already, even if it is not often consciously understood as such. Perhaps it is this lack of reflection which sometimes results in the discussion of different interpretations becoming locked in a stalemate concerning the principles of the history of philosophy, or alternatively leads to a narrow-minded focus upon details which ends up neglecting the larger issues. A reasonable basis of criticism, it seems, would instead be partly an estimation of the interpretation from the perspective of the “neutral” historian, and partly a comparison with interpretations which take competing viewpoints as their point of departure with regard to what is of philosophical interest. One problem with such a confrontation by way of history, however, is that one of the few things actualists and historicists tend to agree upon, is that the claim of the “neutral” historian of phi-
losophy to judge the historical value of their interpretations is at best doubtful—which means that the possibility of beginning from a common, objectively given historical ground seems to dissolve, while the basic difference concerning what is of interest in philosophy, and therefore in the history of philosophy, remains.
is philosophically more interesting, even though historically more problematic or doubtful, it is legitimate to divide and transform the historical object to suit our own interests. Others on the contrary may think that such an objective understanding is in any case an impossibility, since we are never able to free ourselves completely from our own perspective, and may therefore defend their approach by saying that we should make a virtue of necessity, and consciously and expressly understand the past in our own terms, instead of striving for an unattainable goal, with a result which becomes less interesting the closer we come to reaching it.

Of the two main forms of the “historicizing” approach, explicit relativism, can itself be divided into two forms. In one case, the historian’s own perspective is exempted from the general relativist perspective, by making so to speak a distinction of type between history and its reflection in historical consciousness: with this, one may then make a claim to both objectivity and superiority in one’s understanding in relation to the past, precisely because of the allegedly unique insight into the historically conditioned character of all (other) standpoints and the timeless pattern of basic anthropological or other facts which can be discerned behind them (Renouvier, Dilthey). In the other possible form of explicit relativism, the historian does not in this way try to escape relativism for his own part, but accepts the historicity of his own time as something inevitable: therefore, he also gives up the claim to an objective historiography, and instead takes his place in the historical happening in order to let himself be guided by the truths of the present (Collingwood, Spengler). The more cautious form of historicization, on the other hand, which is not clearly or explicitly relativist, is not quite so easy to fit into the scheme, since it in itself amounts to a questioning of what is involved in understanding ourselves as well as history; due to the “effectual-historical” connections, which precede the thematizing approach to the past of historical research, our understanding of the past can never be either a presuppositionless partaking of the self-understanding of the past or an application of categories completely alien to the historical object.

The combination of different aspects thus produces a broad field of different approaches. It is also worth noticing that the practice of philosophical historiography sometimes brings together what declarations of principle might seem to separate (and the other way around). One example of such an overlap is that the kind of relativist history of phi-
osophy which includes the historian himself in its relativism (Collingwood) curiously enough may result in a variety of historiography which in its form is hard to distinguish from that which presupposes the existence of timeless problems and the possibility of objective understanding (e.g. Leo Strauss): i.e. full-fledged relativism may in practice be indiscernible from what one might call an objective “realism” within philosophical historiography. Such examples further illustrate the difficulty of discussing the historiography of philosophy at a level of principles, without reference to actual historical interpretations: it is not always obvious how programmatic declarations are supposed to be realized in concrete examples.9

Instead of continuing to juggle these categories, and before discussing any single standpoint in more detail, I will now take up, first (in this and the following section), the general question concerning the interest and, above all, the possibility of a purely historical approach, and, secondly (in the rest of the paper), the difficulties associated with the attempt to move beyond this and establish a philosophical-historical dialogue. The common denominator for all of the approaches sketched above, including relativism, is that they try, in their different ways, to relate the history of philosophy to its present; in this respect, they are all opposed to the kind of history of philosophy which wants to understand the past completely in its own terms. This conflict or tension between “objective” and “interested” philosophical historiography could thus be taken as the second main opposition in the current discussion.10

9 See the essays by Collingwood, Strauss and Gunnell, collected in King, ed., The Idea of History (1983). Collingwood is here criticized by Strauss (1952) for judging the historians of antiquity in terms of a modern ideal of history in his overview of the history of historiography, thereby deserting the principle behind his own “logic of question and answer,” that thinkers should be assessed from out of their own questions. But Strauss himself is subjected to a similar criticism by Gunnell (1978): Strauss forfeits his claims to objective historical understanding by construing the historical tradition he needs in order to question modern political philosophy.

10 The main characteristics of the standpoint of the neutral historian of philosophy have already been sketched above (the “historical school” of the 19th century and its different descendants). In virtue of its concern with the historical context, this line of historiography is related to but not identical with various “externalist” perspectives, which intend to explain philosophy from the outside, either as a function of political, social and economical circumstances (as in the sociology of knowledge and the Marxist tradition of historical materialism), or as an expression of the general conceptions and cultural context of its epoch (as in the history of ideas or “intellectual history”). In this paper, I will not go into the specific problems and dangers associated with such a sociological or cultural “monism” (Mandelbaum, 1965), but limit myself to a historical
The main argument of the objectivist historian for his approach is of course that it is the only one that holds out any hope of reaching historical truth; the often frivolous treatment of history within the philosophically interested style of historiography tends to result in hopelessly anachronistic interpretations, which ultimately may even work against the philosophical interest which motivated this kind of historical study in the first place. On the one hand, the “timeless problems” which actualists want to isolate from the historical context are often abstractions divorced from reality, which, if they are to be taken seriously at all, should, at a minimum, not be imposed on a past which knew nothing of them; and the question is whether these attempts to actualize history, instead of contributing to the solution of genuine philosophical problems, may not instead rather be the origin or a reinforcement of specious problems. The historicizing approach, on the other hand, betrays in various ways its commendable intention of listening to and learning from history, particularly by letting ill-grounded speculations concerning the nature of philosophy and the overall lines of its history distort and level historical specificity and manifoldness; in doing so, the opportunity of gaining a deeper understanding of one’s own historical situation is also missed, which was the original purpose of this turn to history. In either case, what emerges is neither historical

“pluralism” which grants philosophy a fairly high degree of independence. For an interesting exchange on this issue, focusing upon Descartes, see Derrida’s criticism (1963) of Foucault’s reading of Descartes.

Among modern historians of philosophy with a more or less conscious concern with historical objectivity, insofar as they do not explicitly or obviously depend upon any present-day philosophical tendencies, one might mention Bréhier and Copleston (both writing their way through the history of Western philosophy as a whole) and Guthrie (in his six volume work on Greek philosophy). However, this large-scale type of philosophical historiography, which has its own specific problems concerning objectivity (the division into periods, supra-individual connections etc.), will here not be the primary model for the neutral history of philosophy; rather, one should have in mind extensive and close readings focusing upon the works of a single philosopher, in the extreme case resulting in pure exegesis and paraphrase (as for instance in the editions of Aristotle’s work by Ross, which contain translations or paraphrases as well as commentary, or Paton’s study on Kant’s Metaphysics of Experience).

Among the more programmatic proponents for historical objectivism, one might mention (apart from Quentin Skinner) Dunn (1968), Ayers (1978), Kristeller (1985) and Frede (1988); Passmore (1965) and Mandelbaum (1965) may also be counted among these, as spokesmen for a “cautious” problem history. Interesting to note is also Lovejoy’s extensive defense (1939) of the possibility of objective historical understanding, despite the usual criticism against his own particular brand of “history of ideas” for an un-historical atomization of thinking.
truth nor a philosophically fruitful dialogue with the past, but rather a more or less sophisticated and skillful philosophico-historical ventriloquism: the past seems to speak, but is actually only given lip service by a philosopher-turned-historian out to rehearse and confirm his own ideas.

Quentin Skinner has established himself as one of the staunchest proponents of the necessity of understanding past thinking in its historical context, without thereby surrendering to some form of externalism. In the essay “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas” (1969) he extensively demonstrates the dangers of focusing upon “what the text itself says” to the extent of ignoring the historically given linguistic context—a textual focus which is often advocated by the now-relating styles of historiography. According to Skinner, this textualism, as well as the contextualism (my terms) which aims to fully explain the meaning of texts in terms of their social and historical context, neglect the importance of the writer’s own intentions in understanding the meaning of the text, which results in various kinds of “mythologies” rather than genuine history of philosophy. The textualists thus tend to draw the writer into their own philosophical questions by ascribing to him intentions which he cannot very well have had, given the context of linguistic conventions within which he understood himself and his “utterance”; on the other hand, the socially and historically contextualizing reading confuses a background which certainly may be helpful in understanding linguistic acts with the very content and purpose of these acts themselves.

For their part, the advocates of a philosophically interested approach to the history of philosophy launch two main forms of criticism against any neutral historiography with regard to philosophy. The first, less interesting criticism is that such an objective interpretation of the history of philosophy, although it may in some sense be possible, is of only very limited value to us. Thus, one questions the very point of preserving past thinking without raising the question of its truth or relevance for our present-day questions. Such a purely historical antiquarianism may seem harmless enough, and is of course widely practiced within historical science in general, where references to the “relevance for the present” are often little more than a ceremonial flourish; however, with regard to philosophy, such an approach may even have its own risks, as it easily turns into a breeding ground for historical relativism (witness again the reaction of the early Nietzsche
to the historical over-consumption of his time). Nevertheless, although it should not be allowed to dominate the field, neutral history of philosophy can be given a certain justification, as presenting a kind of raw material in the form of doxographical overviews and broader philosophical perspectives, which a philosophically more penetrating eye may put to good use in its confrontation with the past—thus, the supposed tension is really only a question of a division of labor.\footnote{Such a balancing of neutral and interested approaches against each other is made by, e.g., Lamprecht (1939), Passmore (1965), Powers (1986), Curley (1986) and Morgan (1987). Whether this is also Rorty’s position is not completely clear to me (see the following footnote).}

The second and more fundamental objection which the philosophically interested approach levels against neutral historiography is that this simply does not constitute a possible project. At one level, this might still be seen as merely a deepening of the first criticism, insofar as one questions whether an interpretation which actually manages to be philosophically innocent will really give us anything worth calling an “understanding” of the object studied. To the extent that the attempt to free oneself from one’s own philosophical presuppositions is successful, this only has the effect of making the understanding reached a very superficial one—the achievement of the pure historian will be limited to recapitulating and paraphrasing teachings the true significance of which remains hidden. If the historian nevertheless somehow seems to avoid such a parrot-like repetition, this will be because he tacitly lets himself be guided by views and elements taken from the philosophy of his own time—but in an unclear, arbitrary and superficial way, which is therefore likely to be less fruitful than when the openly “interested” historian consciously and methodically applies his own philosophical tools and perspectives. If the partisan of this latter approach may be accused of practicing the art of ventriloquism, the counter-metaphor exposing the pure historian could be that of a mime-artist, who admirably goes through the motions of philosophical thinking, but denies himself and his object the advantage of a living voice.\footnote{The foremost critic of the possibility of objective understanding, working in the wake of Hegel and Heidegger, is probably Gadamer, whose criticism is somewhat ambiguous, however: at least in part, it rather seems to be of the first-mentioned kind, that is to say questioning the independent interest of objective understanding (see further footnote 15 below). Others who have argued for the necessity of a “philosophically conscious” history of philosophy include Randall (1939), Makin (1988) and Gracia (1992), ch. 1 and 2. Rorty (1984) appears to waver( between two positions: on the one hand, he sees historical and rational reconstruction as complementary but...}
As concerns the first criticism, it is unusual, at least within the history of philosophy, to see anyone defend neutral research into history as having independent interests, in the way which is more or less taken for granted within for instance the history of science or of ideas in general—philosophical doxography is seldom seen or valued as a goal in itself. Even those who think that the history of philosophy should as far as possible be investigated without presuppositions usually accept that the final motivation for undertaking such a task is still the possibility of finding material of philosophical interest. One counter-objection which the objective historian may nevertheless make is that the criticism he faces seems in one way or another to presuppose the superiority of the present above the past: and whereas this may seem reasonable within the natural sciences (barring certain extravagant ideas within the theory and history of science), in the case of philosophy it may be thought of as an arrogant and dangerous provincialism. We cannot exclude the possibility that history contains hidden treasures in the form of now forgotten perspectives and alternative solutions, which we may still find useful in pretty much the same form in which they were originally formulated: and a condition for gaining access to these potentially fruitful alternatives and allowing them to deepen our understanding of philosophy could be that we study philosophy without present-day presuppositions. Of course, the project distinct aspects of the project of writing the history of philosophy, which therefore ought to be conducted apart; on the other hand he argues for a standpoint motivated by general meaning holism, namely that we do not really understand very much of history until we relate and translate it into our own conceptual universe and philosophical concerns, which means that the two aspects of the history of philosophy will be deeply intertwined from the start (for more on these views, which seem to be somewhat uneasy sitting together, see p. 49 f. and 68, resp. 52 f.). Perhaps a certain amount of rational reconstruction, which cannot be undertaken here, might show Rorty’s position to be consistent.

13 Even Quentin Skinner, who as far as possible wants to suspend the question of the relevance to us of the historically investigated philosophical doctrine, finally justifies the work of the historian of ideas with the possibility of gaining philosophical knowledge or at least self-insight (1969, section V). In the essay from 1984, he himself also exemplifies, from a similar motivation, the combination of neutral historiography and positive evaluation. Clean-cut proponents of pure doxography, as opposed to its practitioners, are hard to mobilize (but cf. Oakeshott 1955), and I will not further discuss the possibility of defending such a perspective (or non-perspective).

14 For this very common defense, see, e.g., Skinner (1969 and 1984), Kristeller (1985) and Curley (1986). This defense may be said to harbor its own dangers, however, by introducing a gray area in which philosophical work is done so to speak obliquely, by way of history, which may be tempting as a safer and more comfortable choice than
of the neutral historian as such only amounts to a determination of the objective content of a philosophical doctrine: but nothing excludes immediately attaching a positive evaluation to this.

In light of the first criticism and the response to it, it may be said that the purely historical and the now-relating approaches may very well be united in one and the same study, and that they are perhaps best seen as two different but complementary aspects of one and the same project in the history of philosophy—the differing results are seldom caused by an exclusive adherence to either of them, but rather by the fact that one or the other of the element predominates, while the other is subordinated as the means to the first’s end. To use Rorty’s terms: the rational reconstruction must after all be anchored in historical understanding, if it is not to turn into a free-floating construction; and the historical reconstruction cannot very well be performed in complete philosophical innocence if it is to recreate something we are able to recognize as philosophy. The mutual criticism can therefore to some extent be reduced to pointing out the dangers of one-sidedness, rather than any defects of principle in either of these approaches. The danger of the “now-relating” interpretation is thus that it will reduce the history of philosophy to nothing more than a distorted or tentative version of the present, a self-image wrongfully projected onto the past, where we see only what we may recognize from our own case; whereas history as reconstructed within a programmatic objectivist interpretation may rise up like the tower of Babel, unintelligible and therefore destined to become indifferent to us.

The possibility of such a harmonizing balancing between the supposed contraries is certainly worth mentioning, considering the polemical exaggerations often found in the discussion. Nevertheless, such a mediation would gloss over the real differences which form the foundation of the second objection to a neutral history of philosophy, concerning the very possibility of objective historical understanding. With this, we are in the vicinity of fundamental problems in the philosophy of language concerning understanding and meaning, transla-

approaching philosophical questions head on and in one’s own name. Thus, the historian turned philosopher-by-proxy may allow himself to hint indefinitely at the philosophical interest and potential of the material he is interpreting; but when pressed as to the real philosophical value of this material, he may retreat to the position of a pure historian, as a task which is at some level legitimate in itself; and when pressed as to the historical value or accuracy of his interpretation, he may complete the circle by appealing to the philosophical interest of what may be historically doubtful.
tion and interpretation, which have recently been the subject of very lively discussion. But although these issues, even in their most general forms, no doubt can be related to the problem of the history of philosophy as well, it seems to me less relevant here to apply general arguments for how the interpretation of language and texts happens or should happen (I present some reasons for this view in the following section). Of more interest will be to see which difficulties, if any, are specific for understanding and for entering into a dialogue with the history of philosophy, insofar as this is supposed to differ not only from historical understanding in general, but also from the problem of communication between different philosophical movements in the present. The questions we must try to answer are therefore, first: to what extent may we reach an objective understanding of earlier philosophy? Secondly: what are our possibilities of establishing a dialogue with the philosophical past. This very distinction between understanding and dialogue or application has of course been called into question, but I will argue that it is a distinction that ought to be maintained, since an objective or neutral understanding, at a certain level, is in my view possible, in history no less than otherwise, and must be seen as a precondition for engaging in dialogue with the history of philosophy, and not an obstacle.

IV. The possibility of objective understanding

One problem with several of the objections which have been raised against the possibility of objective understanding in the history of philosophy, I believe, is that they refer to what in fact are more general difficulties connected with understanding and interpretation: to the extent that the conclusions drawn from these difficulties are valid, they must therefore be generally applicable. This means, however, that we either will get results that are intuitively implausible (there is no possibility of objective understanding at all) or that the content of the criticism instead must be weakened in a way which makes it less exciting than it might have appeared (objective historical understanding is possible, but this is not “real” understanding). I would insist, rather, as already indicated, that there is, in a, certain, almost trivial sense, something which may reasonably be called an objective or neutral understanding, and that an interpretation which strives for this cannot be
dismissed *a priori* as philosophically uninteresting; the difficulties which such an enterprise no doubt encounters do not amount to an impossibility of principle, and the *a priori* denial of its own interest would seem to imply a questionable “assumption of incompleteness.”

An obvious analogy which may clarify this and serve as a kind of counterexample is the case where a person makes a drastic transition between two present-day philosophical perspectives, without thereby understanding the new one in terms of the old, or in any other way relating them to each other—the understanding which lies at the bottom of the transition exists, so to speak, completely in terms of the new perspective. Such a sharp conversion may of course not be the typical case, and might even seem psychologically bizarre or intellectually perverse; but it is hard to see why it would not be possible, as a matter of principle. After all, the person in question must have acquired his first philosophical perspective without understanding this in terms of another one, so there cannot be any impossibility of principle for a similar appropriation now—it is only a matter of forgetting and learning something new. If the other, already accepted participants in the discussion also accept the newcomer, it seems we cannot dismiss the

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15 Gadamer’s criticism of objectivist historical research in *Wahrheit und Methode* is difficult to get clear on: it appears to waver between denying the possibility of objective understanding and questioning its interest. Thus, Gadamer at certain points claims that any historical research in philosophy demands an interest-determined selection and guidance from one’s own understanding of the philosophical problems, which means that it cannot be objective in any absolute sense (e.g. p. 250 ff., 261 ff., and cf. p. 533). But in other places he criticizes historical objectivism for its very intention of suspending questions of truth and relevance, since such a purified *Mitverstehen* (regardless of whether it is possible to attain) could not have any independent interest—it is not comprehensible as a form of existential *Verstehen* or *Erfahrung*, which always demands an “application” of that which is to be understood (p. 290 ff., 329 ff.). These two aspects of the criticism also become tied to each other: the artificial and unreasonable character (according to Gadamer) of the attempt to determine someone’s view without asking about their interest, shows up in the evaluations which nevertheless always creep into such an undertaking (p. 342 f., 374 f.). One should also read, from this perspective, Gadamer’s statement that his criticism is not immediately concerned with changing the *practice* of the historian of philosophy, but primarily tries to change his *self-understanding* (p. 250); thus, according to Gadamer, we should of course not give up the striving for objectivity which is laid down in the customary methods of historical learning (p. 515), just as justified and productive “prejudices” must be distinguished from distorting ones (p. 282 f.). All in all, these statements taken together make for a well-balanced view—perhaps a less exciting one to the extent that it is true.
person’s grasp of the new perspective as superficial: a parrot does not raise insightful questions or further develop thoughts.\textsuperscript{16}

That one may in this way make a radical “leap” between different philosophical perspectives, as well as between different life-worlds or language games in general, can not reasonably be denied. It is another thing that the ability to be integrated into any human context whatsoever ultimately may be grounded upon certain brute facts of nature or, if you will, a basic existential constitution, and that we therefore cannot imagine an understanding or explanation which does not presuppose \textit{anything}. The point is that the necessity of such a pre-given understanding (or ability to learn) is probably more a matter of being human than of relating different, more richly articulated life-worlds to each other—the possibility of constructing a regress argument against the contrary supposition at least seems obvious (how would a child ever learn anything about anything?). Of course, for one who is already philosophically trained in a particular school or manner of thinking, it will be natural to begin from tentative “translations” of the new ideas into already familiar categories; but this must be seen as an in principle dispensable shortcut to objective understanding, rather than as an obstacle or a definite limitation to gaining such understanding. The ability of a human being to philosophize and understand philosophy may rest upon certain metaphysical predispositions (Kant) or upon a pre-ontological “understanding of being” (Heidegger), but not, in all likelihood, upon his already being possessed of a philosophical system. We must therefore take it that no one is actually arguing that objective understanding in \textit{this} sense is an impossibility, notwithstanding appearances to the contrary.

Now, there are of course well-known philosophical arguments concerning the indeterminacy of translation and interpretation, or, in another quarter, the impossibility of rigorously and finally delimiting the context of interpretation, which might mean that objective interpreta-

\textsuperscript{16} From a Rortian-Gadamerian perspective, it may perhaps be objected that if I appropriate something in this way, it is actually no longer a matter of \textit{me} understanding something: rather, I \textit{become} someone else, by simply letting go of certain of my previous beliefs. But the possibility of this is all that my argument requires: given that it is in this way possible to transform oneself and enter into a new perspective, it must similarly be possible for the historian to gain such an understanding of his object “from the inside,” by a kind of “compartmentalization” of his mind, without subscribing to the doctrine in question or weighing it against what he may know about or consider true in present-day philosophy (of which he in theory may know nothing and in practice, perhaps, often very little).
tion and understanding is in fact not possible in general, and this would then be applicable also to the relation between philosophical theories and even the translation of a philosophical theory from one language to another, regardless of whether we stay within a single epoch or move between different ages. But whether or not some argument of this kind is tenable seems to me of less interest for our question here, precisely because of the general character of the arguments: if they are valid, they are applicable quite generally, and pose no special problem for the historiography of philosophy, in the sense that the current discussion would seem to presuppose. Moreover, it would seem that the “objectivity” which is questioned or undermined through such general arguments is also of a rather strong sort: it is doubtful whether this is really what is at stake in the discussion of the possibility of objective understanding in the history of philosophy, or indeed in many other contexts. What we should focus upon here, I believe, is that we at all events often make an intuitive distinction, which it seems pointless to obliterate through a mere terminological change, between a purely understanding attitude and a more strongly interpretative and truth-interested attitude—and it is the significance of this distinction which we must try to clarify.\(^{17}\)

Now, it is at a minimum not immediately obvious why we should not be able to imagine the understanding of the past on the same model as in the transition between two present-day perspectives. There are of course several differences between the transition between two present-day perspectives what is normally at issue in the historiography of philosophy, but the question is whether any of these differences are essential. To begin with, and perhaps somewhat surprising, the distance in time cannot reasonably be a decisive factor: indeed, the example given above might serve to undermine the standard conception of a concern with the past as constitutive of the historical attitude. At least with regard to the aspects mentioned above, there is no difference of principle between attempting to understand a contemporary and a phi-

\(^{17}\) Furthermore, we should avoid confusing the conceptual and the factical level. Sometimes, the claim to objectivity may certainly be used as a mere catchphrase to defend what is in fact only deeply entrenched and therefore hidden philosophical and historical perspectives, by dismissing new and therefore more salient ways of looking at history as subjective, ungrounded and speculative interpretations. Without underestimating the frequency and force of this maneuver, it seems to me wiser to save the concept of objectivity and its open applicability, rather than abandoning it because of its possible abuse.
losopher of the distant past: in both cases, it is a matter of entering into a certain way of thinking with the help of its direct expression, its self-understanding and various background information which may enlighten us concerning what is taken for granted by the philosopher himself—and in none of this is it certain that contemporary philosophy will be more easily accessible than past philosophy. The historical attitude in this sense may be directed towards a contemporary theory as well as one in distant times: and the leap into another universe of conceptions would therefore seem to be possible, thus far, in history no less than within one and the same age. 18 Usually, to be sure, the time-factor naturally leads to another difference, one concerning the availability of evidence for the content of the doctrine in question: when it is a matter of the more distant past, we may lack relevant texts, we may be incompletely informed about the historical and cultural background, and we may have no living proponent to ask in order to clarify points we find it difficult to understand (to paraphrase Plato: texts always say the same thing). However (without taking death to be either trivial or accidental), the indicated problems are after all basically a matter of differences of degree and accidental circumstances, and therefore not categorically distinctive of our relation to the past. Even if the historian cannot in a strict sense be accepted as a participant in the conversation in for instance a dead language, he may often receive indirect confirmation of the depth of his understanding by partaking of historically handed down dialogues and commentaries—which is often as far as we get in relation to our contemporaries. In this way one may also refute the arguments which have been leveled against Quentin Skinner, to the effect that the attempt to establish the historical linguistic context would be either a hopelessly uncertain undertaking, lead to an infinite regress or reduce the author to a mere function of his times—none of these problems distinguishes, as a matter of principle, the understanding of linguistic acts in the past from the understanding of those of the

18 Lest it be seen as perverse to use the characteristic “historical” in this way, one might point out that the time-factor was in fact not essential to the original use of the word in ancient Greece. Thus, the subject of Herodotus’ Historia (from Greek historein, to investigate, examine, look around) is not specifically any past happenings, but on the contrary focuses upon the geography and contemporary culture of the regions described; and this in fact continued to be a general use of the word “history” up until recent times, as in the expression “natural history” for a descriptive account of the domain of nature (cf. also the traditional term for one of Aristotle’s biological works, the descriptively oriented Historia animalium).
present. The problem of ascertaining the “universe of discourse” to which the text belongs, as well as the danger of ignoring it, are likely to be the same in both cases, and the difficulties in the one case are not necessarily larger than in the other.\textsuperscript{19}

In the original example we considered a person who accepts the philosophical teaching he has studied as being basically correct. However, what is decisive for the historical attitude as I here understand it, and what lies at the basis of such a conversion, is rather that one does not, to begin with, try to decide the truth of the doctrine studied, or relate it to any standpoint of one’s own, but that one in the first place tries to understand the claims it makes about reality in it’s own terms. Now, it is widely recognized that in this process we have to let ourselves be guided by a “principle of charity,” and thus make certain “assumptions of completeness” about the text or theory we study: an interpretation which forces us to ascribe what is, according to our own standards,

\begin{footnote}{The indicated examples of criticisms of Skinner have mainly been taken from Tarlton (1973) and King “The theory of context …” (1983). As one can see, the recurring argument here can be read in two different ways: either as leading to a general and therefore even more radical problem concerning the objectivity of understanding, which may thus be thought to establish the more specific thesis that objective understanding in the history of philosophy is equally impossible; on the other hand, and this is the way I am reading it, such a general lack of objectivity will probably be an unwelcome result for many of those who question the objective history of philosophy, or if not, it will at least show that this is not, as often seems to be taken for granted, a problem specific to our understanding of the past. At all events, the general thesis may indicate that arguments concerning the problem of reaching objective understanding in the history of philosophy can never be taken as an excuse for simply disregarding the context of utterance and the author’s self-understanding, any more than the general problem gives us any such license in the general case. As a limiting case, and to bring the matter to a head, one might take the problem of understanding one’s own former self, or indeed the conditions and precise content of one’s present thoughts: if there is indeed a general problem concerning the objectivity of understanding, it will be relevant in this case as well—if understanding is always “understanding differently,” this will be true of the thinker in relation to himself, at every instant, no less than of the attempt of others to understand him. (This is not as paradoxical as it might seem: consider, e.g., the case of Husserl or Heidegger, trying to grasp the content and true significance of their own work, spanning several decades of intense elaboration.) But if this is so, it is hard to see why such a general holism should have any particular repercussion on our practices in writing the history of philosophy. If trying to grasp some or as many as possible of the aspects of the self-understanding of a present-day interlocutor is a reasonable task, why should we treat the texts belonging to the history of philosophy any differently—even though there may not, in either case, be any unitary, monolithic phenomenon which is simply the self-understanding of the philosopher? The danger here, I think, is that the vague notion of a past unattainable in the an sich of its self-understanding, will be used as an excuse for not showing the past the respect we pay—or think we ought to pay—the present.}

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wildly false, incoherent or unreasonable beliefs to the author is itself implausible, barring other relevant evidence. This observation is sometimes construed as if we would have to assume that the theory we are trying to understand is actually true. However, if taken literally, this seems obviously false. Therefore (and here I am of course myself applying a principle of charity), this is best understood as a polemically motivated exaggeration. What we must presuppose, I think, is only that the theory is basically rational and reasonable in a certain minimal sense: that it strives for and attains a certain level of consistency and coherence, and that it does not blatantly exceed or contradict the evidence we know or have reason to believe was accessible to its author.\textsuperscript{20} In some cases we will no doubt encounter texts and perspectives which seem to make a point of flaunting these criteria and standards (say in Heraclitus or certain texts of Buddhist thinking where ambiguity and paradox often appear to be intentional): but we may safely assume that this can be accommodated and “rationalized” as a way of achieving a certain effect by leaving the literal form of expression behind. There is also a problem concerning the more precise determination of these criteria (for instance, whether the proponents of the theory understood them in the same way we do), and concerning how they are to be balanced against each other when they come into conflict. However, this is once again something which is not unique to the understanding of past philosophy, but is relevant for the historical, purely understanding or descriptive attitude in general. If anyone wants to argue that in studying the history of past philosophy, we have to presuppose the truth of the theory studied in any stronger sense than this, or that the difficulties of applying the assumptions of completeness make objective understanding impossible, he must also accept that the same goes for our understanding of contemporary philosophy—presumably an unacceptable result, or at least one apt to dissolve our specific interest in the problem of philosophical historiography.

\textsuperscript{20} Cf. Carlshamre (1994) on the possibility of working with different versions, ego- or alter-centric, of the different kinds of assumptions of completeness made in connection with the interpretation of texts. Here, I’m proposing basically the altercentric “principle of humanity” presented by Grady as alternative to an egocentrically understood “principle of charity” (“Reference, Meaning, and Belief,” \textit{Journal of Philosophy} 1974).
V. The transition from understanding to dialogue

An objective or neutral historical understanding of philosophical theories thus seems to be possible in principle, or at least not associated with decisively larger difficulties when it is a question of understanding a past theory as compared with a contemporary one—as far as we have hitherto been able to see. However, it is clear that we often do not content ourselves with such an understanding “from the inside” – not in general, and in particular not in the history of philosophy. This fact may be the reason that “understanding” in the debate concerning the history of philosophy is sometimes even taken to mean something else, something more, namely understanding by relating to one’s own philosophical perspective—what might otherwise be called interpretation. Such a re-definition of understanding to mean interpretation or “understanding-differently” seems to lie at the basis of both Gadamer’s and Rorty’s arguments here. Since a neutral appropriation or radical conversion to another perspective, according to these authors, does not represent a “genuine” understanding (Gadamer) or only gives a “minimal form of understanding” (Rorty), it follows that understanding (of the real, full-fledged kind) presupposes relating to one’s own philosophical horizon and conceptual world. In this way, it is obviously impossible to speak of an objectivity of understanding (or interpretation) except in relation to the conceptual universe concerned—and, if we accept certain radical arguments for the relativity of translation and interpretation (Quine: “indeterminacy starts at home”), not even in relation to that. What I have argued above – that there is a clear sense in which historical understanding without such relating to the present is possible, despite holistic theories of meaning – is therefore not really disputed by either Gadamer or Rorty: they seem rather simply to presuppose that the understanding which results in a strict repetition of the teaching must be a non-genuine or superficial understanding. It is hard to see what the reason for this might be, except a tacit assumption to the effect that the original or “proper” content of the philosophy studied is either no longer valid in its original form, or is tied in an inextricable way to its historical context. To see this, one might make a comparison with the case of understanding a text within the natural sciences or mathematics: although here too there will of course be difficulties or questions of interpretation, as indeed in any text, it seems implausible that we would always have to understand a mathematical
text from, for example, the 18th century differently in order to really understand it at all, if we also accept it as true.\textsuperscript{21}

But what, then, is the reason for the fact that we who are concerned with the history of philosophy usually want to transcend the neutral understanding—so often that it can apparently be taken for granted in the discussion that we \emph{have} to do this in order to “really” understand? The primary reason why we find it necessary to translate into our own conceptual world, if we are to be able to appropriate the insights presumably contained in the theory, is probably that we cannot accept certain basic assumptions in the theory we are trying to understand; we are not prepared to abandon our own perspective without further ado, regardless of whether it is a matter of what we think is empirical knowledge or ways of conceptualizing and understanding philosophical questions. The possibility of reestablishing and embracing a philosophical theory of the past in its full historical form, or even of understanding it completely on its own terms, is therefore likely to remain an idealization; but the necessity of translating into the questions of the present is then not the result of a general meaning-holism, but of the fact that we cannot simply accept the philosophical teaching we are studying, despite the fact that we think we may understand it almost as well or at least as well as its actual historical proponents. When the charitable attempt to understand fails, we must explicitly take up a position outside of the teaching studied, and try to relate it to “our own perspective”—which we have of course already begun by not accepting it as valid in all respects.

\textsuperscript{21} For the de-valuation of the interest of pure \textit{Mitverstehen}, not the denial of its possibility, see Gadamer (1960; 1975), e.g. p. 357 and 374 f., and Rorty (1984), p. 49–53 (esp. p. 50). In Rorty, who is of course deliberately provocative—although apparently not ironic—there is no doubt as to our superiority: the objective historical understanding is likened to the exchange of polite phrases in a language one doesn’t understand, and the purpose of the rational reconstruction is the self-justification of present-day philosophy by conversation with “the mighty mistaken” (p. 51 f). Gadamer’s perspective, as already indicated, is more complex, and my interpretation of it might seem to contradict what he says concerning the necessity of presupposing the possibility of the truth of past philosophy. It is possible that Gadamer is really merely questioning the idea of neutral understanding as a worth-while project in itself: but to the extent that “\textit{Verschmelzung} of horizons” is supposed to mean, as is apparently the case, a dialogue where the interpreter relates to his own philosophical conceptions, rather than relating only to an understanding from a more primitive level of independent experience, without such conceptions, it seems that we as well may speak here of a tacit “assumption” that the doctrine under study is obsolete. Apparently, then, for both Rorty and Gadamer the falsity or irrelevance of earlier philosophy in its original form is simply too obvious even to mention.
This does not mean, however, that in order to find a philosophy defective we need to have our own, elaborated philosophical theories or standards upon which to base our criticism: the disagreement may be relatively limited, and our “own point of view” need neither extend beyond an immanent critique of certain aspects of the theory, which may be of a more formal character, nor question the theory from out of its own explicit purpose and standards. What we are primarily interested in here, however, is a deeper disagreement, where even certain basic assumptions of the theory studied seem to us unacceptable, but the theory as a whole is nevertheless somehow felt to be of interest. It is at this stage that the arguments which the “interested” historiography directs against “neutral” history of philosophy find their real justification, I believe: we are no longer satisfied with an interpreter who is merely able to repeat the teaching we already believe we have understood (no matter how valuable an Aristotle or Kant reincarnated in the guise of the learned historian of philosophy may be at a certain stage of our studies)—what we need is a translator and mediator, i.e. someone who is proficient in the language and theories of both parties. The beginning of deeper hermeneutic questions and tasks, beyond those of the historical and hermeneutic craft, concerned with restoring the context and self-understanding of the past—which in themselves may be immense, of course—is thus that the approach that is purely understanding turns into dialogue.

VI. The dialogue with philosophy in history: difficulties and possibilities

It should be clear, however, that these sorts of translational and interpretative problems are not distinctive for our relations to earlier as

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22 The “immanent” criticism of a philosophical doctrine constitutes a kind of gray area between objectivity and interest. What this shows is that even if the basic attempt to gain understanding, before any now-relating interpretation, already tends to require that one make use of certain standards of evaluation, this need not mean that one in any interesting sense goes beyond the doctrine studied: it can be limited to the application of certain minimal criteria of rationality.

23 The perspective here is of course overly abstract, because it theoretically isolates two aspects of understanding and interpretation which in practice will usually be closely intertwined from the start: nevertheless, it seems worthwhile to preserve and be clear about the distinctions at the conceptual level, precisely in order to be able to see how they interact at the factual level.
opposed to contemporary philosophy: a critical dialogue may obviously be as necessary in the one case as in the other, and as already indicated above; creating a fruitful dialogue between contemporary philosophical schools may be no less difficult than understanding thinkers of a past epoch in relation to any present-day philosophical school. The neglect of this circumstance has meant, it would seem, that quite general problems of philosophical communication have often been discussed as if they were unique for our relation to the history of philosophy, or that problems of understanding past philosophy have been discussed as if they were no different from those of historical understanding in general. The attempt to determine what is characteristic of a *dialogue within the history of philosophy* may therefore conveniently be divided into two steps. First, we may ask what is characteristic for *philosophical dialogue in general*, regardless of whether it takes place between two positions which are contemporaneous or distant in time; secondly, we may finally try to determine what if anything is the distinguishing trait of philosophical dialogue *in history*.

To begin with the first question, something which appears to have been surprisingly neglected in the discussion of the historiography of philosophy is the special character of philosophical texts, which makes the problem of translating and understanding them particularly difficult, as compared with texts and theories in most other areas, regardless from which epoch they derive. What I am referring to is the unsurprising fact that philosophy, insofar as it attempts to question and determine the most basic categories and fundamental concepts of the world and our understanding of it, in its central ideas will move at a high level of abstraction. To the extent that two philosophical theories which are to be put in relation to each other really are different, and have different ways of understanding and conceptualizing the field of philosophy—its “object,” methods, and ambitions—this will bring forth all the problems of translation and comparison which have primarily been discussed with reference to scientific theory, and in particular natural science. However, in order to see that the problems of communication caused by this circumstance are not specific to a dialogue with the *history* of philosophy, one need only think of the gap which has separated so called analytical and continental philosophy during the better part of the 20th century (although it may be questioned whether the main, if not only, ground for this division has been
different philosophical paradigms, as opposed to language barriers and
other cultural or political circumstances).

What then is the basis for the particular difficulties often thought to
belong to the *historical* philosophical dialogue? One factor, I suggest,
is what one might call the *reflective* character of philosophy. Perhaps
one might tender the tentative claim about philosophy in general that it
is not so much an investigation of reality *directly*, but mainly, whether
this is fully understood or not, a matter of reflecting upon our *relation*
to this reality, in its various theoretical and practical forms. Philosophy
can therefore not, as the preceding paragraph may have seemed to do,
without further ado be understood on analogy with high-level theory
within natural science—it is instead a question of a meta-science, or
perhaps rather meta-understanding. 24 But if philosophy in this way is
an essentially reflective or second-order activity, it is obvious how
vulnerable it must be to the more fundamental changes that knowledge
and evaluations undergo in history, even as it intentionally strives to
transcend the specific presuppositions of its own time. By touching
upon the very core of the system of concepts and beliefs characteristic
of its time and culture, philosophy may certainly be less exposed to
changes at the surface level of empirical evidence; but when this core
itself undergoes changes—due to more radical changes in science or
due to political, economical, sociological and other circumstances—the
philosophical superstructure can hardly avoid changing as well. This
then is a point where history at least *might* make a difference, insofar
as contemporaneous philosophers may instead be expected to accept
the validity of the same scientific results and live within a culture
which is fairly homogenous in other respects as well. 25

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24 To give some hint of the kind of evidence which might be offered for such an idea,
one might trace Quine’s “semantic ascent” and Husserl’s “transcendental reflection”
back to the first reflection upon the correlation between language, thought and reality
in Parmenides. Saying that philosophy is a reflection upon our relation to reality rather
than upon reality itself should not be interpreted as a denial that some philosophers
might say—perhaps correctly—that what is discerned at this level, whether it be ideal
forms, a priori categories, logical structures, intentional acts or existential structures, is
more “real” than anything we usually take to be so.

25 This is of course not always the case, especially when we go beyond Western or
Westernizing philosophy: the dialogue between schools of thought which are contem-
poraneous but have originated in widely different cultures is associated with problems
analogous to those which arise in the historical dialogue. The important difference is
the lack of any (substantial) *relation of tradition* in the former case—about which, see
below. A relevant example would be the encounter with philosophy from the Far East
The reflexivity and theory-laden character of philosophy means that problems of translation, comparison and understanding surface here which remain hidden or relatively uncomplicated at lower, more empirical levels, or even within “direct,” non-philosophical science. The real problems of translating and interpreting Aristotle, to take one example, do not emerge when we try to determine the correctness of detailed observations in his biological works, or even when we compare his general understanding of living organisms with current biological science, but when we try to understand his philosophical interpretation of these sciences. When it comes to discussing, for instance, how reasonable the doctrines of substance and of causes are, we cannot appeal to any immediately falsifying or confirming evidence, since it is here a question of basic philosophical categories, within which we (it appears) no longer understand reality: the difficulties, indeed, begin even at the basic level of translation in the literal sense, which easily leads to genuine interpretative questions. The problem, then, is that we cannot directly translate these notions into any obviously corresponding ones in our own conceptual or indeed linguistic universe, and thereby interpret them “in our own terms”; it may seem that we are forced to choose between standing completely outside or inside the “life-world” or “worldview” of which they form the basis. What possibilities of philosophical mediation, then, are available in this situation? With this question, we return to what was earlier characterized as the two main forms of now-relating interpretation within the history of philosophy, and to their different ways of establishing a connection with the unfamiliar and distant past. We can now more clearly see how these approaches under such circumstances are able to raise a claim to be able provide, in a way that “neutral” philosophical historiography cannot, objective knowledge—if not about the historical facts pure and simple, then at least of their philosophical content, to the best of our own knowledge.

The actualizing or problem-historical approach often sees the solution to the problems of communication in being deliberately historically selective, i.e. separating out and appropriating certain parts of a teaching which as a whole seems too strange or questionable to be a viable philosophical alternative, on any reasonable interpretation. It is thus thought, for instance, that mediaeval philosophy of language and

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in Western philosophy from the 18th century on, which seems to have been preceded by only very indirect and highly mediated connections.
logic may be separated out and understood in isolation from other ele-
ments in the “system” of mediaeval thinking, with its ties to Neo-
Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics as well as Christian theology. As
already mentioned, this approach is usually grounded upon the as-
sumption that there are certain objective philosophical problems tran-
scending the historical context, problems that can be identified. That
which cannot be incorporated or at least sympathetically reinterpreted
in this way may then be accounted for with the help of external expla-
nations as to what forces—psychological, sociological, ideological,
political, etc., if not simply a lack of what we now consider well-
established empirical knowledge—may have lead highly intelligent
and perceptive minds to go astray and perhaps even engage in dis-
course without cognitive content. Now, it is hard to see what objec-
tions on the basis of principle could be raised against such a manner of
proceeding. After all, the context of understanding must in practice be
delimited in some way, and just as not everything in the contemporary
background of a thinker is relevant to the understanding of his philoso-
phy, not all parts of his world of thought need be connected in an inex-
tricable way. But is it not possible to establish some limits to this work
of rational reconstruction, insofar as it is meant to convey at least part
of the historical truth, and not merely use material from the history of
philosophy as a stimulating starting point for independent theory-
building?

Quentin Skinner (1969) has suggested a general criterion for an ac-
ceptable historical interpretation, which may be rendered in the follow-
ing way: no thinker can justifiably be ascribed a teaching which he
would not have been able to recognize as his own—that is, the (poten-
tial) self-understanding of the agent sets a limits to the description of
the significance of his linguistic acts. However, this criterion might
seem to have a limited value precisely when it comes to philosophical
texts: the author here usually strives for universal validity in a way
which makes the limits of his (possible) self-understanding particularly
difficult to determine. As Rorty has formulated the matter (1984), we
are also interested in what an ideally rational and educable philosopher
would be prepared to accept as “his” teaching. The philosopher wants
(more often than not) to be understood in a universal, timeless philoso-
phical context, the actualist could say, and it may therefore even be
seen as a historical injustice to insist upon relating him to his historical
background: the historian of philosophy who with putative objectivity
limits himself to reconstructing a teaching in its full historical form neglects something which is also "there": its philosophical potential, seen from the standpoint of our knowledge and evaluations. We want to know not only what the philosopher actually manages to say, but also what he is trying to say, but perhaps lacks the linguistic and conceptual tools to express, and for this it is necessary that we ourselves have an understanding of the problem he is struggling with.

Perhaps we must once again be content with noting that not very much more can be said about this problem at a general level: where it is reasonable or defensible to draw the line for rational reconstruction is a question that must be decided on a case-by-case basis, as the extent to which this strategy is reasonable in any particular case is simply a question of the extent to which the aspects one wants to separate really can be understood as theoretically independent of one another. At a minimum, the criticism of such attempts at reconstruction would do better to focus upon the concrete result and its reasonableness as an interpretation, instead of raising any obstacles of principle, as long as the author is clear on the limitations of his interpretation. It seem undeniable that the strategy of "actualizing" earlier philosophy by way of rational reconstruction, listening to what the philosopher is trying to say beyond that which is historically contingent, has focused upon something which is central to the self-understanding of philosophy in general. The difficulties and dangers of anachronism which always accompany such projects may also be compensated for by their philosophical interest and provocative ability: if nothing else, a philosophically daring interpretation of past thought may stimulate valuable historical research in the very attempt to refute it.26

The second, "historicizing" variety of now-relating historiography instead regards the focus on the relation of tradition as the chief possibility of establishing a connection backward in time. According to the historicist, when it is a matter of understanding our own history, we

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26 One variety of rational reconstruction which may seem especially questionable is when a philosopher on a historically meager basis is ascribed a doctrine which, according to the reconstructor himself, is patently misguided and false. Nevertheless, it may still be of interest to take a figure from the history of philosophy as the starting point for reconstructing and criticizing, in its original form, what one sees as a fatal philosophical mistake, even if this means disregarding the fact that the theory in question, in its original context, may have been well motivated and a remarkable achievement in itself (cf. Russell on the Aristotelian syllogistic in the History of Western Philosophy, and Ryle on Cartesian dualism in the Concept of Mind).
cannot adopt the approach that our history is a completely different culture, developed in isolation from our own: the way in which problem history bridges the historical distance, by discovering shared questions, tends to neglect the circumstance that we are from the start connected to this history as to our origin. Thus, it is no mere coincidence, nor a result of something grounded in what might be human nature, if we are able to recognize “our own” questions in history—rather, this is their point of origin from which they have then been passed on to us. But if this rootedness in a specific tradition guarantees in a certain way the possibility of understanding—as opposed to where no such relation to tradition is present—it at the same time complicates the hermeneutic process in a peculiar way.

From the historicist perspective, the problem with the actualist’s understanding of history “in our own terms” is that it will often actually be an understanding of history in its own terms, but as these terms have been transformed via the intervening historical development. The danger attending this particular form of the “circle of understanding” is a perspectival distortion: the historical process of sedimentation which transforms philosophical doctrines and concepts into rarely questioned commonplaces makes it difficult for us to fully understand the significance they had in their original context—the problem is not that they appear strange to us, but that they may not appear strange enough. If we then also presuppose that we ourselves have an adequate or at least historically superior insight into the philosophical problems being examined, and, in the historical interpretation, merely have to free these from irrelevant accretions, we run the risk of neglecting dimensions of earlier philosophy which might otherwise enrich our understanding of the problems involved, and ultimately of the idea of philosophy itself.27

On the other hand, the historical circularity which is involved in the turn to one’s own tradition also leads to a questioning of the application of “objective” understanding. To begin with, this is no less than problem history exposed to the dangers of perspectival distortion. A naive belief in the possibility of objectivity tends to lead to the uncriti-

27 One recurring case of collision between different conceptual worlds in present-day history of philosophy is that which manifests itself in the distinction, within analytically oriented historiography, of what is thought to be a philosopher’s serious contributions to philosophy of language, logic, epistemology and theory of science, from his more questionable metaphysical, psychological and even religious speculations. The question is whether this distinction is not often made too rashly and heedless of the significance of what is thereby in effect excluded from the field of philosophy proper.
cal adoption of a determined, historically handed-down pre-understanding of both philosophy in general and of the philosophy to be studied. The relation of tradition thus makes the seemingly simple “transition” to another perspective into a complicated process: to leave one’s own perspective behind cannot finally be a question of drastically discarding or abstracting from the philosophical convictions one might have, but will as a rule consist in a demanding and laborious testing of the handed-down pre-understanding against the historical object “itself.” Nevertheless, this is, I think, a difficulty which it belongs to the very intention of the project of objective understanding to solve, something which the appropriation of the honorary word “objectivity” by a superficial style of philosophical historiography should not be allowed to cover up.

However, the relation of tradition also raises anew the question of the very significance and possibility of objective understanding. Even at the general level, it is of course possible to question the purpose of objectivist historical research, which limits itself to ascertaining the content of a philosophical doctrine and suspends the question of truth; but when it is a matter of our own tradition, this neutrality may seem to take on a particularly odd or artificial character. It may be that we in general can free ourselves from the perspective of our own time, and enter into another historical age and its ways of thinking: but what we are then doing, in the case where a tradition exists between this epoch and our own, is in a certain sense to understand ourselves. The relation to tradition means that already from the start it will be unhistorical and potentially confusing to treat the historically given doctrine and anything in our own time as simply two alternative theories, at the same level and possible to understand independently of each other: even when the radical immersion of life into the life-world of the past succeeds, we still remain in a certain way within the horizon of our own conceptual universe. Against this background, I think one should understand the point sometimes made by Heidegger, that what I am able to discover in the past is determined by what I can see as a possible significance or sense for myself today. When we try to explicate the sense of our own projects, philosophical and otherwise, the interpretation of the past has thus already begun.

It is in this relation to tradition, I think, that we should see what is specific for philosophical understanding and dialogue in history. Whereas both the objectivist and the problem-oriented forms of histo-
riography are forms of understanding and dialogue which may without any essential differences be directed towards the present as well as the past, towards other cultural spheres as well as towards the historian’s own, the historicizing position focuses upon what is characteristic in our relation to our own history. This is not to say that it is already decided which of these ways of practicing the history of philosophy is the most fruitful: whether or not we actually stand in such a deeply determining relation to the tradition as the historicist wants to claim is once again a question which can hardly be decided except through detailed and careful interpretations in the history of philosophy.

Of course, the objective historian as well has a method for better understanding a philosophy which appears strange and difficult to comprehend, which is essentially to widen the field of vision to external factors and larger historical contexts: here there will be a fluid transition from immanent understanding to externalist explanation. I will not discuss this method and its problems here, but by way of conclusion sketch a way of taking a stand on and evaluating historically given philosophies which to some extent is associated with the external perspective of the historian, and neither presupposes a relation to tradition or demands that history should answer our own questions. The point of departure for this approach would be what I earlier called the reflective character of philosophy, i.e. that it can be understood as an attempt to investigate—articulate, arrange and critically question—the fundamental categories or forms of thought which lie at the basis of our relation to the world, and that in doing so it must in some sense take it’s lead from contemporary knowledge and culture, while yet striving for universal validity. A possibility of comparing philosophies, within as well as between different cultures and from different epochs, would then be to assess how a philosophical perspective is able to account for its own, historically given “matter of reflection” and the problems this raises. A philosophy could then be judged to be more or less adequate given this material (in analogy to how a scientific theory may be evaluated in relation to the evidence it recognizes or has at hand), instead of being measured in relation to what are supposedly objective questions, detached from history, or declared untouchable within its historical context.28 The transhistorical and shared “problem” unifying

28 At the same time, from the perspective sketched here, I think one may see a certain justification for the related theses or “assumptions of completeness” of Collingwood and Gadamer, to the effect that an interpretation which makes a philosophical theory
different philosophies may then instead be said to consist in filling the reflective and critical function of philosophy in relation to its particular time. This does not exclude that there might also exist an a- or at least transhistorical framework which philosophy is able to reach, and thus also more specific problems and solutions which may be shared over history and between different cultures. But also in order to understand what contribution a philosophical theory really makes to such a comparatively timeless discussion, it will probably be more enlightening both historically and philosophically to see it in relation to the state of knowledge in its own time, rather than trying to understand it as an isolated statement.

The focus upon this relation between philosophy and its time may also reveal affinities between philosophies which otherwise might be thought to stand far from each other, by showing how a common philosophical strategy can take on different forms depending on the matter of reflection. One important consequence of this is that to repeat, apply or “remain true” to earlier philosophy would then not have to mean reinstating specific doctrines or re-appropriating isolated elements of these which are “still of interest,” but might also signify taking up a certain way of doing philosophical work or a view of what philosophy is: in fact, such links of tradition may already in practice be more important for much of our understanding of the history of philosophy and our own place in it than any tradition preserving the content of specific doctrines (regardless of what this understanding more specifically amounts to). Something which also speaks in favor of such an understanding of philosophy in its concrete historical context is that it allows us to explain how we may regard someone as a great philosopher and at the same time consider much of his thinking as obsolete or simply

patently false or unreasonable thereby undermines itself, and must rest upon a misunderstanding as to what problems the author of the philosophical theory was actually trying to solve. However, in accordance with what has been said above, I think that what can be required of a reasonable interpretation is only something weaker, namely that the philosophical doctrine in question should be shown to have a certain degree of relevance or “adequacy” given the historical situation and the material of reflection it provides, not that it actually manages to solve the problems it sets itself beginning from this situation. To assume otherwise seems to indicate either an exaggerated reverence for philosophy, or the tacit assumption that we are always dealing with the “great” philosophers—which presumably, to anticipate the final point, have come to be estimated as great precisely because of their ability to confront and handle currently fundamental problems of reflection.
false, by our own standards: the excellence and exemplary status of a philosopher lie in the way in which he has confronted and managed to deal with fundamental issues raised by the then current state of knowledge, including his own philosophical tradition. From such a perspective, it also seems to me that the better part of what is today the recognized canon of Western philosophy may be given a more substantial, historically as well as philosophically grounded justification, despite the fact that the philosophical teachings concerned are often thought to belong irretrievably to “the past”: we would not have to see this canon as merely a room of references construed for the purposes of philosophical dialogue, or as a mythology adjusted to fit the needs of self-justification of current philosophy—and on the other hand, we need not unnecessarily project consoling dreams of an unfathomable, hidden wisdom onto the thinking of the past in order to respect its achievements.
Ist dir Trinken bitter, werde Wein!
R. M. Rilke

The antagonism between philosophy as system and philosophy as history not only has a history as well as a system, but also a mood, a pathos, the pathos of powerlessness. This antagonism is generally discussed on the basis of Kant’s critical philosophy. In the Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, Kant distinguishes between philosophers and erudites. Philosophers are those whose thoughts have the sources of reason as their starting point, whereas erudites take the history of philosophy to be philosophy, assuming that everything that is being thought has already been thought. In this Kantian distinction, there appears a trace of powerlessness, the powerlessness of not proceeding from the power of reason. At stake are two kinds of knowledge: philosophy and history, the scientific ideal of knowledge’s objectivity and the non-scientific idealization of the subjectivity of not knowing, the power of rational foundations and the powerlessness of a knowledge without foundations.

Even considering the large distance that separates Kant from Nietzsche, it is similarly by means of a description of the pathology of powerlessness that Nietzsche wrote the most inspiring lines about the relationship between philosophy and history, in his Second untimely meditation, Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben.

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However, for Nietzsche powerlessness is defined in terms of not knowing how to forget, of not knowing how to be unhistorical and superhistorical within history. At stake is not the difference between two kinds of knowledge, philosophy and history, but the powerlessness of both philosophy and history, that is, of knowledge, to face the power of life. If, for Kant, history and non-critical philosophy are to be defined in terms of the power of reason, for Nietzsche it is the power of life that defines the powerlessness of philosophy and history. When Nietzsche asks about the relationship between philosophy and history from the optics of life, he shows that Kant’s critical question – what can I know? – indeed presupposes another question, which is not critical but self-critical or genealogical – the question: from where do I want to know? If, for Kant, the critical question – what can I know? – defines knowledge within the boundaries of the rationality of experience, for Nietzsche the genealogical question – from where do I want to know? – shows that the critical knowledge is located within the powerlessness of only being able to dimension experience within the boundaries of rationality. In other words: Nietzsche’s genealogical philosophy reveals that the powerlessness of philosophy and history to face the power of life is due to their lack of power to face the relation between experience and rationality. If Nietzsche’s thought can be defined as a criticism of philosophical critique, then it should be understood as a criticism of the modern concept of experience at the basis of modern science and philosophy in their persistent concern with objectivity.

Nietzsche called this insight unzeitgemäss, untimely. “Untimely” connotes the general meaning of thinking the relationship between philosophy and history as the relation between life and knowledge. Far from any philosophical vitalism or from a simple cultural criticism, Nietzsche’s position shall be discussed on the basis of what he meant by untimely. In the prologue of the above-mentioned Meditation, Nietzsche defines unzeitgemäss with the following words: “unzeitgemäss, dass heisst gegen die Zeit und dadurch auf die Zeit und hoffentlich zu Gunsten einer kommenden Zeit – zu wirken.” 3 To think the relationship between philosophy and history as the relation between life and knowledge is untimely, but not in the sense of not following

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3 Nietzsche, F. op. cit., p.247 (“to act against the age and so to have an effect on the age to the advantage, it is to be hoped, of a coming age,” my translation).
the academic trend of Nietzsche’s or our own time. It is untimely because this thought is to be grounded on another understanding of time itself, on another way of conceiving the ontological basis of time itself. Untimely means therefore understanding time beyond the metaphysical, scientific, ontological definition of time as chronology and succession, but not only this. If we follow Nietzsche’s words in the prologue attentively, it becomes clear that the problem is that such an other understanding of the temporality of time is no longer a theoretical knowledge about time, but, with Nietzsche’s own words, an “untimely experience.” If philosophy and history are powerless to face the power of life it is because they frame their power around an understanding of time that excludes the untimely temporality of experience. Inspired by this reading of Nietzsche’s untimely meditation about the advantages and disadvantages of history for life, I would like to engage here in the following movement of thought: only by starting with an understanding of the untimely structure of experience does it become possible to grasp the relationship between philosophy and history as a relation between life and knowledge. My presupposition is that both the untimely thought of Nietzsche on history and the temporalizing thought of Heidegger on Dasein’s historicity can be approached only by means of a meditation on experience. I assume, at the same time, that experience only takes place when the horizon of the untimely temporality of time breaks through existence. This horizon cannot be deduced by concepts. It can only break through when thinking breaks down. Beyond this horizon, experience is nothing but abstraction, the abstraction of what is called sensible or empirical experience (perception), the abstraction called experiencing or feeling (Erlebnis) and the abstraction called experiment. In many senses it is legitimate to state that despite all its diversity, 20th century philosophy carries the common trace of being à la recherche de l' expérience perdue.⁴ Today, however, it would be fairer to state that our philosophical challenge is no longer this seeking for the power of a true concept of experience but the powerlessness to face the untimely structure of experience. The question I will discuss is therefore not the one of the experience of history but the untimely structure of experience as history. As experience, history means what in Latin could be said with the word eventus, event, the enigma of a coming to be.

⁴ See Müller, Max. Erfahrung und Geschichte: Grundzüge einer Philosophie der Freiheit als transzendentale Erfahrung (München, 1971).
When we, in some way, feel the powerlessness of philosophy and history in the face of the power of life, we feel above all the powerlessness of knowledge to face experience. The words of Mephistopheles – *Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie! Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum*5 – (gray, dear friend, is all theory! And green is the golden tree of life) – sing the proverbial difference between theory and praxis, between knowledge and experience. But in which sense does knowledge differ from experience? In fact, when we talk about experienced people we refer to a kind of knowledge that, in opposition to theoretical knowledge, has the force of self-evidence. People who speak from experience speak from an existential knowledge, which testifies to the living of a life, and not to a categorial knowledge, which gathers by deduction an ensemble of propositions about the reality of facts. *The difference between knowing by experience and knowing through theory can be described as the difference between a knowledge that issues from a lived life and the knowledge which does not need to make knowledge alive.* When issuing from a lived life, experience is supposed to mean a kind of knowledge whose structure is that of testimony, of chronicle, storytelling, and thereby constituted on the basis of present time. The difference between these two kinds of knowledge is the difference between a knowledge that does not need to have present the question of time and a knowledge that is only possible when having present the enigma of time.

This difference was clearly perceived in ancient philosophy. Theoretical knowledge, *epistheme*, differs from knowing by experience, *empeiria* and *praxis*, because the first is concerned with the being-forever, *to aei einai*, whereas the second has to do with what can only be within the finitude and limit of a life. In an article entitled “The Modern Concept of History,” published in 1958, Hannah Arendt showed that the Greek philosophical distinction between eternal and finite is to be understood from the point of view of the dichotomy between nature and history.6 For ancient Greek philosophy, the realm of nature is not the one of inconstancy as it is for us “moderns” but the being-forever, the constancy of life. Nature is therefore the ontological region that comprehends everything that comes into being by itself,

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without interference from humans or from gods, being in this sense immortal.\textsuperscript{7} Only human life differs from nature while being within nature, by being the only being that is really mortal. Animals, plants, everything that is alive dies, but only human life is mortal. In contrast to the death of everything that is alive, according to Hannah Arendt, the mortality of man lies in “the fact that individual life, a \textit{bios} with a recognizable life-story from birth to death, rises out of biological life, \textit{zoe}.”\textsuperscript{8} According to Hannah Arendt, this understanding of human life as mortal within the immortality of nature can explain the ancient Greek concept of history as an opposition to nature: history is understood as exemplarity as far as human life is assumed as mortal, as history, as the \textit{sui generis} (though not \textit{sui juris}) individuality of a life in contrast to all other forms of life, which are nothing but species of the general life. At the same time, it is only by means of this linear and \textit{sui generis} cut or interruption introduced by memory, by what Nietzsche called great deeds or the force of greatness, that mortality of men can “be at home in the world of everlastingness . . . .”\textsuperscript{9}

The opposition between nature and history even explains, I would add, the classical distinctions between theoretical knowledge and knowing by experience, and further between knowledge and experience, \textit{epistheme} and \textit{empeiria}. While theoretical knowledge starts with an apprehension of being as generic universality (the immortality of being-forever), knowledge by experience starts by an apprehension of the being of men as a \textit{sui-generis} individuality (mortality). For Aristotle, the difference between both kinds of knowledge lies in the grade of apprehension of the universal and therefore in the grade of abstraction from the particular and individual.\textsuperscript{10} Theoretical knowledge captures the particular and individual proceeding from the universality and generality of being, while knowledge by experience captures the universal and generic from the \textit{sui generis} of the individual. This distinction guides the concept of experience as apprehension of the specific, particular, individual, unique. The central problem of this Aristotelian distinction is however the “indistinction” between apprehension of individuals and apprehension of the immediate. For Aristotle, to ap-

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\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., p. 278. Nature is, for the ancients, always present, eternal, which is not “to be overlooked or forgotten; and since [it is] forever, [it does] not need human remembrance for [its] further existence.”
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., p.279.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., p.280.
\textsuperscript{10} Aristotle, \textit{Metaphysics} 918a.
}
prehend an apple is quite different from apprehending the apple. An apple is only an apple (a specific individuality) while the apple is a fruit (a generic universality). But this difference means that at the same time as the apple, that is, the apple in general, cannot be perceived, a specific apple, in its specificity, can only be conceived in generic terms. Every attempt to grasp the individuality of something is already a stepping into the domain of generic universality, a stepping beyond the individual specificity. The abyss of individuality, *tode ti*, is that, in its furthermore individuality, the being of beings can only be seized as generic. This is the abyss of being qua *logos*.

In order to overcome this abyss, Aristotle identified the specific individuality with the immediate, with the direct here and now of an empirical, sensible experience. That is why, ever since ancient Greek philosophy, experience has been identified with sensible perception, as the perception which affects consciousness in a here and now, in a *hic et nunc*. That is why experience has been understood as sensualism. And that is also why, after ancient Greek thought, it became an epistemological maxim that although empirical experience, perception, is not all about consciousness, all consciousness is elementarily connected to empirical experience (perception) in the form of its negation or overcoming. The primacy of empirical experience, that is, of perception of an external reality affecting consciousness, desires and feelings, that is, our internal reality, expresses a consciousness of time and space, which in turn defines our concept of perception. The “here and now,” which distinguishes empirical experience from other forms of consciousness, such as memory and imagination, is conceived as the most evident expression of what we call present time.\(^\text{11}\) Because present time has

\(^{11}\) In the 13\textsuperscript{th} century there came to Sicily a version in Arabic, Persian and Hebrew of a pseudo-Aristotelian manuscript which narrates the death of Aristotle in the form of a dialog imitating Plato’s *Phaedo*. This text is known under the title *Liber de Pomo*, the book of apple, because on his death bed, Aristotle still finds some strength to have a dialog with his students about life and death when he feels the smelling presence of an apple. In this dialog, life and consciousness, life and knowledge are staged from the point of view of the sensual force of an apple, from the sensual force of this “here and now.” We find here an illustration of an epistemological maxim that, since Aristotelian philosophy, has guided Western thought, being still very much alive in Husserl’s phenomenological revolution: namely that although empirical experience and perception cannot be equated with all consciousness, all consciousness is elementarily connected to empirical experience, to perception. The nature of the connection is one of abstraction. Being an abstraction, theoretical knowledge is always somehow indebted to empirical experience. This debt should not be called empiricism but the sensual formalism of every theory. The most decisive in this elementary connection between
been conceived as a “here and now” and because the empirical understanding of experience dimensions, by means of negation and abstraction, the field of consciousness, it is under the primacy of time that is present as a now-present that time becomes “perceived” by consciousness. That is why the distinction between theoretical knowledge of consciousness and the empirical consciousness of experience has been traditionally established from the point of view of how time seems to touch us.\textsuperscript{12}

How does time touch us immediately? Immediately, time seems to touch us as the linear succession of past, present, and future. Immediately the past seems to touch us in striking us with its irreversibility, and the present seems to touch us in escaping us through its fugaciousness and inconstancy. Being irreversible, the past cannot be transformed. Being inconstant, the present cannot be grasped. Not being able to be transformed, the past seems constant and definitive. That which is done cannot be undone. Not being able to be grasped, the present seems inconstant and indefinite. On the other hand, the irreversible, constant and definitive past can be forgotten and the inconstant and indefinite present does not want to be neglected. While an earthquake occurring in Lisbon in the 18th century cannot touch us now, what touches us now has somehow the impact of an earthquake. In those terms, we can even trace the difference between theoretical knowledge and empirical experience and describe the feeling of powerlessness of knowledge in relation to the power of experience. What seems to belong to knowledge is the contingency of a proper definition for the already known, while at the same time what seems to belong to empirical experience is the free indefiniteness of any given being. However that which identifies theoretical knowledge with empirical experience is more than the feeling of past and present. It is above all the negligence of future time when the future is grasped immediately as the simple inference from the irreversibility of the past and the in-

\textsuperscript{12} That is also why theoretical knowledge has been assumed as the dimension of past in contrast to the empirical experience of perception which seems to be always present. The verbal forms to name knowledge and consciousness are quite often past forms such as \textit{eidenai}, in Greek, literally “having seen,” like \textit{Bewusstsein} in German, for example. See Bruno Snell’s account on the Greek form \textit{eidenai}. Snell, B. \textit{Der Weg zum Denken und zur Wahrheit. Studien zur frühgriechischen Sprache} (Vndenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen, 1990), p. 26-32.
constancy of the present. Considered in this way, the future is nothing but the transition from an old past to a new present, to a new now. Considered in this manner, the future is simply nothing. If past and present seem to have the power of revealing the dimension of somethingness and therefore of confirming objectivity, the future always appears as the domain of nothingness. But the point is precisely the enigmatic presence of nothing in a coming to be.

This brief account of the basis of the epistemological distinction between theoretical knowledge and empirical experience in the Western tradition is a necessary starting point for our discussion about the untimely structure of experience. And it is a decisive basis for understanding the relationship between philosophy and history as a relation between life and knowledge. Having in mind that “untimely” means another understanding of the temporality of time, we assume that “untimely experience” signals the following dimensions: a) a critical dimension where the evidence of perception as the field of experience becomes a question and no longer a presupposition. This means a criticism of the classical opposition between knowledge and experience, between theory and life as defined from the point of view of the primacy of the here and now of present time. b) a self-critical dimension insofar as the criticism of the traditional epistemological distinction between knowledge and experience is not simply a stepping into a new concept of experience, but the very experience of the concept as a negative experience of experience; c) a creative dimension which reveals the lack in all becoming insofar as it involves the challenge of nothingness. Experience in its very structure is untimely because, in experience, the becoming of creative nothingness breaks through. However, this does not mean that experience is a new concept grounded on a new concept of time deduced from the primacy of the future, that is, that time future is privileged over time present. The discovery of the creative nothingness of a coming to be means, on the contrary, the discovery that time present is not the abstraction of a here and now but the complication of the present. The creative nothingness of a coming to be can only break through when time present discloses itself as the complication of the present; to use an expression of Nicolas of Cusa: *ita nunc sive praesens complicat tempus, the now or the present implies at once all times, the now, the anterior and the posterior*. Indeed nothing is more complicated than the present.
The complication, or co-implication, of time present becomes transparent when we observe, as Ortega y Gasset once remarked when commenting on Cusano’s words, that “of all the points of the earth the one which we cannot directly perceive is that which lies beneath our feet, the here.”\textsuperscript{13} And we can add that from all the moments of time, the one which we cannot perceive is the moment in which we perceive something, the now. In fact, the distinction of past, present and future is everything but perceptible. To desire something as past is a present feeling. To desire and will something in the future is also a present feeling. And the feeling of something present can hardly be disconnected from the delay of a past and the anticipation of a future. Perceiving presently makes always perceptible that the perception of a here and now is as impossible as grasping one’s own shadow. Paying attention to this impossibility, we can discover that experience cannot be reduced to empirical experience because empirical experience is already an abstraction. Empirical experience is never simply present because it always implies the complication of the present. By letting the complication of the present appear, time will emerge in the transparency of the creative and vital nothingness of a coming to be, a coming to be that is always already being.

The complication of the present that manifests itself in the impossibility of perceiving the here and now from which we can perceive something implies the impossibility of seeing oneself when one is seeing something. \textit{It means in fact not being able to perceive the place of the human in the epistemological construction of experience.} However it is, paradoxically, this \textit{not being able} that enables us to see the place of the human as a placeless place, as a here and now without here and now. In other words: to perceive a thing as that which exists without us – external reality – is paradoxically to perceive that within us we do not exist as a thing. Things are apprehended as that which exist without us, for us insofar as we apprehend ourselves as those who do not exist as thing for things. However, to apprehend something as a “thing,” as real, as an external reality carries with it more implications than apprehending us as an external reality to things. It is, at the same time, to assume that in this apprehension we are and are not with things, with others, with ourselves. To be with things and with others as an external reality means in fact not being with things, with others, with ourselves.

in full attention. Extremely rare are the moments in which someone is so dedicated to something or to someone that he or she would be able to forget him or herself, that he or she would be able to leave the “cave of the self” and become other. Extremely rare are the moments in which one is so entirely absorbed in being, in which life becomes so real in the instant of birth or of death, in the instant of creation, that life is as if a dream, as in Calderón’s *Vida es sueño*.

Nietzsche’s thinking, and even more so, Heidegger’s, provide an insight into the impossibility of reducing human reality to a metaphysical ontology of substance through which men know about things. However, the nature of this insight lies in realizing that this *not being a thing* can only be discovered and become explicit in the abyss of not being with things in full attention, that is, by being in the same way as the way of water, which is such that when it rises to the sky, it becomes raindrops; when it falls to the ground, it becomes rivers. In this powerlessness to be integral and whole in its own finitude, humans perceive that they are not present to otherness in an entire attention, because their present is never present but a presence. Being presence and not being present means being discontinuous, being with things and others, delaying the being-already and anticipating the can-be, being chronically anachronic, with Nietzsche’s words, *ein nie vollendendes Imperfectum*. Therefore a new meaning of the human emerges, a sense of human beyond good and evil (Nietzsche), a sense of human from the point of view of the finite temporality of existence, that is, from the finitude of time, where man is historicity and not something that has or makes history (Heidegger), implying also that in its very capacity for knowledge human life encounters its own powerlessness. What Nietzsche and Heidegger saw was that the existential constitution of man, finitude, can only rise out of the negativity of being unable to be what one knows, the powerless of being in a full attention and therefore of becoming other.

The important consequence of understanding this simultaneity is that it becomes clear that the so called “originary,” “authentic,” “resolute,” “great,” heroic character of existence, in brief the whole heroic vocabulary of Nietzsche and Heidegger, is not to be understood as an overcoming of negativity, in the very idealistic sense of the word. These heroic descriptions indicate that those moments of resoluteness are nothing but the revelation of the constitutive negativity of human existence. From the horizon of such a negativity, understood as the
remarkable simultaneity of a knowledge of powerlessness in the very power of knowledge, it becomes possible to make the experience of the untimely structure of experience, and thereby to differentiate experience from, on the one hand, empirical experience and experiencing (Erlebnis), and, and the other hand, from experiment. Experience is therefore fundamentally negative because it takes place within the creative power of nothingness. Experience is further always poor, because it takes place within the power of lack. We have to discuss what it means, this negativity and poverty of experience.

The aporias of sensible empirical experience, which also gave birth to phenomenology, disclosed the presence of a negativity in the very affirmative character of consciousness. This negativity shows itself in the form of a separation. Apprehending and understanding things as things, that is, as things without us and for us, man becomes external to things, no longer confusing himself, in an animistic way, with things. At the same time, man becomes internal to himself, confusing himself rationally with a reality without things. However, man can only get in touch with himself by separating himself from things and in this sense he needs things in order to separate himself from them. The philosophical treatment of consciousness has always insisted on the fact that consciousness is not a product but a production, a conquest. From sleeping to awakening, from not-knowing to knowledge, from opinion to argument, from perception to rational understanding, from subjectivism to objectivity, from dark to light – all these descriptions want to show this philosophical act, which for the Greeks was essentially a “loving act,” in which human life separates from things in order to know things as they are and be human in a human – that is – ethical way. The aporia that this separation presents is that, in separating himself from things, man knows things without being things, and at the same time man is himself without knowing himself. In this separation, man is and is not, man knows and does not know. But how shall we understand this separation from out of which both knowing and not knowing are defined? This separation was understood by the Greeks as life because philosophy was not simply a kind of knowledge but a way of living. Assumed as a form of living, philosophy is not really love of wisdom but the wisdom of love, it is not philia tes sophias, but sophia tes philias, the wisdom of philia. However philia does not refer to the subjective representation of being in love. It refers to the concrete ap-
prehension of life as belonging. In this conception, philosophy means the wisdom of life as belonging. In which way does the wisdom of life as belonging generate knowledge by separation? This way of living, called philosophy, is the way of living of a mortal being. Not being the one who dies but the one who is mortal, human life brings to light that life is belonging in the way of separation and separating, as the only way to belong to life. If, as Hannah Arendt showed, for ancient Greek philosophy, life as nature dies insofar as it is immortal, and human life does not die insofar as it is mortal, what is new in the untimely thought of Nietzsche lies in the fact that he revealed that not only human life is mortal but life itself is mortal. This means that human life discovers another foundation in contrast to the ancient Greek logos of life; human life appears as an expression, as the “lightning eyes” (Schelling) of the mortality of life itself, that is, that life does not die insofar as it is mortal.

Being mortal as opposed to being the one who dies is a way of expressing, in Western grammar, what is expressed in an old Chinese proverb with the words: life and death, the great question. At stake is “the affirmation of life even in death,” to use George Bataille’s words. Neither life nor death, but life and death, the connective, the connection, which is the sense of what Bataille called eroticism, that is, the obscure force of the light of Eros. In its indicative form, the finitude or being mortal of finite life means discontinuity. Life is alive in its generic universality by means of generating specific individualities which interrupt the continuity of life. Individuality is not unique because it is an absolute self but because it is discontinuous, because it is a cut, a caesura or an interruption of the continuity of life. Bataille’s clear intuition is that the life of continuity is the very discontinuity of life. According to Bataille, we do not fear death because we fear to lose the continuity of life, but because we fear to loose our own discontinuity, we fear to lose our solitude and become a lost wave in the multiplicity of waves within the ocean of the continuity of life. The obscure force of the light of Eros means that life can only continue to live by means of separation, of discontinuity and that only by separation is it possible to belong to life. Finitude is therefore not seeking infinitude but is the continuous discontinuity of the discontinuous continuity of life. The

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14 As Chantraine and Frisk showed in their philological accounts on the Greek *philia*.

15 The erotic foundation of life described by Bataille is not only a kind of exegesis of Nietzsche’s understanding of life as the belonging together of the historical and the
eroticism of finitude shows the constitutive negativity of finite existence as a belonging within separation, as a dying life and a living death. In this sense life is history and history is life. But in which sense can the simultaneity in which life is death and death is also life be described as negativity, or better, in which sense is negativity the structuring untimely character of experience?

I think that what Heidegger called Being-towards-death, *Sein-zum-Tode*, the formal indication of the finitude of man as the exhibition of mortal life, is quite decisive in order to explain in which sense experience is always negative. It is even here that we can find the philosophical horizon of Heidegger’s criticism of Nietzsche’s thought and above all of Nietzsche’s understanding of life. Being-towards-death does not mean the end of life, the fact that life has an end, as Sartre understood it. Neither does it mean what is opposed to birth, as Hannah Arendt understood it. Being towards death says that life is birthly – *gebürtig*. This is what is meant when Heidegger says that “death is the possibility of the impossibility of Dasein” (*Tod ist die Möglichkeit der schlechthinigen Daseinsunmöglichkeit*). This means that the certitude that first appears to us as the most certain – the one that we will die – is really the most uncertain one, because we can represent and objectify everything except our own death. The certainty of death is for Heidegger the death of every certainty about our representational and emotional ways of realizing reality. The most uncertain certitude of death is the horizon from which everything that is assured as certain and sure such as the existence of an external reality without us and of an internal reality within us, becomes unreal. From the optic of the most uncertain certitude of death, knowing becomes annihilated, touching a ground of nullity beneath our feet. For Heidegger, Being-towards-death is, however, above all the formal indication of the horizon from which the finite existence of man can be transformed *in concreto*, that is, from which it can become other. In this sense, the most uncertain certitude of death in Heidegger means not only a birth but another birth or, even more precisely, the *birth of the other*. At stake is not the ethical birth of subsuming theoretical consciousness to moral unhistorical, of forgetting and remembrance, but in proximity to Kierkegaard’s analysis of sin, it means a stepping beyond the logic of genders and species, letting the simultaneity of life and death, separation and belonging, discontinuity and continuity break through. Here, life is no longer grasped in terms of kinship but in the concreteness of skinship.

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conscience and thereby being reborn in an authentic, resolute, origi-
nary, great and heroic way of living. At stake is the birth of otherness. 
Because the other does not exist, it has to be born as otherness. But if 
being-towards-death indicates the horizon of the birth of otherness, 
why did Heidegger, being so able with words, not say Being-towards-
life? Why did he have to insist on the expression being-towards-death, 
if the point is the hyphen, the connection between life and death?

We can summarize this important question by stating that, for Hei-
degger, an existential determination is paradoxically an ontological 
negation. Or in other words: the meaning of becoming, of transforma-
tion, implied in the formal indication of Being-towards-death, suffers a 
transformation itself. Transformation does not mean leaving a state in 
order to get into another, but to find oneself in the very experience that 
the self of man, the self of life is nothing.17 The expression “existential 
determination is ontological negation” means therefore the denial of 
the ontology of self and thereby finding oneself in the very abyss of 
consciousness, in the abyss of the reduction of all reality to the per-
spective of a self. At stake is in fact the transformation of the meaning 
of the self, of the “auto,” which since ancient Greek philosophy has 
defined the ontology of life. Pindaro’s maxim “become in an experi-
ence what you are”18 expresses this transformation as the transforma-
tion of the meaning of being a self. This transformation indicates the 
instant in which the field of the self, in which reality can only be real-
ized as the reality without us and the reality within us, is broken. This 
breakdown of reality is at the same time the breaking through of the 
rare transparency of self-awareness of reality. When in anxiety or 
boredom, everything that is alive becomes so lifeless, when in joy and 
in love everything that is lifeless becomes so alive, when in a work of 
art “art and life become one” (Braque), it becomes possible to break 
down the separation of the reality of the subject and the reality of the 
object in such a way that the transparency that reality realizes itself in 
our realizing of reality can break through. 

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17 The task of this existential determination which can be read in Nietzsche’s words 
“die at the right time,” and in Bataille’s definition of erotism as “the approval of life 
even in death” reaches its existential concreteness with Heidegger’s Being-towards-
death. Being-towards-death means to realize this ontological negation, that is, to dis-
cover that the self of man and the self of life is “a king of no-thing.”

Press, 72, p. 178.
Experience. Experience is, therefore, the discovery that transformation is not the transition from a having been to a will, but an abandoning of everything in order to adhere to the nothingness of being. The big challenge is to conceive the negativity of a becoming, of a becoming other, because we are not able to conceive nothingness. In traditional ontology, this negativity is understood either as deficiency or as transition, either as deficiency of power or transition to another power. Coming to be has been conceived from the point of view of what no longer is and what will be, that is, from the point of view of being and of time as substantial. However, when coming to be exposes itself in its struggling temporalization, coming to be can no longer be reduced to anything, breaking through as nothing. On this threshold of the instant, consciousness looses its representational modi, becoming powerless in words and thoughts. Consciousness trembles as in an earthquake, and there occurs what Nietzsche called “conceptquakes,” Begriffbeben.19 At this moment, the questions about becoming, being and not being become real questions for each and everyone, and the discontinuous and finite question of each and every one discovers itself to be the question of being.

It is in this transformation of the questions about reality into real questions that we can find the heart of experience. In experience an appropriation takes place, discussed by Heidegger in terms of Ereignis. It is no longer a cognitive act or a theoretical knowing.20 As the appropriation of the transparency of reality’s self-awareness in the different ways of realizing reality, experience is the experience of nothing. Experience is therefore essentially negative, because it introduces an element that can only have a negative place within the constructions of intellectual thought. This element is the element of a radical powerlessness, the element of nothingness in coming to be, in the transparency of being. That is why when experience breaks through, existence gets a cut, a caesura, an interruption, a “chiasm,” as in the paintings of Fontana. That is why experience, in its fundamental negativity, is the source of history. It is not only the self-critique of categorial statements

20 In experience, the question about why we live becomes meaningless because life exposes itself as nothing. Hence, when life is nothing it can become transparent that we do not live for or because of something but simply through and for life. Experience is therefore not experience of something, neither of something objective as in empirical experience or of something subjective as in experiencing (Erlebnis) or of something objectively subjective as in experimenting.
about reality that belongs to experience, but also the revelation that
only in not being able to say, not being able to think, not being able to
realize, can experience break through in its untimely structure. The
possibility of having an experience of experience lies therefore in the
possibility of finding oneself within the force of a fundamental impos-
sibility, of discovering in the lack of power the power of lacking, in the
desert of life the life of the desert. Thus the desert is also life.21 Perhaps
it is only when it seems that nothing is missing in power and when
knowledge seems to have all power that it becomes possible to find
oneself in the power of lacking. I think it was with this in mind that
Walter Benjamin discussed the relationship between experience and
poverty, in an essay entitled “Experience and Poverty” from 1933,
where he writes: “Poverty of experience: this should not be understood
to mean that people are yearning for new experience. No, they long to
free themselves from experience; they long for a world in which they
can make such pure and decided use of their poverty – their outer pov-
ternity, and ultimately also their inner poverty – that it will lead to some-
thing respectable.”22

In trying to indicate here the way in which experience is connected
to negativity and poverty, I also want to signal that experience can only
break through when language and categorial thought are unable to
describe experience. Hence it is within this impossibility that we can
experience that the moment of the transparency of reality’s self-
awareness has the form of a paradox: the paradox of only having when
loosing, of loosing because of having, of not being in being and being
in not-being.

Every paradox is a task, to recall Kierkegaard’s insight. The task
that is revealed when the power of reason and consciousness is trans-
formed from the point of view of the power of life, and thus of the
power of lack, is the task of being the knowing of a breathing of life into
knowledge. To be the knowing of a breathing of life into knowl-
edge means history, and in this sense history is to be understood as the
very instant (and not the contents) in which to know means to be born

21 If what Heidegger, deepening the genealogical criticism of the modern and scientific
ideal of objectivity, discussed in terms of Ge-stell means the historical powerlessness
of experiencing experience, then we should understand it in the following sense: in this
impossibility it becomes possible to see that experience is untimely.
22 Benjamin, W. “Erfahrung und Armut” in Sprache und Geschichte (Reclam: Stuttgart,
1992), p. 139, engl. transl. from Selected Writings, vol. 2 (Harvard UP: Cambridge,
with, co-naissance, that is, to see things as if it were the first time and thereby to become other. This “as if” underlines that in fact nothing has a first time, but everything is its unique time. If knowledge seems always to annihilate experience and experience to annihilate knowledge, from the perspective of the finite temporality of time, this reciprocal annihilation points to the fact that knowing everything is at the same time the experience of the nullity of never knowing how to be the knowing of a breathing of life into knowledge. Knowing about life, comparing and writing the history of the concepts of life is not yet the same as knowing how to breathe life into knowledge.

But perhaps it is precisely this “not yet” that can become the source of history as experience. When philosophy becomes more and more the history of philosophical knowledges and therefore less and less the experience of the untimely temporality of the life, and of being the knowing of a breathing of life into knowledge, we are faced with the difficult task of legitimating the most bastardly of all children of our time: namely the bastard life of silence, of listening also to the few, in everything that can be said, seen and possessed. Here the untimely experience of history breaks through in such a way that even the most sorrowful experience of being nothing in a coming to be can find words, as in Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus*:

Which is your most sorrowful experience?
If drinking to you is bitter, become wine.
Be in this night from excess
The magic power at the crossroad of your senses,
Your rare encounter sense
And when the earthly has forgotten you
Say to the peaceful earth: I flow.
And to the streaming water, say: I am.

Was ist deine leidenste Erfahrung?
Ist dir Trinken bitter, werde Wein.
Sein in dieser Nacht aus Übermass
Zauberkraft am Kreuzweg deiner Sinne,
Ihre seltsamen Begegnung Sinn.
Und wenn dich das irdische vergass
Zu der stillen Erde sag: Ich rinne.
Zu den raschen Wasser sprich: ich bin.
I want to address here the theme of thinking in history by focussing on the theme of historicity in Heidegger. I want to do this in order to think about the infamous problem of politics in Heidegger and try and produce what Wittgenstein would call aspect change with the way in which we view Heidegger’s philosophical project, at least the early project. But what is the connection between historicity and politics? Prima facie, this seems far from obvious. My clue here is anecdotal. In 1936, Heidegger met with his former student Karl Löwith on a visit to Rome and Frascati. Löwith, for understandable biographical reasons that we do not need to go into, was deeply troubled by Heidegger’s commitment to National Socialism in 1933. Apparently, in 1936, a couple of years after he resigned his position as Rector of Freiburg University, Heidegger still sported a swastika lapel badge and was still a party member. Löwith asked Heidegger the question that many of us would have wanted to ask: what could be the connection between his philosophical project of fundamental ontology or thinking of the truth of being and his political commitment to National Socialism. Heidegger’s answer was one word: historicity (Geschichtlichkeit). What can this mean? What is the connection between historicity and politics?  
Let me try and unpack this question by looking at what Heidegger

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1 See Löwith’s essay in The Heidegger Controversy, ed. R.Wolin (MIT, Cambridge Mass., 1993). To my mind, the systematic connection between fundamental ontology and national socialism was convincingly established by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in his “Transcendence Ends in Politics”, Typography (Harvard University Press: Cambridge Mass., 1989) and also at greater length in his Heidegger, Art and Politics, trans. C. Turner (Blackwell, Oxford, 1990). The same argument has been stated much more polemically and in extraordinary scholarly detail by Johannes Fritsche in Historical Destiny and National Socialism in Heidegger’s Being and Time (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999). About the discussion of historicity, Fritsche claims, “…Section 74 of Heidegger’s Being and Time is as brilliant a summary of revolutionary rightist politics as one could wish for” (p.xii).
means by historicity in the 1927 magnum opus, *Sein und Zeit*, in particular Paragraph 74, entitled “The Basic Constitution of Historicity”. What does he say?

Dasein’s authentic anticipation of its death is called “fate” (*Schicksal*) by Heidegger and this is designated as the originary historicizing (*Geschehen*) of Dasein.² (*SZ* 384) Heidegger’s claim in Division II, Chapter 5, is that the condition of possibility for any authentic understanding of history lies in Dasein’s historicity, which means the self-understanding of the temporal character of being human, i.e. finitude. Contrary to popular belief, the argument of *Sein und Zeit* is very simple: the meaning of the Being of Dasein is temporality, and the meaning of temporality is finitude (*SZ* 331). Dasein’s authentic self-understanding of finitude is “fate”, and this originary historicizing is the condition of possibility for any authentic relation to history, by which Heidegger means “world historical historicizing” (*SZ* 19). It is clear that political events, such as revolutions or general social transformations, would qualify as world historical events for Heidegger. Thinking in history means thinking the meaning of historicity, a proposition which is as true for Hegel as it is for Heidegger, though what they mean by historicity is crucially different.

Now, it was established in Division I, Chapter 4 of *Sein und Zeit* that Dasein is always already *Mitsein*. That is, the *a priori* condition of being-in-the-world is being together with others in that world. As is well known, the everyday, social actuality of this *a priori* condition of *Mitsein* is called *das Man* by Heidegger, and this is determined as inauthentic because in such everyday experience Dasein is not truly itself, but is, as it were, lived through by the customs and conventions of the existing social world. Now, returning more closely to the argument of Paragraph 74, if fateful, authentic Dasein is always already *Mitsein*, then such historicizing has to be what Heidegger calls co-historicizing (*Mitgeschehen*, *SZ* 384). An authentic individual life, Heidegger would seem to be suggesting, cannot be lead in isolation and opposition to the shared life of the community. The question therefore arises: what is the authentic mode of being together with others? What is an authentic *Mitdasein* that escapes or masters the inauthenticity of *das Man*? Heidegger writes, fatefully in my view, “*Wenn aber das schicksalhafte*

² *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1927/1979), in English trans. Macquarrie & Robinson *Being and Time* (Harper&Row: New York, 1975). Henceforth this work will be referred to as *SZ* with page references to the German original.
Dasein als In-der-Welt-sein wasenhaft im Mitsein mit Anderen existiert, ist sein Geschehen ein Mitgeschehen und bestimmt als Geschick” (“But if fateful Dasein as being-in-the-world essentially exists in being-with with others, its historicizing is a co-historicizing and is determined as destiny”). So, destiny is the authentic historicizing that I share with others insofar as my individual fate is always already bound up with the collective destiny of the community to which I belong. Heidegger goes on, “Im Miteinandersein in derselben Welt und in der Entschlossenheit für bestimmte Möglichkeiten sind die Schicksale im vornhinein schon geleitet. In der Mitteilung und im Kampf wird die Macht des Geschickes erst frei”. (“The fates are already guided from the front in the being-with-one-another in the same world and in the resoluteness for determinate possibilities. The power of destiny first becomes free in communication and struggle.”. SZ 384). So, the fates of authentic, individual Daseins are “guided from the front” by the destiny of the collective, a destiny that first becomes free for itself or self-conscious in the activity of communication and struggle. Obviously, the word Kampf has acquired some rather unfortunate political connotations between the period that saw the publication of Sein und Zeit and the present. But that is not the worst of it. Heidegger completes this run of thought with the following words, “Damit bezeichnen wir das Geschehen der Gemeinschaft, des Volkes”. (“In this way, we designate the historicizing of the community, of the people”, SZ 384) So, the authentic communal mode of Mitsein that masters the inauthenticity of das Man is das Volk, the people. In my view, it is the possible political realization of a resolute and authentic Volk in opposition to the inauthentic nihilism of social modernity that Heidegger identified as “the inner truth and greatness” (“der inneren Wahrheit und Größe”) of National Socialism just a few years later in Einführung in die Metaphysik in 1935. Despite the utter disaster of Nazi Germany, Heidegger – to the understandable consternation of the young Habermas writing on Heidegger in his first published essay – stubbornly refused to revise his judgement on “the inner truth and greatness” when the 1935 lectures were published in 1953.3

There is, I believe, a systematic philosophical basis to Heidegger’s political commitment, which is due to the specific way in which Heidegger develops the concept of authenticity in Division II of *Sein und Zeit* and which culminates in the concept of *das Volk*. That is, the only way in which Heidegger can conceive of an authentic mode of human being-together or community, is in terms of the unity of a specific people, a particular nation, and it is the political expression of this possibility that Heidegger saw in National Socialism in 1933. In other words, as Hannah Arendt obliquely implied throughout her work, Heidegger is incapable of thinking the *plurality* of human being-together as a positive political possibility. Plurality is determined negatively by Heidegger as *das Man*. Of course, plurality is the multiplicity of the *demos*, and one might link this Heideggerian worry about plurality to his suspicion, voiced in the posthumously published *Der Spiegel* interview, about the value of democracy. What the question implies here is really if democracy is perhaps essentially inauthentic? Or better: rightly inauthentic? However, to my mind, the urgent task of Heidegger interpretation – provided one is not a Nazi and provided one is still in the business of thinking, as I do, that Heidegger is a great philosopher – is to try and defuse the systematic link between Heidegger’s philosophy and his politics. I will try and defuse this link in this talk by developing the notion of what I call *originary inauthenticity*, a possibility of interpretation that is available, if somewhat latent, in *Sein und Zeit*.

Let me try and explain myself. The thought behind the notion of originary inauthenticity is that human existence is fundamentally shaped in relation to a brute facticity or thrownness which cannot be mastered through any existential projection. Authenticity always slips back into a prior inauthenticity from which it cannot escape but which it would like to evade. From the perspective of originary inauthenticity, human existence is something that is first and foremost experienced as a burden, a weight, as something to which I am riveted without being able to know why or know further. Inauthentic existence has the character of an irreducible and intractable *thatness*, what Heidegger called above “*das Daß seines Da’*. I feel myself bound to ‘the that of my there’, the sheer *Faktum* of my facticity, in a way that invites some sort of response.

Now, and this is where my proposed aspect change begins to kick in, the nature of this response will not, as it is in Division II of *Sein und*
Zeit, be the authentic decision of existence that comes into the simplicity of its Schicksal by shattering itself against death (SZ 385). It will not be the heroic mastery of the everyday in the authentic present of what Heidegger calls the Augenblick (the moment of vision), which produces an experience of ecstasy (Ekstase) and rapture (Entrückung). (SZ 338) No, the response to the Faktum of my finitude is a more passive and less heroic decision, a decision made in the face of a facticity whose demand can never be mastered and which faces me like a riddle that I cannot solve. As I show in my last book on the concept of humour, such a fact calls for comic acknowledgment rather than ecstatic affirmation.4

Dasein is, as Heidegger writes in his extraordinary discussion of guilt, a thrown basis (ein geworfener Grund). As this basis, Dasein continually lags behind itself, “Being a basis (Grund-seiend), that is to say existing as thrown (als geworfenes existierend – another of Heidegger’s enigmatic formulae), Dasein constantly lags behind its possibilities’ (SZ 284). In the light of these remarks, we might say that the self is not so much the ecstasy of a heroic leap energized by the experience of anxiety and being-towards-death, as much as a delay with respect to oneself that is perhaps best expressed in the experience of languor or fatigue. Oblomov answers Nietzsche avant la lettre by simply refusing to get out of bed. I project or throw off a thrownness that catches me in its throw and inverts the movement of possibility. As such, the present continually lags behind itself. I am always too late to meet my fate.5 I think this is what Heidegger might have in mind when he writes of bringing us face to face with, “the ontological enigma of the movement of historicizing in general’ (SZ 389). I want to think about this enigma and un-authentisable kernel of existence historical experience.

It is my hope that if one follows my proposed aspect change from a heroics of authenticity to an originary inauthenticity then a good deal changes in how one views the project of Sein und Zeit and in particular its political consequences. My main point is that both aspects are available to an attentive reading and this is why the young Habermas was right in his first publication in suggesting that it is necessary to think

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4 See my On Humour (Routledge, London, 2002).
5 This line of thought is suggested by Jean-François Lyotard’s remarkable posthumously published text, The Confession of Augustine (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2000), pp. 55-57 & 70-74.
both with Heidegger and against Heidegger (mit Heidegger gegen Heidegger zu denken). However, such a reading is a huge task that will have to be postponed to the future, though I’d be happy to hear any suggestions you might have. In the remainder of this paper, I would just like to sketch how we might begin this task by briefly examining three central concepts from Division II: death, conscience and temporality.

Originary inauthenticity I: death

First, I think that the notion of originary inauthenticity places in question what Heidegger sees as the non-relational character of the experience of finitude in the death-analysis in Division II, Chapter 1. You will recall that there are four criteria in Heidegger’s full existential-ontological conception of death. It is unbezüglich, gewiß, unbestimmt and unüberholbar: non-relational, certain, indefinite and not to be outstripped. It is only the first of these criteria that I would take issue with, as the other three are true, if banal. However, if the first of the criteria falls, then the whole picture changes.

Heidegger insists on the non-relational character of death because for him, crucially, “der Tod ontologisch durch Jemeinigkeit und Existenz konstituiert wird” (“Death is ontologically constituted through mineness and existence”, SZ 240). Therefore, dying for an other (sterben für) would simply be to sacrifice oneself (sich opfern) for an other, or to substitute (ersetzen, SZ 239) myself for another.6 Thus, the fundamental experience of finitude is non-relational, and all relationality is rendered secondary because of the primacy of Jemeinigkeit.

Now, I just think this is wrong. It is wrong empirically and normatively. I would want to oppose it with the thought of the fundamentally relational character of finitude, namely that death is first and foremost experienced in a relation to the death or dying of the other and others, in being-with the dying in a caring way, and in grieving after they are

dead. Yet, such relationality is not a relation of comprehension, the other’s dying is not like placing an intuition under a concept. It is rather a non-subsumptive relation, in Kantian terms a reflective and not a determinate judgment. In other words, the experience of finitude opens up in relation to a brute Faktum that escapes my understanding, or what Stanley Cavell’s Wittgenstein would see as being beyond the reach of my criteria.

Deliberately twisting Heidegger’s words, I would say that the fundamental experience of finitude is rather like being a student of pathological anatomy where the dead other “ist ein lebloses materielles Ding” (“a lifeless material thing”, SZ 238). With all the terrible lucidity of grief, one watches the person one loves – parent, partner or child – die and become a lifeless material thing. That is, there is a thing – a corpse – at the heart of the experience of finitude. This is why I mourn. Antigone understood this well, staring at the lifeless material thing of her dead brother and demanding justice. Authentic Dasein cannot mourn. One might even say that authenticity is constituted by making the act of mourning secondary to Dasein’s Jemeinigkeit. Heidegger writes, shockingly in my view, “We do not experience the death of others in a genuine sense; at most we are just “there alongside” (nur ’dabei’)” (SZ 239).

A final thought here: if death and finitude are fundamentally relational, that is, if they are constituted in a relation to a lifeless material thing whom I love and this thing casts a long mournful shadow across the self, then this would also lead me to question a distinction that is fundamental to Heidegger’s death-analysis. Heidegger makes the following threefold distinction:

1. dying, Sterben, which is proper to Dasein; which is the very mark of Dasein’s ownness and its possibility of authenticity;
2. perishing, Verenden, which is confined to plants and animals; and
3. demise, Ableben, which Heidegger calls a Zwischenphänomen between these two extremes, and which characterises the inauthentic death of Dasein. (SZ 247)

Now, although one cannot be certain whether animals simply perish – as Wittgenstein said, “if a lion could talk, we could not understand him” – I have my doubts, particularly when one thinks of domestic pets and higher mammals. Thus, I think one should at the very least
leave open the possibility that certain animals die, that they undergo *Sterben* and not just *Verenden*. I also doubt whether human beings are incapable of perishing, of dying like a dog, as Kafka’s fiction insistently reminds us. And what of those persons who die at the end of a mentally debilitating disease, or who die whilst being in what is termed “a permanently vegetative state”? Do they cease to be human on Heidegger’s account? I see no other option. But, more importantly, if finitude is fundamentally relational, that is, if it is by definition a relation to the *Faktum* of an other who exceeds my powers of projection, then *the only authentic death is inauthentic*. That is, on my account, an authentic relation to death is not constituted through mineness, but rather through otherness. Death enters the world for me not through my own *timor mortis*, but rather through my relation to the other’s dying, perhaps even through my relation to the other’s fear, which I try to assuage as best I can. It is this notion of an essentially inauthentic relation to death that both Blanchot and Levinas have in mind when reversing Heidegger’s dictum that “death is the possibility of impossibility” into “death is the impossibility of possibility’ (SZ 262). I have power neither over the other’s death nor my own. Death is not a possibility of Dasein, but rather describes an empirical and normative limit to all possibility and to my fateful powers of projection. My relation to finitude limits my ability to be *(Seinkönnen)*.

**Originary inauthenticity II: conscience**

Once this relational picture of finitude is in place, then the picture of conscience would also have to change significantly. I have come to think – through an experience of teaching and against some long-held prejudices about Division II – that the discussion of conscience is potentially the most explosive and interesting part of *Sein und Zeit*, and we have already had occasion to discuss certain passages above. Of course, the analysis of conscience follows on logically from the death analysis, being the concrete ontic-existentiell testimony or attestation *(Zeugnis, SZ 267)* for the formal ontologico-existential claim about death. Death is ontological, conscience is ontic. Indeed, the word testimony might detain us more than it has done in the reading of *Sein und Zeit*. Testimony evokes both a notion of witnessing as testifying to something or someone, and also expresses a link to evidence and veri-
fication, where Heidegger is seeking in conscience the concrete ontic evidence for the formal ontological claim about death, a question which resolves itself relativistically in the key concept of “Situation” (SZ 299-300).

My point here is simple: if death is non-relational for Heidegger, then also a fortiori conscience is non-relational. Heidegger writes, in italics, “In conscience Dasein calls itself” (‘Das Dasein ruft im Gewissen sich selbst”, SZ 275). That is, although in conscience it is as if the call of conscience were an alien voice (eine fremde Stimme, SZ 277) that comes über mich, such a call, although it is not planned, really comes aus mir. As Heidegger insists in differentiating his concept of conscience from the “vulgar” one, what is attested to in conscience is Dasein’s ownmost or most proper ability to be (eigenstes Seinkönnen, SZ 295). Authentic Dasein calls to itself in conscience, and it does this not in the mode of chattering to itself, but rather in discretion (Verschwiegenheit) and silence (Schweigen). This behaviour is what Heidegger calls resoluteness (Entschlossenheit), which is then defined as the “authentic Selfhood” of Dasein (SZ 298). Heidegger completes this train of thought in a slightly troubling fashion by claiming that when Dasein has authentically individuated itself in conscience, “…it can become the “conscience” of others (zum “Gewissen” der Anderen werden). Only by authentically being-their-selves in resoluteness can people authentically be with one another…” (SZ 298).

This brings me to my question: is conscience non-relational? It would seem to me that Freud, and I am thinking of the essay on Narcissism (1914) and “Mourning and Melancholia” (1915), would have one or two interesting things to say here.7 The Freudian thought I would like to retain is that of conscience as the imprint, interior mark, or agency, for a series of transferential relations to the other: ego ideal, paternal super-ego, maternal imago, or whatever. Conscience is the Über-Ich that stands über mir. It is fundamentally relational. Furthermore, it is this place that the analyst has to occupy if the analysis is going to work. Conceived in this way, the appeal made by conscience would not be Dasein calling to itself or even the voice of the friend that every Dasein carries within it (SZ 163). If that were so, then Dasein would have to be its own best friend, which is a rather solipsistic, indeed sad, state of affairs. Even worse, I would want to avoid the sug-

gestion that I can become the conscience of others in some sort of pre-
sumptuous and potentially dominating way.

On my picture, conscience would be the ontic testimony of a certain
splitting of the self in relation to a Faktum that it cannot assimilate, the
lifeless material thing that the self carries within itself and which de-
nies it from being fully itself. It is this failure of autarky that makes the
self relational. The call of conscience is a voice within me whose
source is not myself, but is the other’s voice that calls me to responsi-
bility. In other words, ethical relationality is only achieved by being
inauthentic, that is, in recognizing that I am not the conscience of oth-
ers, but rather that it is those others who call me to have a conscience.

It would here be a question of reading Freud’s concept of narciss-
sism, as a splitting of the self into conflictual agencies (the division of
ego, super-ego, and id in the second topography) back into Sein und
Zeit. If authentic Dasein cannot mourn, because its fundamental rela-
tion to finitude is a self-relation, then I think this is because, to put it in
psychoanalytic terms, it has not effected the relationality of the trans-
ference. Transference is a relation to an other whom I face, but whom I
cannot completely know, whom my criteria cannot reach. Such a rela-
tion is described by Levinas with the adjective “ethical”. Of course,
Mitsein is being-with-another, but it is standing shoulder-to-shoulder
with those others in what Heidegger calls in one passage “eigentliche
Verbundenheit” (“authentic alliance or being-bound-together”, SZ
122). Such alliance might well be said to be the camaraderie that in-
duces the political virtue of solidarity, but it is not a face-to-face rela-
tion and as such, in my view, is ethically impoverished. I sometimes
think that Mitsein is a little like being in church, it is a congregational
“being-together-with-others” where we vibrate together as one body in
song and prayer. Pleasant as it doubtless must be, such is not the only
way of being with others.

Originary inauthenticity III : temporality

If we begin to hear thrown projection as thrown projection, and factical
existence as factical existence, then I think Heidegger’s claims about
temporality – the very meaning of being – would also have to be re-
vised, away from the primacy of the future and towards the primacy of
the past. To recall, Heidegger’s claim in his discussion of temporality
is that there are three “ecstases” of time: the future (\textit{Zukunft}) that is revealed in the anticipation of death, the past or “having-been-ness” (Gewesenheit) that is opened in the notion of guilt and resoluteness, and the present or “waiting-towards” (Gegen-wart) that is grasped in the moment of vision (Augenblick), or taking action in the Situation. The claim is that Dasein is the movement of this temporalization, and that this movement is finitude: “Die ursprüngliche Zeit ist endlich” (‘Primordial time is finite”, SZ 331).

Now, although Heidegger insists that the structure of ecstatic temporality possesses a unity, the primary meaning of temporality is the future (SZ 327). As Heidegger writes, “Zeitlichkeit zeitigt sich ursprünglich aus der Zukunft” (‘Temporality temporalizes itself primordially out of the future”, SZ 331). That is, it is the anticipatory experience of being-towards-death that makes possible the Gewesenheit of the past and the Augenblick of the present. For Heidegger, the Augenblick is the authentic present which is consummated in a vision of resolute rapture (Entrückung, SZ 338), where Dasein is literally carried away (ent-rückt) in an experience of ecstasy.

Rapture is a word that worries me, not the least for the way in which \textit{raptus} seems like a plundering of the past, some sort of rape of memory. To hear the thrownness in the throwing off, and the facticity in existence would, I think, establish the primacy of the past over the future. This past is one’s rather messy, indeed often opaque, personal and cultural history.\textsuperscript{8} In my view, it is this personal and cultural thrownness that pulls me back from any rapture of the present into a lag that I can never make up and which I can only assemble into a \textit{fate} on the basis of a delusionary relation to history, and into a \textit{destiny} on the basis of a congregational interpretation of that delusion.

On the contrary, from the perspective developed in this paper, the unfolding future always folds back into the experience of an irredeemable past, a past that constitutes the present as having a delay with respect to itself. Now is not the now when I say “now’. My relation to the present is one where I am always trying – and failing – to catch up with myself. As such, then, I do not rise up rapturously or affirmatively into time, becoming as Nietzsche exclaimed on the verge of madness, “all the names in history’. No, I wait, I await. Time passes. For Heidegger, this is the passive awaiting (Gewärtigen) of inauthentic time.

\textsuperscript{8} On this topic, see Paul Ricoeur, “La marque du passé”, \textit{Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale}, Janvier-Mars 1998, No.1.
Of course, this makes me fatigued, sleepy even. As such, in my fatigue, the river of time begins to flow backwards, away from the future and the resolute rapture of the present, and towards a past that I can never make present, but which I dramatize involuntarily in the life of dreams. True, I can always interpret my dreams or, better, get another to interpret them for me. But what Freud calls the navel of the dream, its source, its facticity, always escapes me, like an enigma.

If the theme of thinking in history is thought philosophically, that is, if it becomes a matter for thinking, as Heidegger would say, then what is essential is a thinking of historicity as the ontological condition of possibility for historical happenings, events and so-called “facts”. In this respect, Heidegger is right: our approach to history is dependant upon inherited and unanalysed concepts which must be submitted to a process of *Destruktion* or *Abbau*, deconstruction if you like. Seen in this light, any objectivist conception of history will be drawn back to its existential or transcendental conditions of possibility. However, where Heidegger is mistaken is in prioritising a notion of authentic historicity which is built upon the concept of authenticity that is at the heart of the existential analytic. This is what causes him all his political confusions and explains his response to Karl Löwith with which I began this talk. If this notion of authenticity is loosened up and rethought from within, as I have tried to begin to do in this talk, then a different conception of historicity might offer itself which might lead to a different approach to thinking in history. If we seek to be as inauthentic as possible, and I would like to exhort you all to be persistently joyously inauthentic, then a different approach to history might offer itself. James Joyce remarks somewhere that history is a nightmare from which we are all trying to awake. This is true. But it is not just a nightmare, it is a slaughterhouse, a place of trouble, tribulation, silencing and violence. Before we wake up, I think it is incumbent upon us to think through the meaning of that nightmare.
In §76 of *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger analyzes the origin of history on the basis of the historicity of Dasein. The point which he stresses here, and which also structures the argument of the book as a whole, is that history, along with our different ways of understanding, studying and relating to history, is rooted in the fact that our existence itself is historical. It is with reference to this existential-ontological fact that a new attempt to raise the ancient question of the meaning of being cannot avoid the confrontation with, and destruction of, its own history, i.e., the history of the formation of ontological concepts and positions. The argument is spelled out very forcefully as early as §6:

If the question of being is to have its own history made transparent, then this hardened tradition must be loosened up, and the concealments which it has brought about must be dissolved. We understand this task as one in which by taking the question of being as our clue, we are to destroy the traditional content of ancient ontology until we arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of being – the ways which have guided us ever since.¹

In the next passage he emphasizes that this does not amount to relativizing or simply negating previous positions, for its aim is positive, as it

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directs itself toward the present, toward the today, and its ways of approaching the history of ontology. This agonistic orientation vis-à-vis tradition, and more precisely with regard to how the tradition lives and is manifested in the present, will henceforth guide the steps by which the analysis spirals itself toward the foundational level of Dasein’s being, culminating in the description of ecstatic temporality.

If we move forward in the book again, to §76, as well as §74, we can also note how Heidegger draws the distinction between different ways of living the originary historical condition of existence. There is an authentic, and an inauthentic way of enacting our historical predicament. The distinction hinges on the ability to live oriented towards the present and the future, and only from this position take over the past which one already is, in Heidegger’s words, to take over—in the moment, the Augenblick—one’s own thrownness (p. 385). To do so is what makes authentic historicity, or by another name, “destiny,” possible. The last section (§77) of chapter 5 deals entirely with the historicity of Dasein and it contains a rather detailed account of and quotations from Dilthey and Count Yorck von Wartenburg, whose work, and in particular whose correspondence, was an important source of inspiration for Heidegger in working out his existential account of historicity.

But before referring to this important source material, Heidegger also makes a brief digression at the end of §76 to Nietzsche, and the latter’s 1874 Second Untimely Meditation, On The Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life (Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben). In this brief discussion he notes that Nietzsche has reached the heart of the matter concerning the use and abuse of history, and he also recounts his three famous kinds of historical writing, monumental, antiquarian, and critical. But he also reproaches him for not stating the necessity of this particular tripartite division, and for not demonstrating their “inner unity.” Only on the basis of a theory of historicity, along the lines presented by Heidegger himself, is this division and its unity said to be fully understandable. He ends the brief account with the claim that Nietzsche’s division is not incidental, for the beginning of his considerations indicates, Heidegger remarks somewhat enigmatically, that Nietzsche “knew more than he revealed” (p. 396).

What was this knowledge that Nietzsche possessed, but did not reveal? What is the deeper truth of the Second Untimely Meditation from the perspective of existential ontology? And is there perhaps also a
hidden truth concerning the full importance of this text for Heidegger’s own analysis? Heidegger never returns again in his published work to the *Second Untimely Meditation*, but in the winter semester of 1938/39 he devotes an entire lecture course to this particular text, *Zur Auslegung von Nietzsches II. Unzeitgemäßer Betrachtung*, published within the *Gesamtausgabe* in 2003, as GA 46. For readers waiting for a more thorough development of his appreciation of Nietzsche as a thinker of historicity, this volume is somewhat of a philosophical disappointment. Heidegger’s own lecture notes do not provide a full and readable text, but rather contain mostly sketches. From the detailed student lecture notes added in an appendix, we get a better sense of the actual development of the argument presented in the course. But the course is also a disappointment in its reading of Nietzsche’s essay in the sense that it is guided by the increasingly critical assessment of Nietzsche in which Heidegger, step by step, distances himself from his predecessor, as can also be seen later in his *Nietzsche I-II* from 1961, which collects together material from 1935 and onward.

Much of the commentary in the 1938/9 course is devoted to Nietzsche’s understanding of life and animality, and the philosophically unsatisfying way in which the concept of a self-affirming life is presented. Since Nietzsche’s overall purpose in this text, Heidegger writes at one point, is dominated by the will to “renew German Culture,” it fails to question its own understanding of life, which remains the unquestioned horizon of the whole treatise.² He even goes so far in his critical distance that he asks if the return to the “needs of life” called for in this text is not an escape from reflection (*Besinnung*), an escape into the animal and life’s own sense of righteousness, in the sense of a beast of prey (*Raubtier*).³ The seminal question issuing from Nietzsche’s text is in the end said to be not really about the use or abuse of history at all, but about the legitimacy of positing “life” as a fundamental reality in the sense of a *Kulturbiologie*.⁴ From this short summary it is clear then, that by this time Heidegger is no longer following Nietzsche as a thinker of historicity in his own right. Instead, he reads the essay on history rather as a symptom of a more general philosophical inability to think the truth of being and man’s place in this

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² *Zur Auslegung von Nietzsches II. Unzeitgemäßer Betrachtung* (Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 2003), GA 46, p. 212.
³ Ibidem, p. 213.
⁴ Ibidem, p. 255. This is the last entry of the scattered lecture manuscript, apart from the appendices.
event, an inability which issues from Nietzsche’s form of “subjectivism.”

Ten years after SZ, Nietzsche thus no longer holds out a promise for a knowledge yet to be articulated. In order to understand the rationale of this quite drastic reorientation on Heidegger’s part with regard to Nietzsche as a thinker of history, one would have to analyze the complex issue of how his thinking develops in general during the thirties. That is not my task at this particular point. Instead, I would like to take another route, namely to propose a reading of the Second Untimely Meditation which complements and advances Heidegger’s own analysis of historicity in SZ, not in order to criticize Heidegger’s later assessment of Nietzsche, but in order to bring what I take to be the prevailing matter of this seminal essay into sharper relief than we find in Heidegger’s later commentary.

I

To write on Nietzsche’s Second Untimely Meditation from the perspective of Heidegger’s account of historicity does not require much interpretative violence, since the two accounts are already intricately intertwined. What I hope to do through such a reading is, first, to come to a more thorough understanding of Nietzsche’s concern in this text with the dangers of historical consciousness, and to show how this problem can be said to provide a key to his subsequent historical philosophical critique. But in addition, it is from the perspective of Heidegger’s ontological concerns that we can fully grasp the extent to which Nietzsche diagnoses as it were a certain necessary, and thus in a sense tragic blindness concerning the possibility of existential-ontological understanding of historicity. What he measures, in the end, is the essential limit of philosophical theoretical reflection, in the sense of theoretical contemplative wisdom, with regard to the historical predicament of thought. But here I anticipate my conclusion.

First of all, let me briefly rehearse the general argument of this text. The text was written during the fall of 1873 and published in 1874, as the second of four completed so-called Untimely Meditations. Its stated problem is the danger of an excess of historical consciousness (historische Sinn), something which Nietzsche diagnoses as a sickness

peculiar to his time. As such it belongs to the series of critical assessments of his own philological environment of this period. Its argument is that through an excess of memory, and the scientific ideal of an unlimited gathering of knowledge of the past, an age can become so burdened by its own knowledge that it loses its creative potential. In this sense an exaggerated historical preoccupation can become a danger to life itself, which thereby loses its natural instincts and ability to act in the present. Contrary to the present ethos of historical science, according to which historical knowledge and historical awareness constitute a virtue, Nietzsche, in a jesting mode, turns the scales around and suggest that an excess of history can in fact turn into a vice and a sickness, and that life also needs forgetfulness in order to prosper and create. In the course of the analysis, Nietzsche introduces five categories, first the unhistorical and the superhistorical (unhistorische and überhistorische) and secondly the threefold distinction between the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical. The first pair of concepts is presented as two different remedies against an excess of historical consciousness. The unhistorical marks an attitude of active or spontaneous neglect of knowledge of the past, akin to the natural forgetfulness of the animal, whereas the superhistorical is the virtue of the supreme historian who is able to view the past as a resting perspectival totality of every possible form of life. The three different attitudes to history designate three different ways in which history can become useful for life, the monumental as an incentive for heroic action with the past as a model, the antiquarian as a preservation of one’s own community, and finally, the critical as a way of criticizing the present in order to replace it with something new. While they can all serve life, they can also—when abused—become a danger to life in different ways: the monumental as a stifling classicism, the antiquarian as a motive for relentless and undiscerning gathering of everything whatsoever, and finally the critical as a kind of purposeless destruction.

II

Before analyzing these concepts and the overall argument of this text in greater detail, a few words are needed concerning its position within Nietzsche’s work as a whole and also in the secondary literature. The text was considered by many commentators, in particular during the
first half of the twentieth century, as one of Nietzsche’s most important works, alongside the *Genealogy* and the *Birth of Tragedy*. Its argument against the historicism of its age had a massive influence, far beyond Nietzsche commentaries and scholarship. The general idea of a danger inherent in a culture too much obsessed with memorizing the past, and therefore incapable of creative work in and on the present, can be followed like a shadow of many aspects of our aesthetic and political modernism, preoccupied as it has been with the looming weakness, decadence, and decline of Western and European culture. Even though the interest in this particular text diminished in later decades, several recent monographs have nonetheless stressed its particular importance. At the same time the argument has been voiced that the essay, on the contrary, does not constitute an important step in the development of Nietzsche’s thought, since its essentially anti-historicist message clashes with his subsequent historical analysis of morality in particular. Such an argument can also find support in what appears to be Nietzsche’s surprisingly low esteem for this particular text. In striking contrast to the importance accredited to it by its readers, Nietzsche later did not pay much attention to it. When asked by correspondents, e.g., Brandes, to recommend his most important writings, he would never refer to this essay. And while republishing most of his earlier writings with new prefaces in 1886, he did not bother to reedit any of the *Untimely Meditations*. In the brief review of the text in his autobiography *Ecce Homo* (composed in 1888), he describes it as the first attempt to view the “historical consciousness” (*historische Sinn*) as a sickness and a sign of decay, and also how contemporary science poisons life, and makes it “barbaric.” Thus he connects it to his general critique of science and the theoretical activity, but he makes no connections to his own subsequent practice of historical, genealogical critique.

Nietzsche’s silence with regard to this specific essay in the years that followed, and the indications that he was displeased with it, motivated Jörg Salaquarda to recreate, in a very detailed essay from 1984,

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6 Two such recent works are Ludwig Geijsen, *Geschichte und Gerechtigkeit* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), and also Christian Lipperheide, *Nietzsches Geschichtsstrategien* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1999).
7 Cf. Thomas Brobjer’s “Nietzsche’s View of the Value of Historical Studies and Methods,” in *J. History of Ideas* (forthcoming).
its genesis using Nietzsche’s working notes and correspondence. Salaquarda’s conclusion was that one reason for Nietzsche’s later apparent dissatisfaction with the text probably had to do with an experienced crisis as a writer during the time of its composition, following critique from his close friends, especially Rohde. Indeed, it is not difficult to criticize this essay, both on stylistic and thematic grounds. The prevailing nationalistic and romantic tendency, in the sense given to this term in Nietzsche’s own later critique of his contemporary study *The Birth of Tragedy*, with its Wagnerian hopes for and appeals to a new generation of dragon-slaying German youths, would most likely have provoked his subsequent dismay.

In this connection it is also important, however, to note the self-criticism implied in the essay already at the time of its composition. In the last section Nietzsche notes that the text itself demonstrates the traits of that with which it is trying to come to terms: “…precisely this treatise, as I will not conceal, shows its modern character, the character of weak personality, in the excess of criticism, in the immaturity of its humanity, in the frequent transition from irony to cynicism, from pride to skepticism.” There is a sense in which the writer, in the very act of composing his critical treatise, becomes painfully aware of what is perhaps the inner impossibility of properly communicating his message. Or perhaps, that the very need to communicate it cannot avoid exemplifying the very problem with which it is trying to come to terms. The awareness of being overburdened with historical awareness and reflection cannot be presented and analyzed without continuing to manifest this very condition. On one level it can only be overcome by means of the *deed*.

At the root of this discourse we can thus discern an almost desperate and perhaps also embarrassing awareness of the limit of reflective consciousness with regard to the problem of an excess of historical knowledge as also an excess of self-reflection. One legacy of the text may therefore also be a *necessitated silence* precisely with regard to the

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problem which it has detected, a silence concerning the what of history, in favor of a movement into the how of history, as that which in the end has to be enacted or lived.

Frequently, Nietzsche’s essay is read simply as a statement against historical awareness and historical studies in general. From such a standpoint it clashes abruptly with the oft quoted remark at the outset of *Human, All Too Human*, written only a few years later. In the second section of this book we read about the “hereditary defect” of philosophers, which is precisely their lack of historical sense (*historische Sinn*), manifested in the often repeated tendency to interpret man from the standpoint of the present, in total neglect of the dimension of change and becoming. But since there are no eternal facts, what is needed at this point, Nietzsche argues, is on the contrary a “historical philosophizing.” Later on, in *Beyond Good and Evil* (§204) he even celebrates the historical sense as a specifically German virtue, and as something that Schopenhauer, through his “unintelligent criticism” of Hegel, has damaged. And in a similar spirit he writes at the beginning of the *Genealogy*, of the contemporary philosophers that they—even in their attempts to compose a history of morality—all lack “historical spirit” (*historische Geist*) and they think essentially “unhistorically” (*wesentlich unhistorisch*), which in this case also means that they think from the perspective of the present. In other words, there is on the one hand a fierce criticism of historical consciousness as the sickness of an age, and on the other hand the call for an increased historical consciousness as the necessary remedy against the defects of contemporary philosophizing. And this tension is not only acted out over the course of his later writings, but is even contained in the first text itself.

For at one of its most vertiginous moments, Nietzsche even admits that the problem of modernity’s excessive historical consciousness can only be dissolved through its own means, i.e., through historical knowledge: “history must itself dissolve the problem of history, knowledge must turn its sting against itself.”

How should we view these apparently divergent statements? Do these different positions constitute yet another of the “contradictions” that we are accustomed to ascribe to Nietzsche? Or are they a sign of a

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10 KSA 2: 24-25.
11 KSA 5: 258.
12 KSA 1: 306: “…die Historie muss das Problem der Historie selbst auflösen, das Wissen muss seinen Stachel gegen sich selbst kehren.” in English transl., p. 45.
drastic shift in his orientation, a proof that there is a Nietzsche I and a Nietzsche II, if not indeed a Nietzsche III? Or are they, indeed, two sides of the same philosophical position, a position which can then not be understood properly unless we can manage to unite these two apparent extremes in a more fundamental consideration of the problem? Without denying the drastic changes, both in style and content, of Nietzsche’s thought from the time of the Birth of Tragedy to the last writings from the mid-eighties onward, in my reading of it the Second Untimely Meditation remains, despite its obvious shortcomings, an absolutely seminal text for Nietzsche’s understanding of the problems of history, of historical consciousness and of historicism in general. And since he never again returns explicitly at any significant length to these issues in the later writings, besides the brief remarks just quoted, its status and importance as a programmatic statement increases. Indeed, I would argue, when read properly, this essay can give us an important key to the nature of his subsequent work on the whole. And the fact of his later silence or negligence about the essay should not automatically lead us toward the conclusion that it contains an abandoned or untenable position. In this respect the remark from the preface to the second part of Human, All Too Human is highly significant, since he says with respect to his earlier writing: “what I have said of the ‘historical sickness,’ I have said as someone who learned, slowly and with difficulty, to recover from it, and who was by no means prepared to relinquish ‘history’ in the future just because he had suffered from it.”

History, we can read from this quotation, is not an entity with regard to which Nietzsche adopts differing theoretical positions, but rather a basic predicament, which can be a source of both sickness and health, depending on how it is lived and enacted.

When seen from this perspective, the essay can also be seen to anticipate the problem encountered and addressed by Heidegger fifty years later in regard to the possibility of something like an authentic historicity. In this analysis, Heidegger is also concerned with the damaging effects of historicism on philosophical work in the present. But his remedy is not an anti-historical attitude to philosophical problems, but a confrontation with the historical situatedness of thinking as such.

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13 KSA 2:371: “…und was ich gegen die ‘historische Krankheit’ gesagt habe, das sagte ich als Einer, der von ihr langsam, mühsam genesen lernte und ganz und gar nicht Willens war, förderhin auf ‘Historie’ zu verzichten, weil er einstmals an ihr gelitten hatte.”
And the authenticity held out as an evasive promise is in the end an affirmation of the inescapable finitude of the human gaze in the moment of decision. The genuine historical existence cannot constitute a fullness, but must be understood as tension, as exposure, an ability to occupy the rift of time. This is what both Heidegger and Nietzsche, in their different ways are indicating. In order to bring this out, however, we have to read the text, not only on its manifest level, but also against itself. Only by confronting Nietzsche with his own vain hopes for a fulfilled historical personality can the most radical implications of his analysis be brought to the fore.

III

The Second Untimely Meditation begins with a reflection on the animal, in the image of the cows grazing in the field. The animal is here a name for that which presumably lives without a sense of time or history. It is the unhistorical creature, for it is said to have no memory. In contrast to this invented “other” of man (the legitimacy of which we need not address at this point, even though it warrants a discussion in its own right), we humans are presented as the ones who live openly towards the possibility of that which is not present. Man is surrounded by traces of life which has been, and therefore also to the possibility of his own coming to pass. The awareness of the past, of words and deeds, is also the inescapable awareness of a future which comprises his own death. His life appears before him as this stretch of time, in which he has to model his life according to his own choice. Nietzsche does not speak of freedom in this context, but of memory. But the contrast to the animal without memory called forth here is in actuality also the condition of freedom. Man stands open toward that which is possible, and the anxiety of this situation is not only actualized in regard to the future, but also, and inversely, to the past. For the being who is free to shape his future is also someone exposed to the past, a past on which he not only rests, but which also threatens to pronounce judgment on him and his actions.

An existence without memory, one which lives only in and through the moment, can therefore, from the perspective of this difficult human freedom, only shine forth as a possibility of bliss and happiness. Nietzsche speaks of an experience in which we are temporarily deliv-
erred from the experience of time as the experience of standing on “the threshold of the moment,” *Schwelle des Augenblicks* (KSA 1:250), suggesting that this is indeed a moment of “experiencing unhistorically” in the way that animal nature exists. And yet the promised paradise of blissful unawareness of time is not available to man. For man is a historical creature.

The threat confronting the creature with a memory, in Nietzsche’s account, is the expansion of this memory to a point where it overburdens him. As he becomes filled with the awareness of what has been his whole existence is diluted and becomes awash in the flood of becoming and passing away. No action in the present becomes possible or meaningful. Here, he likens the man overburdened by memory to a creature suffering from insomnia, or indigestion. The two metaphors recur in the text almost interchangeably, though they do not quite converge. On the one hand there is too much seeing, too much wakefulness, which must be countered by a closing of the eye—of a necessary blindness—on the other hand there is the inability to digest, to incorporate, to make the other into oneself. What unites them is the image of a body exposed to what it cannot handle, and which becomes an excessive burden. The staring gaze and the deficient stomach are here the two sides of a historical sense which in its ultimate and excessive form damages life.

Life is potentially threatened by its historical sense. This is the key thought throughout this meditation. Life is harmed by an excess of memory of the past. But what is life, in that it can be harmed? And is that which harms life not also life? Can it be something different from life? Are history and the historical sense something which comes to life from the outside? These questions are of decisive importance for understanding Nietzsche’s whole philosophical orientation. We cannot hope to address the full scope of these questions here, but only to indicate a few lines of inquiry. Throughout this text Nietzsche will return to a notion of force, of *Kraft*, by means of which life can and must maintain itself in relation to the past. Sometimes this force is credited with male powers, with potency, more explicitly masculinity, *Männlichkeit*. This force is also what secures for itself a *health*, which is sometimes equated to a natural, and at times a more specifically human, feature. The ability to experience unhistorically, in other words to close one’s eyes to history and to live and act in the moment, is at one point said to enable something “right, healthy and great, something
truly human” (KSA 1: 252). In several of these epithets a promise is held out of a restored natural humanity in which the threats and dangers of a degenerated form of life are overcome. At times it can indeed seem as if Nietzsche is portraying history and historical consciousness as such as something unnatural, while life stands for that which is healthy and sound nature. Life would then be separated from historical awareness. But in most passages it becomes clear that this force is not something which life mobilizes against history, but is instead a particular historical force within life itself. He speaks of the “plastic force” (251) by means of which a people and a culture can integrate and transform the foreign and the past. He speaks of what life “masters” (bezwingt, 251) and of the force needed to use (gebrauchen) the past in order to make (machen) for itself a future (253). The general principle for this domination and mastery is that everything living needs a “horizon” (Horizont), in other words a limit. It has to contain itself within a sphere that can be surveyed.

In all of these remarks life is the agent choosing and establishing its own limits of awareness and action, handling what is external to itself. Yet, from Nietzsche’s own account it becomes clear that we must see the danger as something which comes from within life itself. The historicity of life is given from the start. It marks an unsurpassable predicament. Nietzsche does not express it in exactly these terms, but it is a way of interpreting the meaning of the horizon. Life is a being with a horizon: it occupies a finite openness, what Heidegger would later call a disclosure, an Erschlossenheit. And it is within this space, this open space that it must learn to act. The threat of excessive historical awareness is not external to this life; it is part of the unstable horizon which constitutes its being. The truth of this horizon is that it can collapse or disintegrate. The point then is not that there is a natural, healthy life, somehow beyond and independent of history and memory, but rather that there is, in principle, a means of occupying this openness which constitutes our being in a way that could be described as “natural,” alternately as “healthy,” or simply “human.” At this point we can begin to see how closely the argument anticipates Heidegger’s subsequent exposition of how Dasein can live its own historicity in either an inauthentic or an authentic form.

In order to motivate the distinction suggested by Nietzsche between a healthy and an unhealthy historicity, one would need first to specify the general conditions under which history is manifested in the course
of life. In this respect as well, Nietzsche’s analysis can be read as a forerunner to Heidegger, as it takes the everydayness of historical existence as its theme, in its description of the “use” of history. For beyond its utilitarian, and somewhat subjectivist, vocabulary, we could read it as the phenomenological description of the neutral space in which history becomes manifest in the course of ordinary life.

In sections 2 and 3 of the essay Nietzsche presents the famous triad of the monumental, the antiquarian and the critical. These are connected to three modes of life, as acting and striving (the monumental), as preserving and admiring (antiquarian), and as suffering and being in need of liberation (critical). I need not rehearse the content of this analysis, to which I also referred briefly above, since it is surely the most well known aspect of the text. But a few general remarks on the significance of this analysis is in order. The ambition behind it is not to judge or evaluate these forms of historiography relative to one other, but to set up a typology of attitudes, which summarizes how history becomes activated and cultivated by individuals, and within cultures as a whole. Primarily it is a neutral structural description of how the historicity of life brings itself to a more and less conceptual and articulate level. On the face of it this neutrality is also a neutrality with regard to truth and falsity. Nietzsche’s point is that life will create for itself the past as a monument, as an ideal, in order to act, or rather as a part of its action; that it will create for itself the past as something in need of preservation, in the course of loyally maintaining its current form; and that when its conditions become unbearable and it turns against the powers of the present to create a change, this will go hand in hand with a critical account and evaluation of how the history of this present situation has been written up till now. The past is received, oriented, and indeed even manifested as such, from the future in which life opens itself to that which it can take over. This is also, we will recall, how the ecstatic unity of temporality and historicity is formulated by Heidegger in SZ, in an analysis which by other and somewhat more formalized conceptual means continues in the direction of Nietzsche’s account.

In a recent essay on the Second Meditation, Mats Persson has argued that we should see what Nietzsche is doing here as an attempt to replace the modern conception of history as science with the ancient model where history was primarily seen as a magistra vitae, as a
source of examples for life to orient itself according to.\textsuperscript{14} This is true as a general remark on Nietzsche as a philosopher of history. But it fails to recognize the specificity of the reflective position with regard to the problem of history as such which Nietzsche, in an unprecedented manner, establishes. Whereas it is true that Nietzsche, long before Gadamer, sees the limits of the modern historical consciousness and the presumption that there could be a purely scientific attitude to the past, and also that there is a necessary applicative element in all historiography, his solution is not simply to try to replace one mode of historical study with another, and to return us to an ancient practice of historiography. His genuine, and in a sense unsurpassed contribution, consists instead in having raised the question of the historical as such, what it means for man to have a history, and the forms in which a historical horizon is constituted. If we read him as wanting primarily to establish once again the role of history as useful example for the present, we reduce him to one of the typological figures which he himself has established, namely as a representative of a specifically “monumental” history.

Instead we must take in clearly the insight and originality of this typology, as both a description of a general space of historiography, but also and secondly as an attempt to specify what we with Heidegger could speak of as fallen or inauthentic varieties of these three general practices, which in Nietzsche’s terms constitute forms of abuse, or disadvantage, Nachteil. Heidegger would not speak of this distinction in terms of use or abuse. Instead he would interpret it in terms of ways of relating to time, and to the future. But this too is anticipated in Nietzsche’s analysis, for the futural horizon is what defines action and a self-affirming life. All of the three modes have their deficient modes. Whereas the monumental can be of service to a life when it is seen as a motivating example, it can become a stifling classicism when held up as a stable measure and judgment of the present, by someone who does not create, and who simply rejects what is created in the present. When the antiquarian tendency deteriorates it leads to an endless gathering of everything. Finally, when the critical attitude loses its future-oriented purpose, it becomes instead a purely destructive enterprise. For it is impossible to specify the legitimate limit for a criticism of the past.

What is the place of modern historical consciousness, and historical studies, in this existential economy? It would be tempting to see it as an extension of the antiquarian impulse, the indistinguishable gathering of the past, as an unquestioned premise for human activity. But Nietzsche himself does not make that connection explicitly. Instead he points to the modern scientific project of historiography as an abnormality hitherto unknown in the form of a “new star” which changes the entire constellation with the demand that history become a science (271/23). The effect of this new enterprise is the creation of individuals in which the urge to gather the past has lost all contact with the creation of a “personality,” a being who drags along so much material from the past which it cannot digest, which makes it into an interior being, in neglect of its exterior. It chews and chews on that which it cannot integrate, and thus develops a new form of “barbarism.”

Who are these people? On one level we can perhaps say that we “know” what Nietzsche is referring to here, namely the young scholars grown old too early from too much undigested knowledge, the spirit of gravity which he had already met many examples of during his stay in the houses of learning. Weak personalities and characters, crippled by the burden of wanting to know, being expected to know, but with no guidance where to take it, the victims of a romantic humanism and its ideal of Bildung transformed into decadent duty and obligation. Here Nietzsche is speaking of his own world, the world of academia, its sacrifices and its tolls. But he is also speaking of a more general predicament, a transformation in the relation between man and his world, whereby the natural environment of his being, the finite horizon of his thinking and acting becomes somehow externalized, and made into the object of a distanced concern. Heidegger would speak of it as a forgetfulness of being. For Nietzsche, it is turned into a problem of balance and measure. The urge for knowledge is an excess, an Übermaass, without hunger, without need, in other words, a calling without a direction. A culture which has placed itself under this new constellation, this new scientific worldview—or which has fallen into it, for there is a sense of an inscrutable fatality at work here—has taken upon itself a new task which therefore also constitutes a danger. There are a number such dangers, listed by Nietzsche (279/28): the weakening of personality through an imbalance between inner and outer (in other words an excessive interiorization). Through this excess an epoch is led to the misguided conception of its own justness, a kind of self-righteousness.
which is furthermore said to destroy the natural instincts of individuals, preventing them from reaching “maturity.” Also it leads to a sense of being a latecomer and an epigone, which invites an ironic and ultimately cynical attitude.

These enumerated dangers constitute a general predicament. But they should be seen not as equally valid for everyone. On the contrary, the historical age makes it clear that the pressure of knowledge is something that must and can be mastered by the individual to different degrees. The excess to which he is referring is not measured by a common standard. For the point at which the excess of historical knowledge produces its effects is entirely dependent on a certain “strength” of the individual. As one of the principles set forth by the text we find the ominous statement: “only strong personalities can endure history, the weak are completely extinguished by it” (283/30). The latter are said to lack the ability to make themselves the measure of the past. Later on he will add to this that “it is only from the highest strength of the present that we may interpret the past” (293-4/37). This notion of strength, as a capacity to hold one’s position, to judge, and also to digest and internalize, could be pursued throughout Nietzsche’s remaining writings. Much of what he will say in the texts from the eighties concerning the notion of rank (Rang) can be referred back to this sense of holding sway in the encounter with the past. Reinterpreted in Heidegger’s terms, and in the terms of a hermeneutical phenomenology, this is the point made frequently concerning the condition of any hermeneutical situation: that it is only in conjunction with working out the matter of a question in and for the present, that the past can become available to us. Without a clear sense of the Sache, of that which we have before us, all attempts to gain access to the past will fall short of their original thrust, and become instead unknowingly epigonic.15

The way Nietzsche phrases this problem produces a tension in his whole argument, which is never fully brought up to the surface, but which the comparison to a destructive hermeneutics can make explicit. If the challenge to the present is described in the terms of manifesting force and insistence on the establishing of oneself as the measure, then

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15 This point is made forcefully already in the early text on Aristotle, which outlines the whole existential analytic, so to speak, in nuce, “Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles. Anzeige der hermeneutischen Situation,” Dilthey Jahrbuch 6 (1989), p. 237-269.
it becomes difficult to see how this differs from the aforementioned
danger of the historical age, namely the presumption that we are justi-
fied in taking ourselves as the standard in regard to the past. The same
point could be made even more clearly in regard to Nietzsche’s as-
seSSment of Hegel. If we follow him in the statement that the capacity
to prevail in a creative mode in history requires strength, force, and the
ability to digest, in short, if it requires a good stomach, should we then
not see precisely the Hegelian account of history as the ultimate tri-
umph of a Nietzschean pedagogy? Who could possible have a stronger
stomach than Hegel, who was able to incorporate and digest the entire
movement of known history, and indeed to make himself the supreme
judge of the past? And yet Hegel and Hegelianism is to Nietzsche at
this stage the very metonymy for the German cultural disaster. To be
sure, his reaction to Hegel, and also his knowledge of Hegel, was more
visceral than analytic, mediated through his early reading of Schopen-
hauer. Still his criticisms of Hegel, or rather of the effect of a certain
Hegelianism—which at certain points approaches that of Marx and
some of the left Hegelians—is an important part of his whole account.
For Nietzsche, Hegel becomes the philosopher of the end, of that last
stage. Hegel teaches us that we are latecomers having arrived after
history has passed, while at the same time raising these latecomers to
the status of the meaning of history. The attempt to lay the facticity of
history to rest within an account of the lawfulness and power of history
is also to bow to an authority. In this way, Nietzsche sees the effect of
Hegelianism as the cultivation of a presumptuous, self-satisfied, and
conservative climate in which nothing new is created.

It is interesting to note the example he chooses in order to display
the vanity of the rationalization of historical facticity that he wants to
challenge, namely the premature death of the artist Rafael. From the
“apologetics of the factical,” he says, we hear that he had already ar-
ticulated what was in him (310/48). In other words, that his death was
in line with the natural movement of history. It is this rationalization of
the brute loss of something promising and beautiful that he wants to
contest. So from this example it becomes clear that the force called for
to maintain oneself as the judge and measure of history is not the force
to reshape history into an image suitable to the preferences of the pre-
sent, but rather the force to counter and receive it in its facticity, its
brutality, its senselessness, and to hold it before oneself in the maxi-
mum width of its horror. The predicament of modernity is that it is
both weighed down by an enormous and ever growing memory, which it believes itself to master, and that it fails to see that history can never be justified, and that all its losses can never be absolved or cancelled.

What then is the remedy to the overdose of memory? The question brings us back to the two concepts that were introduced initially, and to something like a conclusion. It brings us back to the unhistorical and the superhistorical. In the concluding pages of the essay Nietzsche repeatedly states that these two are the natural antidotes to the historical sickness of our age. But what are these antidotes? Here we need to push his own question and terminology a bit further than the text might admit. Health and disease, by dint of their metaphoric use in the text, appear as two substances that can be ordained and consumed, for the benefit of life. But their apparent simplicity should not fool us into thinking about them as if life had the possibility of escaping its historicity, from under or above, as if its historicity were a contingent condition. We have already seen how the unhistorical marks a process of limiting of historical consciousness. Yet, it should not be taken as a claim that man can cease to have a memory, that he could somehow become again solid nature, mending the rift within which his experience of the past is constituted. Instead it seems to mark the possibility to lay reflection and memory, temporarily, to rest, to bend away as it were from knowledge and to engage in action.

But what about the superhistorical attitude? What is this superhistorical gaze? When Nietzsche first introduces the concept, he refers to a statement by Niebuhr, the great contemporary German historian of antiquity, who used it to designate the position to which one would be elevated when seeing fully the contingent nature of the perspective from within which great historical events arise. What the superhistorical standpoint would have seen, from its superior point of observation, is the lack of rationality, reflection, and knowledge that has contributed to making the past as we know it. He would have seen the “blindness and injustice in the soul” of those who actually make history (254/12). Such a person, who can reflect freely on the facticity of the historical process, will no longer, Nietzsche says, aspire to contribute to history. He has become instead an impassionate eye. The superhistorical men, he writes, see the past and the present as essentially the same, as varieties of stable types, as “a static structure of unchanged value and eternally the same meaning” (256/13). He will not understand history as development, as change towards that which is better, as reconciliation
or redemption. He will hold history before himself as a turning crystal, to recall an image we find later in Ernst Jünger.

Who and what is this position, of only eye and vision, and no participation? In Nietzsche’s account it is both tempting and frightening— tempting, because it holds out the promise of a higher wisdom; frightening, because its consequence is nausea, and ultimately death. For a phenomenon fully explained, Nietzsche writes, laid out in all its causes and aspects, ceases to be a phenomenon that awakens any interest, it is for “him who has understood it dead” (257/14). From the superhistorical perspective action therefore becomes meaningless, for every action has already been constituted in the past. The vision of the superhistorical man thus comes near that of the Spinozist God, who has no interest, no investment, no particular hopes or aspirations in what it scrutinizes. For this reason his wisdom can not be lived and enacted, and in a finite body it will eventually only produce disgust and lethargy. “History as pure science and having become sovereign, would constitute a kind of final closing out of the accounts of life for mankind” (257/14).

Here philosophy stands at a crossroads: it has to split itself in two—literally, we could say, since Nietzsche suggests that the superhistorical perspective contains more wisdom, whereas we, wir he says, have more life, more passion, more will. Here sophia and philia fall apart. There is a sophia, which knows life so profoundly that it ceases to will life, and there is a philia which must accept its own relative blindness. Let us instead, Nietzsche writes, rejoice in our “unwisdom” from the bottom of our hearts. This rhetorical self-blinding, this strange castration in favor of life, holds a paradoxical position in the text. At the point where Nietzsche claims to shift from death-bound wisdom to living blindness, he moves instead to the discourse on the different forms in which history can be useful to life that was discussed above. But must we not conclude that this very analysis, this description of the various modes in which history is constituted from within the finite horizon of an acting, loving and hating, human being, is itself a piece of precisely such a wisdom? For the very attempt to address history, not as a specific history, but as the historical as such, as historicity and its types, is to place oneself for a moment above the fleeting, conflictual appropriations of the past. It is to place oneself at the supreme outpost, overlooking the very construction of the historical and its experience.
If we follow this reading we can say that in developing his analysis, Nietzsche has not turned his back on the superhistorical man, instead he has, in his own way, fulfilled his aspirations. But following his own analysis he has also anticipated the necessary destruction of that very gaze. For the philosophical attempt to grasp the historical as such is doomed to suffocate from its own nausea, it can only survive by closing its eye, and by stepping into the movement of its own happening, as a struggle with its specific, concrete past. Perhaps we could say that in this essay, for which he later had such a cold eye, he has also experienced the necessity of becoming the active interpreter of the past through the present and vice versa. And in affirming this need to enact and make history he has also stated, through his own example, that the truth of life is that it must affirm itself as living, and as living it can not have a full truth of itself.

We can recall here the remarkable scene in Zarathustra, when standing on the threshold of the “moment,”” overlooking history as one long repetitive stretch, the spirit of gravity echoes Zarathustra’s own words of the eternal recurrence. At this point he becomes ill with nausea and he falls to the ground. Later on, when he sees a little shepherd into whose mouth a snake has crawled, he finds himself screaming—as if from afar—“bite,” and the head of the snake is spit out, followed by Zarathustra’s laughter. At this point he is cured from his own nausea, having become one who has acted. This could be read as an allegory for the meaning of historicity as fate. For a human being to live is to have to exist, in the sense of having to act, to create passionately the space within which history becomes present as a limited horizon. It can aspire to a knowledge of this history as well as of the conditions of the historical as such. It can even aspire to rise to the position from which this whole spectacle of history appears before its eyes as one eternally resting circular figure. But at this point it also approaches a point where knowledge becomes dangerous to life itself. To live is to find a measure. Where is this measure? We can not know, and yet we must create it, constantly, seeing and closing our eyes, acting, in passion.

16 KSA 4: 200.
The Historicity of the Work of Art in Heidegger

Sven-Olov Wallenstein

The theme of historicity is central in Heidegger, and it traverses the whole of his work, from the early reflections on the concept of time, through the analysis of ecstatic-horizontal temporality in the ’20s, up to the expanded and reworked concept of history that appears after the “turning” and that guides the attempt to think being itself as history. And even in the final stages of the development of his thought, where the question of the Event of appropriation seems to imply that we in a certain way should “take leave” of the history of being and step out of the closure of metaphysics—“to leave metaphysics to itself”—the step must still be understood as historical through and through, since it is situated at the end of a tradition and forms its critical limit.

I will not attempt to trace this concept of historicity as such in Heidegger, which would be an immense task, but will rather focus on a more limited, though essential topic: the historicity of the work of art. By this I do not propose to undertake a Heideggeresque interpretation of art history, though this would no doubt be an interesting task—in particular the examination of whether the various conceptions of art and artistic practice that have been developed throughout Western art theory could be strictly mapped onto the “epochal” structure of metaphysics, as Heidegger appears to assume when he outlines a “destruction of the history of aesthetics” in the first volume of his Nietzsche, or whether we would have to address a much more many-layered and non-synchronous structure, which I believe to be the case, although this argument cannot be pursued here.

My question here, then, in relation to Heidegger, has to do with history as the element of truth: the element in which works of art acquire their meaning, on which they act, and on the basis of which they prepare us for other possible futures. I say “possible futures” with good
reason, for Heidegger is often understood to be someone who, in spite of the radicality of his questioning of the history of aesthetics, in fact blocks the way to a positive reflection on modern art, and whose allegedly complete rejection of contemporaneity as a mere negative “oblivion” leaves him with little or even nothing productive to say about the condition of artistic modernity. Even though this case could be maintained on the basis of the surface level of some, though indeed not all, of his texts, I shall argue that there are other ways to pursue a Heideggerian mode of questioning, and that the productive link between Heidegger’s dismantling of metaphysics and contemporary art is to be found within the domain opened up by the question of the essence of technology. In saying this I would like to free us from a certain image of Heidegger, just as he himself attempted in the case of Nietzsche: to think through him, beyond, or even against him, but in order then to come back to him, though in a new and different way.

I. The (Greek) origin of the work of art: The origin and the repetition

In Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes, Heidegger sets for himself several tasks. The most important one can be heard in the title of the lecture, first held in 1935, that served as the basis for the essay, “Die Überwindung der Ästhetik in der Frage nach der Kunst.”1 Heidegger’s attempts to undo the edifice of aesthetics should not be construed as something negative, no more than should the earlier “destruction of ontology”; rather it seeks to free us up for a different experience, to allow us once again to approach art as a unique mode of disclosure situated beyond “aesthetics” in all of its classical and modern forms. The Postface clearly states what is at stake: Erlebnis, as the modern,

1 The lecture was then developed in three subsequent talks in 1936, which provided the tripartite structure of the text published in the first edition of Holzwege in 1950 (together with a Postface), to which an important “Zusatz” (written in 1956) was added in the Reclam edition from 1960. The lecture version from 1935 has now been published in a French-German edition as De l’origine de l’oeuvre de l’art. Première version inédite (1935); there is also an even earlier version from the same year, apparently never presented as a lecture, now published as “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes. Erste Ausarbeitung.” Here, I will make use of the version published in the Gesamtausgabe edition of Holzwege (GA 5) which also contains a selection of Heidegger’s own marginal notes; henceforth cited as UdK.
subjectivized and “aestheticized” form of the Greek *aisthesis*, is the
element in which art dies, although this process might require hundreds
of years in order to reach its completion. But, as Heidegger says in a
handwritten marginal note, this does not simply mean that art would be
over and done with, but rather that we have to attain a *new element* for
its becoming:

Dieser Satz besagt aber doch nicht, daß es mit der Kunst schlechthin zu
Ende sei. Das wäre nur der Fall, wenn das Erlebnis das Element
schlechthin für das Kunst bliebe. Aber es liegt alles daran, aus dem Er-
leben ins Da-Sein zu gelangen, und das sagt doch: ein ganz anderes
Element für das “Werden” der Kunst zu erlangen. (*UdK*, 67, marginal
note b)

In order to attain this element, a whole series of precautionary meas-
ures have to be taken. Already from the outset, as Heidegger seeks to
locate the very terrain of the question he is pursuing, he faces difficul-
ties bearing on the same kind of reductionism and philosophical “in-
scription” of art into an encyclopedic system that is at work in German
Idealism—a philosophy of art encountering or determining art as an
object or ontic region among others, and this is one of the problems
that will stay with Heidegger throughout the rest of his career. The
question of the origin of the work of art must, Heidegger says, inquire
after the “Herkunft ihres Wesens” (1), and not presuppose this essence
as already given in relation to modern subjectivity. Keeping in mind
the new notion of essence that becomes predominant in Heidegger’s
thinking after the turning, where essence is not to be understood as
generality, as *quidditas* in the sense of a general conceptual order sub-
suming particulars, but as a coming-to-presence in a temporal move-
ment, we see that this question does not bear upon a formal generality
valid for all times and in all contexts, but instead attempts to locate the
origin of the work of art in the movement of being’s historical unfold-
ing – indeed, as we shall see, as one of the primary manifestations of
the event of being.

Heidegger’s analysis first follows a movement back to the tradi-
tional notion of the artwork as a thing, as a unity in a manifold, as a
bearer of properties, etc., in order to show that it has to be thought in a
different way. In using the famous examples of the van Gogh painting
and the Greek temple, he wants to show that the work has to be under-
stood as the setting-up of a world (“Werksein heisst: eine Welt aufstel-
len,” 30) in opposition to an earth, thus reflecting the twofoldness (Zweifalt) of truth itself as a-letheia, concealing and unconcealing at once, which is then set (in)to the work as the “chasm” (Riss) between its material and its signifying dimension. I will however not follow the development of these concepts here, and I assume them in any event to be fairly well known, in order to move on to a passage at the end of the text.

The moment that interests me here is when historicity comes to the fore in the third section. Here Heidegger says that the sphere of the work extends out to include the “preservers” (die Bewahrenden) as necessary constituents in the founding of truth, which in its turn occurs above all through Poesy (Dichtung), which Heidegger in a transgeneric and non-literary manner claims to be the essence of art (although it remains closely connected to the sphere of language). This event of poesy is an instituting (Stiftung), and Heidegger proposes that we should see it as consisting of three dimensions (to which there also corresponds, he says, three respective modes of preserving, although this is never developed in the text): bestowing (Schenken), grounding (Gründen), and beginning (Anfangen). In its first aspect as bestowing, the work is an overflowing, and its “thrust” (Stoß) into the extraordinary cannot be deduced from any pre-existing rules or norms, but it in fact declares everything that is already there and instituted to be invalid. But, and this second aspect changes the direction of the first movement in a decisive way, the thrust does not send us out into a complete void, it is addressed to the preservers to come, and the openness it grants is that into which a Dasein (not in the sense of individual finite existence, but as a historical human collective, “ein geschichtliches Menschentum”) is already thrown, i.e., a world anchored in an earth that is specific for each people, that becomes its own earth (“Dies ist die Erde und für ein geschichtliches Volk seine Erde,” 63), and which becomes a “supporting ground” (tragende Grund) only through this poetizing projection. In this second dimension, as grounding, creating thus means drawing from a source (Schöpfen), as opposed to creating out of oneself as the subjective genius does.2 If the poetic project in the first sense seems to come from nothing, in this second sense

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2 This is in fact a rather reductive conception of the genius, which in its Kantian version only violates the rules because it is in contact with a more profound nature, for which it is the mouthpiece. On the relation between Heidegger and Kant on this point, see Jay Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, 99-108.
it remains essentially tied to a historical people: that which is thrown to the people, through the project, is “die vorenhaltene Bestimmung des geschichtlichen Daseins” (64).

If these first two aspects have an initiating quality (although the first more so than the second, as we have seen), then the third dimension, beginning, will allow us to grasp poesy’s function within history in another sense. Bestowing and grounding have “das Unvermittelte dessen, was wir ein Anfang nennen” (ibid), but this initiating, as a “leap” (Sprung), is however something which has been preparing itself for a long time, just as it also reaches into the future (as a “Vorsprung”) and has already gone beyond everything which is to come, even though this may remain concealed until the very end. Thus the beginning already contains the end within itself, as a fold of time and history, and as such the proper beginning has nothing to do with the “primitive,” which, Heidegger claims, always lacks a future because it is incapable of the bestowing and grounding leap.

In this three-fold temporal structure we can recognize important traits of the analytic of Dasein’s ecstatic temporality in Sein und Zeit, where past, present and future as objective-worldly temporal extensions are brought back into Dasein, which exists as “temporalization of temporality” (Zeitigung der Zeitlichkeit). As the origin of temporalization, Dasein is however neither conceived of as a theologically defined nunc stans located outside of time, nor as the transcendental subject acting as the founding kernel of time, but as a now always standing outside of itself, ec-statically opening up towards the future and allowing it to approach us on the basis of the presencing of the past, and only in this way being able to receive the present as the intersection of the other two modes.

Now, instituting qua basic trait of poesy, of Dichtung, is accredited with the same temporalizing function, and in this way it can assume the function of instituting history, not only in relation to a separate sphere of aesthetic values, art history, cultural memory, etc. (all of which for Heidegger belong to the “death of art” as it has been proclaimed in Hegel’s Aesthetics), but to beings as such: “Immer wenn das Seiende im Ganzen als das Seiende selbst die Gründung in die Offenheit verlangt, gelangt die Kunst in ihr geschichtliches Wesen als die Stiftung” (64). And, Heidegger adds in a gesture which on the one hand inscribes the whole of the artwork essay within a highly traditional discourse, but also fundamentally connects it to his project of
overcoming Western metaphysics in all of its ambivalence: “Sie [die Stiftung] geschah im Abendland erstmals im Griechentum” (ibid).

How should this traditionalism be understood? Does Heidegger claim that all art, if it is to remain within the sphere of poesy as instituting and putting truth (in)to (the) work, must necessarily remain within the Greek orbit? It is true that he, in his critical discussions of the traditional concepts of the thing, of the passage from truth as aletheia to truth as ortothes, of the genesis of aesthetics in Plato’s separation of the aistheton from the noeton, etc., attempts to bypass Greek metaphysics and all of its subsequent transformations in search of a non-metaphysical concept of art. But does he ever, on another level, question the metaphysics of Greece, the metaphysics of a certain and necessary origin which holds the historical schema together? The insistence of this figure in Heidegger’s discourse has been pointed out by many commentators.³ The poetic as well as philosophical founding of truth occurred in Greece in its originary form, so Heidegger seems to claim unequivocally, because this was the site for art’s and philosophy’s irruption into a finite historical world, and thus also for the setting of a measure for all of what is to come.

On the other hand, different epochs of art may open different spaces, and Heidegger mentions the medieval transformation of beings into ens creatum, which then becomes a mathematically calculable object at the beginning of modernity, and in all of them the openness of truth must be fixed in a corresponding Gestalt. Each of these epochs, he says, has its own form of unconcealment, and is a way in which an “essential world” breaks forth through a “Stoß” where history begins anew or takes a new turn. But even though these remarks endow art with a certain autonomy with respect to the Greek founding moment, at the next level they re-inscribe it even more forcefully into the sending of being, since the “shapes” produced by art only become possible within an openness granted by the history of being, which appears to be Greek through and through.

It should be noted that this Grecocentric claim could, at least in some respects, be read as a conditioned one. The suggestion that the instituting event occurred in Greece, in, with respect to, the Western

world, could be taken as a sign of reserve, although Heidegger does not in this context consider any other possible world, except the “primitive,” which he rejects as devoid of future, and thus outside of the anfängliche historical project of poesy. Does this mean that it could not occur once more, somewhere else? For instance, in a modernity, or even post-modernity, which would no longer, as a finite historical project, be essentially determined by the Greek beginning, but rather would have to come to terms with a different type of finitude for which the irreducible multiplicity and plurality of origins, and not the twofoldness, no matter how abyssal, of the origin, would be that which is decisive? Even though elements for such a thought of finitude may be unearthed in Heidegger’s writings, for instance in his occasional remarks on the possible dialog between the Eastern and the Western world, the proximity he establishes between the history of metaphysics and the history of art as a sequence of Gestalten, and the position accorded to the instituting, which already reaches all the way to the end, seem to imply that the new thrusts can occur only to the extent that they preserve a continuity with the initial Greek instituting, which in this sense retains a supra-historical value. Poesy is a radical founding of history; it bestows, grounds and begins anew, but always on the basis of the Greek Anfang. Greece is the proper beginning, and as such it will always be “ahead” of us.

The traditionalism of this gesture is evident, as is its background in the tradition of German Idealism, although the image of Greece produced in Heidegger’s writings will be different, more conflictual, due to his view of Greece as already marked by the retreat from and obliviousness to the truth of being, an un concealment and a forgetfulness from which we can never awake, but to which we can only become attentive. On the one hand, Heidegger places himself in a basically Hegelian position, which conceives of history as a unitary space founded by a first, Greek presentation, that eventually comes back to us as a fulfillment at the other end of the span of the tradition. On the other hand, the important difference is that Heidegger does not think that art in any simple sense could be sublated into philosophical and conceptual thought, and that philosophy will not necessarily have the last word (above all since it did not have the first word, whose disclo sive power unfolded without there being such a discourse as “philosophy” in the sense handed down in the Platonic tradition). For Hegel, if the end is already present in the beginning, this means that the begin-
ning is something abstract and unmediated, the simple presentation of being in the mode of a “not yet,” i.e., not yet mediated through consciousness; for Heidegger, the beginning as *An-fang* has already reached into the farthest future, since the fullness of its unthought opens the space for all further determinations, although without predetermining them in any teleological fashion, which of course leaves the sense of the “farthest future” highly indeterminate.

The question of the origin of the work of art, then, finds itself, at the very moment when an answer seems to take shape, struck by a profound ambiguity. We have seen that art is the instituting preservation of the truth of beings in the work, and the essence of art is Poesy, a poetizing which brings together both creators and preservers on the basis of a thrust that opens a future. “Die Kunst läßt die Wahrheit entspringen” (65), Heidegger says, and this is the fundamental sense that Heidegger wants to hear in the word “origin” (*Ursprung*): to let something spring forth, as an originary leap (*Ur-Sprung*) in which truth becomes historical and grounds the historical Dasein of a people. The measure of this origin was however first established in Greece, and all subsequent origins will somehow have to measure up to this first event. But, he adds, the question concerning the essence of art was not raised in order to elucidate the meaning in art in the bygone days of ancient Greece, in fact it was not a historiographical question at all, but resulted from a *contemporary* need. Can art, for us, once more become an *origin* in the sense established above, can it become a “Vorsprung” reaching into the future, or is it condemned to remain a “Nachsprung,” i.e. a merely intra-cultural phenomenon? In short: does Hegel’s verdict on the end of art in modernity, its sublation into the retrospective gaze of aesthetics as a philosophy of the history of art, for which this history is necessarily closed, still stand?

Now, in determining the origin of art as this originary leap, at once drawing on a Greek source but also requiring that it somehow be binding for our future, for our historical Dasein, Heidegger seems to place modern art in the face of an impossible challenge: either it should return to the Greek instituting moment, which is impossible, as Heidegger himself would be the first to point out—the world of the temple has crumbled, the flight of the Gods is irrevocable—or it should assume its modern destiny, which could mean simply a state of melancholy, a kind of work of mourning in relation to the past. But perhaps there is another way to be Greek, to be different from the Greeks while yet
returning to their heritage—for the beginning, the An-fang, remained hidden from its moment of inception, which also means for the Greeks themselves. Perhaps, then, it is only at the end that there is a possibility to recover the possibilities of the Anfang, to return to it in a way which is “more anfänglich”, i.e. where the Beginn (the factual inception of metaphysics and art somewhere, sometime, in the Mediterranean world) starts to separate itself from the An-fang, as that which always comes towards us from the future, and where the Greek oblivion of being shows itself a positive source: “Der Beginn des Abendländischen Denkens ist nicht das Gleiche wie der Anfang. Wohl aber ist er die Verhüllung des Anfangs und sogar eine unumgängliche. Wenn es sich so verhält, dann zeigt sich die Vergessenheit in einem anderen Licht. Der Anfang verbirgt sich im Beginn.”

II. The essence of technology: framing as the final form of metaphysics

The question of whether Heidegger’s meditations on the origin of art ensnare us in a historical loop, condemning us to the repetition (in an almost Freudian sense) of a lost origin, must therefore bear just as much on the determination of the end of metaphysics, and on the status of contemporaneity. I think that the way to address this question, if we want to remain within the orbit of Heidegger’s thinking (while still, as I would like to do here, also maintain a certain distance from it) has to pass through the question of the essence of technology, which may allow us to understand how modern art, precisely in its irrevocable modernity, can provide a thrust. And this, I will argue, it can in do in what from a Heideggerian vantage point would appear precisely as its destructive and nihilistic qualities, in its very dismantling of the “aura” and everything that the Heidegger of the 1930s claims to be the essence of “die grosse Kunst.”

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4 Was heißt Denken?, 98.
5 The proximity in time between Heidegger’s essay and Benjamin’s essay on “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” from 1935 is surely no coincidence. Both of these diagnoses take into account the predominance of Erlebnis, and a destructuring of the subject that must be interpreted as a moment of truth, and as a form of attunement to technology. Although they, at least on surface, draw diametrically opposed conclusions from this predicament. For a discussion of the relation between Benjamin and Heidegger on this point, cf. Willem van Reijen, Der Schwarz-
In order to substantiate the claim that the step beyond the closure of metaphysics in Heidegger’s later work is fundamentally related to technology (*Technik*), we must first examine what he means by the essence of technology, and then why this essence would be intimately intertwined with the “essential provenance” of the work of art, i.e., its coming to presence in and as history. In “Die Frage nach der Technik” (1953) Heidegger attempts to show that this essence is itself nothing “technological” (*technologisch*) in the sense of being connected to certain types of industrial production, scientific theories, equipment, machinery, etc.—to use the terminology from *Sein und Zeit*, we might say that it cannot be reduced to any “ontic” model—but has to do with the sending of being itself. This means that we should neither embrace nor reject technology, and above all, that we should not understand it as something neutral that could be used for any purpose of our own choosing. The interpretation of technology in terms of instrumentality or as a tool for human action is insufficient, above all because it rests on an anthropological metaphysics—man as the master and technology as a mere tool. If on the other hand, Heidegger claims, we attempt to understand it as a sending of being (*Geschick des Seins*), i.e., as a way in which the history of metaphysics comes to an end, exhausting all of its possibilities in a movement of completion and saturation, then we may be able to grasp how technology extends back into the root system of the Greek *techne*, and in this sense constitutes a radical form of “disclosing” (*Entbergen*). If we understand technology in this way, we can see that it too belongs to the sphere of truth as *a-letheia*—even

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6 For a brief but lucid discussion of the distinction between technics and technology, cf. Jean-Yves Goffi, *Philosophie de la technique*. The normal acceptance of “technology” would, as Goffi points out, be “technics” (in the sense of practical knowledge inherent in all human activities) as informed and systematized by modern science, which is not wholly foreign to Heidegger’s use of the word *Technik*, although they are certainly not the same. The word *Technologie* is in fact seldom used in German, where both aspects seem to be merged in *Technik*; when it is used, however, it often refers to concrete material artifacts (machines, equipment, etc.), as is the case when Heidegger occasionally uses the term. In fact, Heidegger’s conception of *Technik* cuts transversally through the distinction technics-technology, since he reconstructs it on the basis of the Greek *techne* which, as we shall see, for him is neither theory nor practice, nor is it determined as the interplay of scientific generality and practical everydayness, but is conceived of as a, or even the, fundamental way of “letting-presence,” of allowing-to-appear. For the sake of consistency, I will translate *Technik* as “technology” throughout, although the reader should be aware of the wider sphere of this concept’s associations.
though this structure of truth and disclosure has indeed changed fundamentally within modernity, since it is no longer a receiving and allowing to come forth, as in the Greek constellation of physis, techne, and poiesis, but rather an active, volitional positing and challenging, a whole complex of operations that Heidegger will thematize under the concept of Ge-stell (which I here will translate as “Framing”).

Even if modern technology only contains a faint echo of the originary Greek conception, it is essential that this thread leading back to the origin, no matter how thin the thread may seem to us today, never gets completely cut off. In fact, the intention of Heidegger’s meditations seems to be to re-establish this connection, and to do so in order to provide a different perspective on our modernity and our technological world. And that this connection will be mediated through the concept of “art” – although now understood as pointing towards the sphere of the Greek term techne, rather than the “aesthetic” system of modern fine arts – gives an indication of the central function of art (although in a way that severs the term from its current acceptance) in the turning away from metaphysics. It will be through a transformed idea of art, or rather a “constellation of truth” (Konstellation der Wahrheit) bringing together art and technology as two modern descendants of the Greek techne, that Heidegger will attempt to open up a free relation to the essence of technology and, as a result of this, will also attempt to determine the essence of thinking in a new way, as something attuned to technology, to its essence, although not in the sense of being held captive or overwhelmed by it. The way beyond aesthetics into art leads through the essence of technology, the way beyond technology into its essence leads through art, and this constellation can only be grasped if we are attentive to the hidden dimension of techne that holds sway in both of them.

Just as in the case of Poesy, the question of essence of technology in the 1953 essay once more opens by leading us through language. What do we hear in the word “technology,” Heidegger asks, what reverberations are there in Technik? Wouldn’t the normal approach, the “natural attitude” as it were, be to understand it as an instrument, as a tool? And if this is so, in what way does this help us understand the essence of technology?

First of all, Heidegger claims, as we have already noted, that the essence of technology is not itself something technical. Other types of

7 “Die Frage nach der Technik”, 35. Henceforth quoted in the text as FT.
understanding—as means to an end, or as a human doing (Tun)—are also rejected as too instrumental and anthropological. These determinations could indeed be “correct” (Richtig), but they do not reach the “true,” which is required if we are to have a free relation to the essence of technology.

This correctness however still provides us with a guiding thread for our questioning, and we have to probe deeper into the means-ends relationship, if we are to proceed from the merely correct to the true as disclosure: “Nur dort, wo solches Enthüllen geschieht, ereignet sich das Wahre” (7). We have to seek the true through the correct, and thus we must start with instrumentality. Instrumentality, Heidegger continues, is the sphere where causes and effects unfold, and where things are done in order to achieve something. But what, then, is a cause? Heidegger delineates the classical Aristotelian fourfold schemata: causa materialis, formalis, finalis, and efficiens. But why these four types of causes, and what is meant here by “cause”? For us moderns, the efficient cause has become predominant, and we are barely able to perceive the other three aspects as equiprimordial modes of causality, Heidegger notes, and especially so in the case of the final cause. The Aristotelian conception is essentially different, however: it has nothing to do with “bringing about” (bewirken), and in order to avoid such connotations Heidegger translates the Greek word for cause, aition, as “Verschulden.” The efficient cause has no priority here, and Heidegger gives the example of the bringing forth of a silver bowl intended for ritual use in the temple: the silversmith does not produce or make it “als den Effekt eines Machens” (9), he gathers together the three other modes of bringing-forth, the hyle, the eidos, and the telos, in a bringing-to-appear (zum Vorschein bringen), which is the movement of apophainestai. The silversmith is not a maker or a producer, but someone who gathers together and allows to appear, and does this in a mode of “acting” which cannot be circumscribed by the distinction between the active and the passive voice. This allowing the not-yet-present to presence is traversed by a “Bringen,” Heidegger says, and he cites a phrase from Plato’s Symposium, which introduces us to the important concept of poiesis, which is determined as that kind of aition which brings out of non-being and into being (he gar toi ek tou me ontos eis to on ionti hotooun aitia pasa esti poiesis).8

8 Symposium, 205 b.
Poiesis, Heidegger notes, does not just include artisanal or artistic productions, but it also refers to the productive dimension of physis. The difference between them is that the products of physis come to presence out of themselves, whereas the artisanal product based on poiesis requires another, for instance the silversmith, in order to appear. Both of them however bring the not-yet-being into unconcealment, and thus they both belong to aletheia, to truth as disclosure and presencing. The decisive conception here seems to be that the movement of poiesis is something which the “maker” receives, and to bring about means to guide or allow to appear rather than to put a subjective faculty into play: poiesis means to acknowledge what is already there, to draw out of physis in a collaborative way rather than as a subjective imposition.

Now, all bringing-forth is rooted in unconcealment (Unverborgenheit), which also includes the structure of means and ends—instrumentality in the wide sense of the term—as the founding trait of technology. The questioning of instrumentality thus leads us back to unconcealment, and all pro-ductive bringing about has this as its precondition. Technology cannot be exhausted by the idea of means and ends, however, but has to be understood as a mode of unconcealment, and thus of aletheia, even though a highly limited and reductive one if we compare it to its Greek counterpart.

But if our modern concept of technology derives from the Greek techne, this historical link does not lead us back exclusively to artisanal knowledge, but just as much to the sphere of what has for us become the “fine arts,” which means that techne is itself poietical. And furthermore, techne does not only exceed practical knowledge, but as we have seen also contains a moment of knowing, of “making true” (aletheuein), and the decisive is in fact not the practical aspect of producing, but rather disclosing. “Technik,” Heidegger summarizes this phase of his argument, “ist eine Weise des Entbergens. Die Technik west in dem Bereich, wo Entbergen und Unverborgenheit, wo aletheia, wo Wahrheit geschieht” (13).

But in what sense could this apply to modern technology, above all since it has acquired a wholly new relation to the exact natural sciences as the rational substructure of modernity? It is still an unconcealing, although its structure has changed, so that it is no longer a poietical activity as for the Greeks, but a “challenging forth” (Herausfordern) that no longer acts in accordance with nature, no longer completes and
fulfils the movement of *physis*, but demands of it that it should provide energy that can be stored, transmitted, and circulated. The old windmill is subjected to the vagaries of the wind and climate, whereas the modern power plant lays claim to a mastery over nature. Our activities “pose” (*stellen*) nature, they draw everything into a productive cycle, so that all moments eventually form an interlocking whole, and in this sense always aim towards a totality, to a “technical absolute” that no longer recognized an outside, and where the artifice no longer forms the Other of nature, but wants to become its own ground.9

Heidegger’s most famous example of this is the river Rhine, which now appears as a supplier of electric energy. The power plant is not built into the stream like the old wooden bridge, on the contrary the stream is now “built into” (*verbaut in*) the power plant. Something “uncanny” (*Ungeheure*) holds sway here, Heidegger says, and this we will note if we compare the Rhine as “verbaut in das *Kraftwerk*,” and as “gesagt aus dem *Kunstwerk* der gleichnamigen Hymne Hölderlins” (15), and in this passage between the different senses of the work, Heidegger also prepares the constellation of art and the essence of technology that will be the essay’s final proposal.

All of these operations are still to be understood as modes of disclosing, although they now come together in a different way: the cycle of production finds its overriding determination in “steering” (*Steuerung*) and “securing” (*Sicherung*), i.e., in a cybernetic structure. Here the structure of disclosure changes: everything becomes a “standing reserve” (*Bestand*) for something else, and thus it can no longer be understood even as “ob-ject,” i.e., something which stands in a determined there, in a firm over-against, but only as a fluid and infinitely malleable possibility of *productive transformation*. It should be noted that Heidegger’s view of technology in this respect does not amount to a simplistic theory of the “objectification” of nature, or to a critique of the subject-object dichotomy in the name of some pre-rational unity, as is occasionally presumed, and finally, it should not be interpreted as a pure and simple *rejection* of “instrumental reason”: the structure of objectality has already been dissolved and overcome in Framing, just as that of sub-jectality (*Subjektität*, a term that Heidegger uses in order to distinguish sub-jectality in general from subjectivity, *Subjektivität*, as consciousness), and instrumentality is only the superficial aspect of a

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9 For a discussion of the idea of a “technical absolute” in this sense, see Jean-Philippe Milet, *L’absolu technique*. 
more profound structure that demands to be deciphered. All of these terms have become part of the standing reserve, whose operation is precisely to organize, mobilize, and displace, to render transformable and communicable, to initialize cycles of production and reproduction that no longer acknowledge any outside, and in this sense can be called “ab-solute,” ab-solved from all externality. Extrapolating somewhat from Heidegger’s suggestions, we might say that the attempt to make fixed oppositions fluid, the drive towards mutual interpenetration of opposites and their subsumption into a neutral third term, is what propels technology forward (and our current fetishism of “information” surely inscribes itself in this lineage). This is why technology cannot be understood on the basis of machines or mere technical innovations. Hegel’s definition of the machine as an “autonomous tool” is insufficient, Heidegger claims, since it is based on artisanal production; from the point of view of the standing reserve, the machine is wholly heteronomous, since it is what it is only as a function of the reserve.

The agent of this positioning cannot be man as a subject: man has never had aletheia at his disposition, and this applies just as much to modern technological disclosure as to the Greek unfolding of being. Man is himself drawn into the standing reserve, although not merely as a passive respondent, but as the one who is challenged to perform the operations of the reserve, and to carry out its specific mode of unconcealment, and thus he is never just merely one part among others (tools, machines, raw materials, communications systems, etc.) of the reserve. Unconcealment occurs as a sending, but only to the extent that man responds to it—if it is true that technology is not just a human undertaking, not an instrument for the completion of our projects, then we must add that neither is it simply without man: it gathers man as the

10 Contemporary theories of information technology, networks, “immaterials” (Lytard), etc., occasionally revive these Heideggerian themes. I borrow this idea of technology as driven forth by the emphasis on mediation and the insertion of a third from Lyotard; cf. his essay “L’inhumain,” in L’inhumain. Causeries sur le temps.

11 Heidegger does not give any precise reference to Hegel, but he is presumably referring to the discussion of how the division of labor renders work more efficient, but also more mechanical and capable of becoming externalized. In the Enzyklopädie, Hegel writes: “Die damit zugleich abstraktere Arbeit führt einerseits durch ihre Einformigkeit auf die Leichtigkeit der Arbeit und die Vermehrung der Produktion, anderseits zur Beschränkung auf eine Geschicklichkeit und damit zur unbedingten Abhängigkeit von dem gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhange. Die Geschicklichkeit selbst wird auf diese Weise mechanisch und bekommt die Fähigkeit, an die Stelle menschlicher Arbeit die Maschine treten zu lassen” (§ 526).
“Besteller” into what Heidegger calls the *Ge-stell*. *Ge-stell*, “Framing,” is Heidegger’s term for that kind of unconcealment which permeates the essence of technology, although it is itself nothing technical, not any kind of machinery or specific technology. *Framing is the name for that which gathers together all the different moments of technology as the unfolding of the metaphysical determination of being into its final and most ambiguous moment.*

However, Heidegger adds, in order to see this gathering-together as a figure of a radical possibility it is also necessary that we in this *Stellen* recognize an echo of the *Her- and Darstellen* that formed part of the Greek *poiesis*, otherwise we would lose sight of the fact that they both belong to *aletheia*. In the modern challenging-forth there is still a trace—which as such is not just a remnant, a reminder of what once was, but also an inverted trace of *what is to come*, approaching us from the future—of another possible relation to being, and the meditation on the essence of technology demands of us that we follow this trace in order to re-establish a connection to what on a more straightforward historiographical level would seem irretrievably lost. The setting up of a statue in the Greek temple and the modern *Stellen* “sind zwar grund-verschieden, und bleiben doch im Wesen verwandt” (20), and this kinship is what opens the possibility of thinking their articulation in a way that directs us beyond the surface of technology (machinery and technical appliances, instrumentality and efficaciousness) and into its essence, as the ultimate presencing of being within the order of epochality and withdrawal. To experience the co-implication of the Greek *techne* and Framing is a necessary precondition for experiencing the end of metaphysics as the *end*, as the final gathering of all the different sendings (“eschatology,” as Heidegger says in another passage),12 where all possibilities are brought together, and as it were *exhausted from within*, and thus making another relation to this history possible.

As early as *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerk*, Heidegger makes use, as if *en passant*, of the notion of *Ge-stell* in connection with the *Gestalt* of the work of art. The question then arises as to how we are to under-

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12 “Die Geschichte des Seins versammelt sich in diesen Abschied. Die Versammlung in diesen Abschied als die Versammlung (logos) des Äussersten (eschaton) seines bisherigen Wesens ist die Eschatologie des Seins. Das Sein selbst als geschickliches in sich eschatologisch.” (“Der Spruch des Anaximander,” *Holzwege*, GA 5, 327). We should however not understand eschatology in the theological sense, Heidegger adds, but rather “in dem entsprechenden Sinne, in dem seinsgeschichtlich die Phänomenologie des Geistes zu denken ist.” (*ibid*)
stand the nucleus *Stellen*, and the way it branches out into a whole series of compound expressions which remain operative throughout the artwork essay: *Her-stellen, Auf-stellen, Zurück-stellen, or Setzen*, as in truth putting itself (in)to (the) work (*Ins-Werk-Setzen*)—especially given that the everyday and ontic meanings of these expressions are insufficient. We should understand them on the basis of the Greek notion of *thesis*, Heidegger suggests, as modes of “Aufstellung im Unverborgenen.” (*UdK*, 48) In the Addendum, he returns once more to this problem, and begins by noting an implicit contradiction between the claim that art would be both a “Feststellen” of truth (51) and “Geschehenlassen der Ankunft von Wahrheit” (59): the first statement implies a willing, an acting which codifies, inscribes, and renders permanent; the second is a letting, and in this sense “ein Sichfügen und so gleichsam ein Nichtwollen, das Freigibt” (70). This contradiction is dissolved, he claims, if we grasp that *thesis* neither means to place something before oneself in terms of an egologically defined subject-object positionality (which, we may note, is the basic sense in phenomenology and its “thetic” acts of consciousness), nor the positioning within consciousness as thesis, antithesis, and synthesis that we find in German Idealism from Kant to Hegel. *Thesis* in the sense of “setting” (up and forth) should not be conceived of as a positioning emanating from subjectivity, as the concept of *Setzung* had been formed within the metaphysics of subjectivity in German Idealism, but as a letting-presence that cannot be reduced to the subjective modes of either activity or passivity.

This terminology might seem surprising given the status accorded to the terms in the later works, and not only the role of *Ge-stell* in the analysis of technology, but also that of *Gestalt* in the discussion of nihilism in *Zur Seinsfrage*, where they are explicitly connected to the Platonic theme of the *typos* from *Timaeus*, as modes of metaphysical “typing” or inscription of eidetic forms. This connection is important, however, and this for two reasons that inform Heidegger’s implicit rereading of his work: (a) it indicates the extent to which a heroic and voluntaristic terminology is essential in the artwork essay, although in

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a form removed from the sphere of subjectivity and transposed to another level, which in the later phase could be understood as a refiguration of Framing; (b) it opens a passage from the subsequent writings to the earlier ones, so that the later essay on technology might implicitly look back to the earlier use of *Ge-stell*, and be construed as a kind of implicit self-criticism in order to rethink the respective essences of art and technology as mutually intertwined. The work of art repeats the Greek notions of *thesis*, *poiesis*, etc., and does so in such a way that their original essence comes to shine forth beneath their modern, technological interpretation, both of which were still tangled together in *Der Ursprung*. The constellation of art as the saving force hidden within technology in the later texts is fundamentally dependent on this connection. Heidegger’s own commentaries in the Addendum (*UdK*, 72 f) are clear evidence of this (this text was written in 1956, three years after “Die Frage nach der Technik”), as well as the conclusion to the lecture on technology: “Weil das Wesen der Technik nichts Technisches ist, darum muß die wesentliche Besinnung auf die Technik und die entscheidende Auseinandersetzung mit ihr in einem Bereich geschehen, der seinerseits mit dem Wesen der Technik verwandt und anderseits von ihm doch grundverschieden ist. *Ein solcher Bereich ist die Kunst.*” (*FT*, 35, emphasis mine)

We noted earlier that man is neither a passive recipient nor the active “subject” of technology, but rather someone who is placed into Framing as the one summoned forth to undertake and carry out its implications: technology is neither independent of nor wholly dependent on man. For Heidegger, it is impossible for us simply to assume another stance or “attitude” towards Framing in retrospect, we can only change our relation to it to the extent that we are already inside of it, caught up in its way of presencing as that which is. We are, as Heidegger says, sent on a path, a trajectory, the “sending” of both *poiesis* and Framing as possibilities, and hence our freedom resides in our belonging to the sphere of the sending in a more intimate and thoughtful way, in becoming attentive to its essence as essencing, and not in a act of will or some type of volitional causality in relation to it. Just as with truth, freedom belongs to the free and the open, to the “gelichtete,” which in its turn is founded on the twofoldness of *a-letheia* as simultaneously concealing and un concealing. That which sets free always and necessarily has an opaque and hidden side: “Die Freiheit ist das lichtend Verbergende, in dessen Lichtung jener Schleier weht, der das
Wesende aller Wahrheit verhüllt und den Schleier als den verhüllenden erscheinen läßt. Die Freiheit ist der Bereich des Geschickes, das jeweils eine Entbergung auf ihren Weg bringt.” (25). The sending is in this sense nothing like an unavoidable destiny, rather it is an appeal to our freedom—we are claimed by the sending in such a way as to render a response possible. There are two possibilities lodged within this sending, Heidegger notes: the first being simply to fulfill the commanding call, the second to think through the sending so as to become aware of the fact that Framing is only one of several ways to think being, and that being’s disclosure both needs and uses man, in the double sense of “brauchen” that Heidegger plays upon in this context when he talks about “die gebrauchte Zugehörigkeit zum Entbergen” (26). 

This ambiguity turns every sending into a danger, or perhaps even into danger itself: in Framing we stand at the edge of an abyss where man might turn into a pure reserve, and where the memory of being is on the verge of becoming obliterated. This is the negative side of Framing, one that covers over the possibility of ek-sistence and has the effect of erasing the memory of poiesis in dissimulating its own character as a process of disclosing. But given the twofoldness in this utmost danger, we must be wary of demonizing technology, Heidegger cautions us, and instead we should meditate on the “secret of its essence” as simultaneously danger and promise, and he cites two lines from Hölderlin’s hymn Patmos: “Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das Rettende auch.”

For this protective dimension to be saved, we require the movement of a “memorial thinking” (Andenken) able to step back into the essence: from the instrumental to the causal, then to the sending of unconcealing, and finally to the “granting” of openness in the sending itself, which “uses” (braucht) man so that he may perform his part in unconcealing. The essence of technology must remain ambiguous, however, since it points to the “secret” of disclosure, to the twofoldness of truth. The two moments, Heidegger claims, are like two astral trajectories both nearing and withdrawing from each other, just as (aesthetic) art and (instrumental) technology must seem infinitely at odds

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14 For Heidegger’s understanding of “Brauch,” cf. above all “Der Spruch des Anaximander,” Holzwege, 362 ff, where the term is derived from Anaximander’s to chreon, normally translated as “necessity.”
and yet intimately intertwined at the line separating completed nihilism from the other beginning.

Thus there is a fundamental analogy between the dismantling of aesthetics, which was projected as early as the essay on the origin of the work of art, and the release of technology from the instrumentalist interpretation, in that they both point toward the constellation of truth: the closer we come to the essence of technology, Heidegger claims, the more enigmatic art becomes, and the only way to experience this constellation is to abide within the movement of questioning, which is “the piety of thought” (die Frömmigkeit des Denkens, 36).

It is on the basis of the unity of techne, which comprises both our (aesthetic, subjectivist) “art” and our (instrumentally and/or anthropologically interpreted) “technology,” that art may become a countermove to Framing—memorial thinking, in its retro-activating, de-sedimenting and archeologically reconstituting strategy, needs to find the common ground for that which in the conceptual diaspora of late modernity appears as free-floating concepts devoid of inner relations. And the inner relation between art and technology is essential for this move: rooted in techne, they have within post-Cartesian modernity come under the rule of instrumentality and aesthetics, which is reflected in the tension between the memory of the Greek thesis and the positional quality of the Stellen. Thinking through this constellation, understanding it as a sending, would then begin to open up a free relationship to their common history, and to the secret hidden in it.

In all of this, there is surely a certain proximity to a romantically tinted critique of technological modernity, but also an essential distance that needs to be measured. When Heidegger, in the seminar on “Zeit und Sein” (1962), talks of Framing as a “Janus-head,”15 the emphasis is on the constellation, on the duality of the figure and its capacity to form a passage: completed nihilism, where being appears as nothing, has to be traversed as the desert that it is, and the only way is forward, never back to any kind of lost origin. It is only when all the epochal transformations have been exhausted and we are faced with the final, utmost concealment of being that we are set free from the

metaphysical quest for foundations and security—when metaphysics deconstructs, as it were, its own authority by being fully realized. This aspect gets wholly lost if we interpret Heidegger’s thought as merely a critique of technology. As the descendant of Platonic eidetics, Cartesian subjectivity, and Nietzschean will to power, Framing is the (pen)ultimate and unavoidable way in which being yields itself up as thinkable, as the final horizon of thought within metaphysics. The way out of the reign of technicity cannot be to reject it, or to entertain Romantic fantasies about a world existing before “objectification,” but can only be a memorial thinking leading us into the essence of technology as coming to us from the future just as much as from the past: the sending of openness that is being’s unfolding emanates from early Greek thinking and reaches its final stage at the completion of modernity, but which then, as if in a strange fold in being and time, allows us to return to the beginning as an other or second beginning (andere Anfang), lodged within the first and yet needing to have passed through the epochal sequence in order to be given to thought.

III. Conclusion. Framing and modern art

The whole of Heidegger’s thinking on art can, and indeed has been, interpreted as a backward-looking romanticism, and some have claimed that he rejects any possibility for art to entertain any essential relation to truth in modernity. Otto Pöggeler, for instance, claims at one point that Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes makes any treatment of modern art impossible, and although Heidegger planned a sequel which was supposed to deal with the possibility of art in a technological world, this project failed to materialize since it was contrary to his own philosophical presuppositions. It is indeed true that Heidegger devotes little time to commenting on modern art, and when he does so, he seems to take a rather negative stance. The only modern work mentioned in Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes is van Gogh’s painting of a pair of peasant shoes, and even though it serves as the point of entry into an entire meditation, and in fact provides us with first insight into the complex of earth and world, there is no indication that Heidegger

16 Otto Pöggeler, Philosophie und Politik bei Heidegger, 157. In a later work, Bild und Technik, Pöggeler returns to this question in much more detail, drawing especially on Heidegger’s notes to Klee. I will return to Pöggeler’s arguments in another context.
would ascribe to it the same world-formative power that belongs to the
Greek temple or the cathedral in Bamberg.17 The modern work of art
seems hopelessly enclosed in the museum, in the critical edition, in
academic discourse, and as such its power is usurped on the one hand
by a culture of Erlebnisse, and on the other by a culture of learned
commentaries.

In a handwritten note to Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes (UdK, 67),
Heidegger asks whether modern art is able to step out of the sphere of
“Erlebnis,” or whether what we experience today is merely “das tech-
nologische des Schaffentriebes” and “das Wie des Machens,” which
contribute in the highest degree to rendering art even more subjectivist
and “Erlebnis”-oriented. The note then goes on to speak of the empti-
ness of “so-called informal art” (by which is probably meant postwar
abstract painting, l’art informel of the 1950s), and the verdict on mod-
ernism seems unequivocal.

But let’s take our cue from another passage, this time from Der Satz
vom Grund, in order to begin to assess these verdicts in another light.
Here Heidegger provides us with a rather different perspective, and
claims that abstract painting is in fact the only appropriate form of art
in a world dominated by technology: “Dass in einem solchen Zeitalter
die Kunst zur gegenstandslosen wird,” Heidegger writes, “bezeugt ihre
geschichtliche Rechtmässigkeit und dies vor allem dann, wenn die
genstlosen Kunst selber begreift, dass ihre Hervorbringungen
keine Werke mehr sein können, sondern etwas, wofür das gemässe
Wort fehlt” (66). Just as technology exceeds the duality of object-
substance and subject-consciousness, absorbing both of them into the
transformational and positional matrix of Framing, art must become
non-objective, or “free of objects” (gegenstandslos) since it is precisely
not a question of opposing the subjective and the objective. Emmanuel
Martineau has proposed this type of reading, although without refer-
ing specifically to the analysis of technology, but rather emphasizing
the affinity between Heidegger’s early conception of “das Nichts” and

17 It is thus surely no coincidence that the exemplary works selected by Heidegger are,
not only architectural, but also religious buildings, and his motivation for this choice
seems to be that it ties together a whole series of trans-aesthetic dimensions whose
nucleus is constituted by an experience of the holy. The discussion of architecture,
building and space constitutes an important thread running throughout Heidegger’s
oeuvre; for a brief discussion, see my “Three Ways of Retrieving Heidegger: The Case
of Architecture.”
the non-objectivity of suprematism in Malevich. Extending Martineau’s remarks in a somewhat different direction so as to connect them to my topic here, I would also locate an important affinity in how the painter and the thinker each in their respective ways determine the connection between the non-objectivity of art and technology.

Now, there is an important sense in which this “nothingness” could be taken as the proper truth of modern art: non-objectivity, resistance to, and even destruction of, the object-form as well as the subject-form, to the form-matter duality, etc., characterizes modern art precisely to the extent that it is attuned to the essence of technology. Its “moment of truth” (to use an expression from Adorno that is not so far from Heidegger’s “Konstellation der Wahrheit”) is its un-truth in relation to the traditional categories of aesthetics (beauty, pleasure, expressive signification), its way of violently undoing them so as to allow the lethe in a-letheia to shine forth as the necessary and inescapable withdrawal of being’s own presencing. The question whether there can be “grosse Kunst” in late modernity perhaps needs to be displaced in a way that may contradict a certain Heideggerian sentiment, but surely not the movement of Heidegger’s questioning: the greatness of late modern, and perhaps even postmodern art (if we leave the art historical dividing line between them undecided for the time being), could be this very dismantling of the idea of greatness, of historical Stiftung, of the “people” and their “native soil,” etc., in such a way that art at the end of metaphysics would allow us to perceive the end as a necessary loss that is the other side of a multiplicity of beginnings. “The origin of the work of art,” both as a question as well as a specific text by Heidegger, would then be more complex than a certain interpretation of (and to a large extent also by) Heidegger—though not the only one possible—has suggested, an interpretation that is historical through and through: the Greek origin is lost, but also in a certain way retrieved in Framing as its own absence, as the necessity to reinvent other grounds and origins, and the “greatness” of modern art would thereby be at once identical to and radically different from the origin.

The “thrust” would then have to recognize the radical absence of the ground from which it draws its meaning, that the “people” it addresses is an indeterminate entity, and not tied to any particular soil or community—that le peuple est toujours un peuple à venir, as Deleuze used

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18 See Martineau’s preface to the selection of Malevich’s writings, La lumière et la couleur, as well as the more elaborated argument in Malévich et la philosophie.
to say. And perhaps just not recognize it, but also bring it about in an active way, so that the grounding must always be an undoing of the soil, of the natal, always something un-heimlich. And finally, the Anfang would not already have leaped ahead of us so as always to have determined the end, but would have to be thought of as opening up an unknown future.

This would indeed be something like an undoing of the temporal knot in Heidegger’s thinking on the origin of the work of art in 1935, but maybe not in the later works, especially those when art is connected to the question of technology. For me anyway, to follow this line of thought, as it cuts across Heidegger’s texts and opens up the question of modern art, would indeed by a way to think through him, beyond and against him, but in order then to come back to him in a new and different way.

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The Theory of History in Spinoza’s
Theologico-Political Treatise

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In the Theologico-Political Treatise, chapter seven, Spinoza states that in order to understand and interpret Scripture, i.e. the Old and New Testament (which, as with his own conviction, will prove to be perfectly in accord with the freedom of thought and philosophizing, contrary to the current interpretation of religious authorities) we must understand it in the light of its history.¹ This approach does not strike us as unreasonable or strange: indeed, it is not uncommon for us today to look back on history in order to situate various events, to understand our own position and current problems and affairs. To the philosopher, in particular, the injunction might even seem unnecessary, since history clings to every act of our thinking, pollutes our concepts regardless of what we want, reminding us forever and painfully of the impossibility of an immaculate conception. However, to the Spinozist reader, the author’s claim is striking: not that Spinoza would be unaware of our historical condition – far from it, since he devotes one of the two books published during his own lifetime to this subject – but rather because throughout his work, the very notion of history, implicitly if not explicitly, is severely criticized. Indeed, if we understand anything at all about Spinoza’s theory of knowledge, we know that true understanding is understanding from the viewpoint of eternity, a theme to which the fifth part of the Ethics is entirely devoted. That this implies a thorough undermining of our common conception of time should come as no surprise: eternity is, by definition, something other than time, eternity is without beginning and without end, and cannot be related to even the most infinite duration. In other words, if we are to understand

¹ Spinoza, Theologico-Political Treatise, transl. R. H. H. Elwes (Dover Publications Inc: New York 1951) Page references will henceforth be given in the main text.
adequately only by seeing something in its eternal belonging, we must not turn to the way that the thing in question occurs in time, since all that is accounted for in this are external relations that are of no use to us if we want to see it in its essence or intrinsic constitution.

But in saying this, it seems that we – or rather Spinoza – have invalidated the very notion of history: indeed, what is history, if not precisely the retracing and the narrative of how things occur in time, of how they relate to one another and intertwine with one another in their temporality, i.e. in their extrinsic relations? It appears at this point that we are faced with at least two rather uncomfortable problems: in the first place, if Spinoza really holds that time, and thus history, cannot be of any relevance for real understanding, with what then are we left to understand ourselves and the world that we, as a matter of fact, do experience in time however inadequate this experience may be? And secondly, something which at this moment might appear as a secondary problem indeed, if history is invalidated so powerfully and definitively as it seems to be by Spinoza himself, then why does he expressly state that we read Scripture in the light of its history in order to understand its meaning? Even if we admit the possibility of a philosopher contradicting himself once in a while, this seems to be a rather heavy contradiction.

However it might be that we have just unconsciously jumped to a certain number of conclusions that in fact obscure our understanding of the problem in question. Undoubtedly, Spinoza privileges the eternal understanding over the temporal. But, just as certain, he himself accomplishes a meticulous historical analysis of the Bible. Moreover, in the Theologico-Political Treatise and in the Political Treatise, he analyzes historically the movements by which our political societies evolve and take on different aspects, in order to establish the conditions of a viable and reliable civil – political – state. In other words, while it is true that any theory of knowledge, for Spinoza, must ground itself in essential and eternal understanding, it is no less true that this understanding by definition situates itself in actuality, as opposed to beyond the temporal condition that constitutes human existence. In yet other words, we can say that Spinoza, in an extremely urgent manner, particularly in the Theologico-Political Treatise, tries to establish the conditions of our possibility of understanding our own history in order to live our present and our future in a way that makes us stronger, happier and freer than is presently the case. That is, he tries to make us
grasp how we interpret our own history in a way that we may become what we are. If this is the case, we must take a closer look at what Spinoza really means by time and history in order to see what is at stake in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*.

Given the absolute immanence of eternity and duration that Spinoza establishes in the *Ethics* – the former being the only dimension in which we can understand a thing in its essence, but the latter, the dimension within which we experience this eternity – the main problem appears to be the way in which we understand our duration, that is, our unlimited perseverance in existence, in terms of time, or rather, the way we confuse this positive determination with that of time which is an abstraction and as such, liable to generate inadequate ideas in particular. When Spinoza, in the letter XII on infinity to Ludovic Meyer, defines time as “an auxiliary of imagination,” he expressly states that time, when measured and divided in punctual instants, hours, days or seasons, only has a meaning insofar as it makes it possible for us to situate ourselves, in a more or less fictional manner, in the duration or the passing in which we are. To speak about an objective reality of time is therefore pointless. Or rather, it constitutes a habit of speech that we must use and understand as such: we are in the “passing,” and we quantify this passing in an imaginary way in order to relate to the passing of the beings that surround us. The “passing” is not, of course, imaginary in itself, as we easily can see at every moment in the changes of the relations of movement and rest constituting our body. However this passing cannot be ascribed to the quantitative measures that we give time, since this quantification is perfectly abstract and does not correspond to any given reality concerning the singular essence of each being which defines it: whenever we consider something in relation to a time-measure (hour, day or any other), we submit it to a beginning and an end, but this does not give us a real definition of the thing in question, since, as we know, the definition of a thing, for Spinoza, consists in expressing its possibility of existing, but not of its ending.

The idea of time-measure is thus something auxiliary, a helpful tool for the imagination in order to relate abstractly to the environing world, but it remains absolutely linked to imagination also insofar as it constitutes an inadequate way of conceiving things: indeed, it is imagination, not reason, that conceives of things in a linear way, that considers them in the order of their appearance. However it is this way of conceiving
them that is inadequate: knowing for real, that is by knowledge of a
singular essence, is possible only in a rupture with the chronological or
even existential chain, since this order gives only “extrinsic determina-
tions, relations or, at most, circumstances,” according to §101 of De
Intellectus Emendatione. These determinations or relations constitute
information that gives us no clue to the definition or the essence of a
thing. Knowing on the one hand that the existential order – the appar-
et linear causality in time (i.e. things succeeding one another and
organizing themselves in what appears to be an order of past and suc-
cession) – gives us nothing but exterior relations which are therefore
quite circumstantial, and knowing on the other hand, that it is impossi-
table to comprehend the totality of this interconnection (which would be
necessary in order to understand it as such) since we would have to
have an infinite intellect – we would have to be God himself – it is
very clear that it is not by a linear linking-up that we are able to grasp
something, and we cannot develop ourselves correctly since it does not
make us understand ourselves either. Duration, once again, does not
encompass its own finitude but only its beginning, and it is thus insuf-
ficient to determine things by these measures. Clearly, says Spinoza, if
we do, we thereby “separate them from the substance and the manner
in which they [the modes] proceed from eternity, thus neglecting that
without which they cannot be correctly understood” (Letter XII). In
other words, if we persist in considering things according to the meas-
ures of time, we will at the most have an assembly of external relations
of appearance, but not each thing in its singular sense since we then
separate them from the whole of nature or the totality to which they
belong.

Thus, determining things according to the abstract measures of time
not only means that we fail to see them as singular realities existing
according to their conatus, i.e. persevering in their being, but we also
fail to perceive the essential linkage that makes them derive necessarily
from the substance. In this way, things appear in a contingent and con-
fused way. For Spinoza, no thing is to be understood in the apparent
succession of measured time, and, he says, “it is not surprising that
those who have made great efforts to understand nature’s progress by
these notions, in themselves quite badly understood, have cast them-
selves into inextricable difficulties; they were unable to find a way out
without confusing everything and by admitting the most absurd
things.” An example of these absurdities is, for instance, the idea of
God having a temporal existence, thus being older now than at the birth of Adam, and so forth.

The point for Spinoza consists precisely in saying that whenever we want to know how things are constituted, or why they produce certain effects and not others, we cannot rely on an explanation in terms of measures of time, because these terms immediately falsify the nature of the things to be understood: they separate and divide that which, by nature, must be considered as a whole, in itself indivisible. This separation operates on several levels simultaneously: first, we separate the things from the substance, since we separate them from the simultaneous production of all things within the divine intellect. Then, we cut them off from their essence: what we must really know, that is, how a thing makes an effort to persevere in its being in an unlimited way, is thus immediately out of our reach. Finally, considering it in its measured temporality makes us consider it apart from other things: therefore we cannot understand how it relates to the rest of the world, how it affects the world and how it is affected by it.

This now brings us to Spinoza’s treatment of historicity. By indicating what I would like to call Spinoza’s rupture with linear chronology or temporality, I have tried to show how erroneous it would be to understand Spinozian temporality as a vision where things would follow one upon another in a single line, directing themselves towards a finality or a final end that would be eternity itself, or even a comprehension of it. In order to understand that this is not the case, we could have contented ourselves with the respective definitions of eternity and duration, since it is clear that eternity is not the continuation or even the finality of duration: on the contrary, they intertwine with each other, and eternity is always actual at every moment of duration. It is thus certain that we cannot speak of a progressive thinking in Spinoza: this would be as inexact concerning the different levels of knowledge as it would be concerning temporality. The “goal” to be attained is never, for Spinoza, situated outside of actual existence, which makes him radically different from the Judeo-Christian tradition of thinking, since salvation for him has no meaning except in this actual world: Spinozian beatitude is never post mortem, but always during this very life. This is exactly why we have to abandon the idea of a linear temporality: if the “goal” is not situated at the end – the end of our life, the end of our history – but is present at every moment of our duration, we have to understand the various things that happen to us in a way that
differs from their immediate succession and appearance. This means that we have to understand them by their intensive causes, that is, we have to considerably modify our understanding of what we call history.

To understand history by its causes implies something radically different from what we usually call history, as far as a linear and progressing narrative is concerned. We must instead examine the events of the past and of the present in terms of an intertwining of causes that cross one another, reproducing themselves at various times. Only in this way can we reach a knowledge of ourselves that would not be based upon the common misunderstanding of human history as the linear ascension towards the wisdom constituted by what Spinoza refers to as the third degree of knowledge and of the final and enduring civilization – a misunderstanding that is not only erroneous as such, but moreover, singularly deceptive since we can by no means pretend to have reached these heights, nor are we ever likely to do so. Spinoza is extremely clear on this subject, even if we can speak of something resembling a progression in, for instance, the way a child goes from complete ignorance to a certain kind of knowledge of himself and of the world in the apprenticeship of reasoning. Indeed, according to the appendix of the first part of the *Ethics*, an individual has, at birth, no knowledge of the causes of things affecting him.

As the child grows up it will, however, be affected by joyous passions that increase its capacity of action. Thereby the child will, little by little, learn to form adequate ideas concerning the relation of his body to the bodies that affect it. In this way, he can be said to have proceeded from the first degree of knowledge to the second – knowledge by common notions, that is knowledge that learns to recognize how certain things convene with one another, according to *Ethics* II, scholia of prop. 40. This is a knowledge of things in general, but one that is nevertheless adequate – *Ethics* II, prop. 37 and 38. But even if we do evolve from the first degree of knowledge to the second (reasoning by common notions), it is still obvious that it is not because we have gained knowledge of certain things that we cease to be affected in a passive way by others, of which we form inadequate ideas. Indeed, we will continue to be affected by passions, and we will continue to form inadequate ideas for the entirety of our lives – this happens every time we experience anger, hatred, sorrow and general misfortune which necessarily overcomes us at times. So, on an individual level, it would be very difficult to speak of a linear progression – the most we
can aim for is to increase to a maximum our affections of joy, and to limit those of sorrow, in order to, in certain moments, embrace the world with a real understanding. Moreover, even if Spinoza states that it is only from the second degree of knowledge that we can arrive at the third degree – meaning that it is not possible to go directly from the first degree to the third (Ethics, V, 28) the third degree being that by which we have knowledge of singular essences – this development does not really constitute a passage or step forward. The third degree of knowledge is precisely not an acquisition, but an intensification, a change of perspectives from the general to the singular, which by no means can be accounted for by a progressive or linear thinking.

On the level of collectivity, the problem is necessarily similar: naturally, we can speak of a progression in the history of humanity insofar as we can state for a fact a certain number of developments, be it in the technical skills of humanity where things certainly have advanced, or in our factual knowledge of the order of things. In De Intellectus Emendatione, Spinoza actually seems to imply such a progression:

But as men at first made use of the instruments supplied by nature to accomplish very easy pieces of workmanship, laboriously and imperfectly, and then, when these were finished, wrought other things more difficult with less labor and greater perfection; and so gradually mounted from the simplest operations to the making of tools, and from the making of tools to the making of more complex tools, and fresh feats of workmanship, till they arrived at making, with small expenditure of labor, the vast number of complicated mechanisms which they now possess. So, in like manner, the intellect, by its native strength, makes for itself intellectual instruments, whereby it acquires strength for performing other intellectual operations, and from these operations gets again fresh instruments, or the power of pushing its investigations further, and thus gradually proceed till it reaches the summit of wisdom.

More important even, we can state with Spinoza himself the fact that certain types of civil society tend to create the necessary conditions for improving or even for setting in progress knowledge and ways of living – these societies being ruled by democratic principles, a fact that we will consider more closely in a moment – which certainly seems to indicate not only that things can improve, but also that they do so under certain favorable conditions. It is only reasonable to see this as a historical process. However, what we are here calling a historical process is defined precisely by the fact that we isolate it from the totality of
the context. Whenever Spinoza considers the history of a society – that of the Hebrews, for instance, which is thoroughly analyzed in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, or, for that matter, whenever he considers the contemporary developments in his own nation, he explicitly pictures it within a very precise framework, a particular period, a particular moment, where he abstracts from everything that can be seen as an external influence of the state in question. This is, among other reasons, why the Hebrew state lends itself so conveniently to his analysis, since it was conceived by Moses precisely as an isolated entity, apart from everything else. In this perspective, we can indeed speak of a beginning and an end, or, in other words, a rise and a fall, and the reasons for this development can easily be divined by paying attention to the evolution of its institutions (the details of which I will not address here).

In contrast to this analysis, determinable in time and thus historically coherent, we cannot do the same thing with Humanity with a capital H, i.e. we cannot historicize human nature because, in essence, this nature is not given in temporal terms. The best example of this is, as usual, given by Spinoza himself, once again in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*. In chapter XVI, which is fundamental to the understanding of the constitution of the political state, the central question is the passage from natural right to civil right: “*By the right and ordinance of nature, I merely mean those natural laws wherewith we conceive every individual to be conditioned by nature, so as to live and act in a given way:*” – and Spinoza gives the example of fish being naturally conditioned for swimming, and the greater devouring the lesser by natural sovereign right. “*For it is certain that nature, taken in the abstract, has sovereign right to do anything she can; in other words, her right is co-extensive with her power,*” this, since nature on the whole can only be defined by dint of its producing itself. Further: “*Now, it is the sovereign law and right of nature that each individual should endeavour to preserve itself as it is, without regard to anything but itself; therefore this sovereign law and right belongs to every individual, namely, to exist and act according to its natural conditions.*” Defining natural right as being exactly the same as the essence of every individual, that is her perseverance in existence, or *conatus*, whereby “right” stands in absolute proportion to the degree of power – *potentia* – expressed by the *conatus*, we are brought to understand why the civil right cannot – and it is not “must not,” but “cannot” – be of any other
nature than a right that maintains the essential determination of the conatus. Indeed, civil right must, in order to be accepted by each political subject, correspond to the same degree of perseverance in existence as does natural right; it must imply the same degree of perseverance in existence as, by extension, that of natural right, since otherwise it will be counter to the individual it is supposed to protect. And if it counters it, then no individual with common sense can adhere to it: I refer here to the extensive development of chapter XVI. Put differently, when we conceive of civil right, it must necessarily be in terms that maintain the possibility of each individual to persevere in existence to the fullest degree of her power, which means making possible a maximum of joyous affections and ensuring that she may develop her capacities of body and intellect without coming to harm. Indeed, this also happens to be the exact definition of the political state as Spinoza will have it.

This statement naturally has a great number of fundamental implications which are well worth lengthy discussions – on the political level, and also of how politics, to Spinoza, are necessarily connected with metaphysics. I will, however, just point out something of particular interest to our discussion here. In refusing the point of rupture between natural and civil right, Spinoza not only marks his strong difference with traditional philosophical political theory, where these two forms of right correspond to different things, but – and this is the important point – he refuses to see the passage from natural right to civil right as an evolution inherent in humanity in terms of a temporal development. Thus, he is not saying that before the constitution of civil rights, humans lived in the state of natural right which they transformed into a civil right at one point, say, for instance, as a passage from animality to humanity, but rather that these two manners of conceiving a human being coexist as two inseparable dimensions of our own understanding of ourselves. One dimension is natural right, insofar as we consider ourselves essentially as modi expressing by our conatus a specific degree of intensity of the substance’s infinite power. The other is civil right, insofar as we consider ourselves in necessary coexistence with, and codetermination by, other individuals. Given this, we understand why the constitution of civil right cannot be seen as a Historical turn, nor be understood in terms of a History of Humanity, but rather, that it is constituted in various ways in varying degrees of perfection, over and over, each and every time that the determinations of human coexis-
tence allow for it. In other words, the constitution of civil right is incessantly reformulated under the different conditions of every specific constellation.

It then appears that we must be very careful not to confuse things of different orders. The problem, in reality, is not so much the fact that our evolution is determined by a certain temporality – it would of course be far from Spinoza to deny this fact – but rather that our comprehension of this order is necessarily and naturally subject to misinterpretations. When we do understand something, and thus can be said to progress, individually or collectively, we understand it in its proper causality: we understand how it expresses its particular relation to the substance, how from certain causes follow certain effects and this, with necessity, in a way that is regardless of time. Whenever we see this as a progression, we reveal only our own perspective, so to speak, where the thing occurred takes a meaning in our own view, clothing it thus with a sense that is finalizing – “it was meant to be,” etc. In this manner, we inscribe a finality in nature that is not to be found, could we consider it in its totality and its necessity.

In other words, the reasons why we still tend to understand time as well as history along these lines are clear to Spinoza: things do happen to us in a certain order, and we do perceive them that way. However, what we ignore is precisely the way these events are linked one to the other, just as we commonly ignore how they affect us: in trying to reconstitute the order of things, we more often resort to our imagination than to our reason. This means that we arrange them in patterns that comfort our already existing views and wishes, which in turn are largely determined by our general lack of knowledge. In this way, we tend to interpret things solely out of our own particular viewpoint, conferring upon them a meaning and a direction which in reality only corresponds to our particular way of sensing them. Thus we create a History by which we want to explain the world, when the only thing we are explaining is our own tendency to see the world in the most restricted of ways, though it does correspond to our chief interests. And even if this created History is coherent, which it may well be, it nevertheless reposes on a partial view that is specifically human: when we see things as absurd, useless or evil, it is in this perspective:

[I]t is because we only know in part, and are almost entirely ignorant of the order and interdependence of nature as a whole, and also because we want everything to be arranged according to the dictates of
our human reason; in reality that which reason considers evil, is not evil in respect to the order and laws of nature as a whole, but only in respect to the laws of our reason.

But in this partial view, which is indeed difficult to overcome, all we attain is an increasing confusion. In Spinozist terms, this is nothing but another way of speaking of sad passions by which we become more and more separated from our power of thinking and acting, thus leaving the door open towards all kinds of abuse – the abuse of statesmen who only want to maintain their own power, the abuse of religious authorities who seek their own privileges; in short, the abuse of all those who thrive on the weakness of others. These are different sorts of abuse that, like all other passions, are fuelled by the multiplication of affects that are involved in proportion to the number of individuals that are concerned. It is this problem that constitutes the heart of the matter treated explicitly by Spinoza in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, where he shows the different ways in which our interpretations of nature go astray, and how we create a History that does not correspond to reality, but that nevertheless tries to impose our own views on nature itself.

Spinoza also shows something else, perhaps of even greater interest. He shows how these various interpretations correspond not only to individual desires and affections, but even more so, how they are multiplied and transmitted by the affections of the multitude, thus creating far greater effects than would the deed of a single individual. It is this, I believe, that we must understand as the very core of Spinoza’s development in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*: in very simple words, the problem is not that we exist in a temporality that is necessarily defined by our own finitude – we do experience things in the perspective of their beginning and of their ending – which makes it possible for us to speak of a history: the history of humanity, of a nation, of concepts and so forth. Yet, our way of interpreting this history – created by our own condition, so to speak, is necessarily determined by the way these events affect us in various ways as *individuals and as a multitude*.

It is this point that brings us back to my initial question, concerning Spinoza’s recommendation that we read and understand Scripture in the light of its history. In relation to the previous investigation, though also in light of the fact that I have not developed each of the different points approached as each would require, I would like to think it is
possible for us to reach a certain understanding of this specific Spinozist equation.

We know now that history, in its broadest sense – that of the evolution and even more the direction of the world – does not really make sense to Spinoza. There are several reasons for this, which we can perhaps summarize by saying that this historical construction, in the first place, has a strong tendency to introduce the idea of a finality in nature which is nowhere to be found except in our own imagination and desire. This is why it is not a bearer of truth as such, since nature as such does not organize itself according to our wishes, to say the least. In the second place, the idea of explaining the world – ourselves and being as it is – through the idea of History tends to obscure the object of our interrogation rather than enlighten it, since whenever we try to grasp the order of being by submitting it to a linear and temporal view, we get further and further away from its actual being.

For Spinoza, things are not defined by their order of appearance, but by the intrinsic determinations that structure them, and these cannot be reached by a temporal consideration. Nevertheless, we are, as are all finite beings, determined existentially by what happens to us and in the order in which things occur. We are affected continuously, and by these affections, we generate affections upon ourselves and upon others. We can then, or rather, we must then, speak in terms of historicity, since that is the perspective in which we live, and by which we try to put some order into the infinite number of things affecting us simultaneously. In other words, in order to understand how and why things occur, we must delimit our analysis within certain borders, isolate it, not in order to think of it as a separate entity, but in order to figure out the determinations under which specific things occur by linking them together in a graspable causality which we can then compare or set in relation to other events or periods, and for which we thereby can establish a certain number of rules. Now this manner of proceeding is actually the same whether we are trying to grasp the meaning of a particular event, or a particular narrative, a particular action, a particular history or a natural phenomenon, according to Spinoza in the same chapter VII just referred to.

The second point is that we tend to create an interpretation of everything that happens to us. This means that we tend to construct a narrative which, on the one hand, corresponds at best to the facts experienced, but, on the other hand, is always determined by the way we
have been affected by it depending upon what implications it has carried with it. Now, we are affected not only by what happens to us at a given moment, or rather, the way we are affected does not only depend on what actually happens, but on the infinitely complex layers of things that have already determined us: previous experiences, customs, traditions, and so forth. This is to say that every interpretation is already conditioned, so to speak, by an almost countless number of previous interpretations, most of which we have already forgotten are interpretations, and not objective facts, to use a Nietzschean mode of expression.

All these elements must also, however, be taken into consideration, were we to engage in an interpretation of the Bible. Indeed, examining Scripture is not merely one option among others. It is necessary, according to Spinoza, since it constitutes perhaps the strongest and most important interpretations of our situation as human beings *per se*, at least in these parts of the world. For it gathers much of our understanding of ourselves as human beings, of the meaning of this being, and, most importantly, of the understanding of nature immediately transferred upon our societies. This means, first, that Scripture – to the extent that we conceive of it as a written document – must necessarily be considered as a mighty and powerful narrative that is an interpretation of a certain number of events and natural phenomena. I will not go into the problem of its historical accuracy or its supposedly divine origin here. Spinoza actually holds it to be the bearer of essential truths, however not in the way this is generally meant by religious authorities, but that, again, is not the point here. It is a narrative, and in order to be understood, it must be submitted to the same treatment as any narrative: it must be examined in the light of what it is actually saying. This, however, implies an extensive investigation of its own premises since we otherwise commit the most common error committed today, which is overlooking its singularity to the benefit of an imagined generality.

What, then, are its own premises or its own history? Spinoza states them clearly: understanding Scripture in light of its history implies three considerations. First, the consideration of “the nature and properties of the language [i.e. Hebrew] in which the Books of the Bible were written, and in which their authors were accustomed to speak.” In other words, it is necessary to compare every expression with common or conversational usage in order to establish what must be understood as metaphors, colloquialisms or literal sense and so forth. Second, we
must do an analysis of each book, and an arrangement of its contents under headings, in order to see how different texts treat recurrent themes. Third,

[Such a history should relate the environment of all the prophetic books extant; that is, the life, the conduct, and the studies of the author of each book, who he was, what was the occasion, and the epoch of his writing, whom did he write for, and in what language.]

This also implies an investigations of the circumstances in which each particular book was admitted into the whole collection, and the circumstances surrounding its being accepted as sacred, and so forth.

Now, as we can see, when Spinoza is doing this, he is actually reconstructing the history of the Bible, showing, so to speak, two things simultaneously: first, that it has its own history, and that it is subjected to it as any other narrative would be, but secondly, even more importantly, that its validity itself is conditioned by its history, that is, by the different circumstances surrounding its interpretations. What Spinoza is actually doing then via the example of the Bible is showing how a historical narrative is constructed, and, at the same time, he is constructing another narrative superposed on the first one, and this is how this history must be read and understood. In this way Spinoza actually maps out the conditions for a science of history. This science of history – the thinking in history, a history that is always and already determined by its particular conditions of interpretation – must then be seen as a second-degree narrative – in Spinoza’s words, a critical history, a genealogy, having as its object not only the necessary linking of events, inasmuch as they can be reconstituted (and this is a great problem concerning the Bible in particular), but also the way in which the authors of history, being themselves most often unconscious of the causes affecting them, imagine the “meaning” of their history. However, Spinoza actually doubles this already double analysis in the Theologico-Political Treatise, since he also relates it to the way that his own contemporaries perceive their own history and the model of interpretation constituted by the Bible, in order to show how our own modern history is conditioned.

So, what does this theory of history amount to? If there is no absolute history to which one can refer, we can, and must, in order to understand what kind of narratives we are determined by, establish a relation to our different ways of perceiving history or rather histories.
Understanding this, however, takes into account not one unitary history that would be that of mankind, but the different ways in which historical narratives are lived and perceived, and most of all, how they produce repercussions by the affections they create, by the multitude, and of the multitude, of the particular society they are related to. A theory or a science of history is thus, for Spinoza, nothing but a theory of social passions, passions of the collective body constituting society as such. This is where the science of history becomes a science of politics, grounded in the affectivity constitutive of our human condition.
Death and Resurrection as the Eternal Return of the Pure Land: Tanabe’s Metanoetic Reading of Nietzsche and the Question of History

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In the concluding chapter of his 1949 study of Nietzsche, Nishitani Keiji paused to reflect on the historical situation of his own analysis and in so doing thematized the problem of history at the ground of the meeting of Asia and Europe. He did so by explicitly considering the "meaning of nihilism for Japan.” This might seem at first curious because the entire text had been devoted to coming to an understanding of nihilism per se, although Nishitani immediately argued that if one wants merely to know about nihilism, as if this were a conversation topic, then the question was being asked from a standpoint in which nihilism itself ceased to be a question (N, 1). Nihilism is not a general object of knowledge and hence is not transmittable within the terms of the information age, where nihilism is reduced to epistemic posturing and a general idea about the nature of things. Nihilism only comes into question when the singular self, beyond its codification into various strategies of information and other means of defusing an intimate and critical question by making nihilism abstract and general, takes it up as question. Nihilism only becomes a question for a singular individual, yet it does so not when that individual asks about nihilism but only when they first find themselves having become a question to them-

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1 The text was originally just called Nihirizumu [Nihilism], but Graham Parkes and Setsuko Aihara expansively, and with a good deal of clarification, titled their fine translation, The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). Hence cited as a parenthetical note in the text as N. Please note also that I here follow the Japanese custom of citing the family name followed by the given name.
selves. “By being thrown into nihility, the self is revealed to itself. Only in such encounters does nihilism (like death) become a real question” (N, 2).

One might recognize an explicitly Heideggerian resonance in such an articulation, and that should come as no surprise. Nishitani was a student of Nishida Kitarō, the patriarch of the Kyoto School, and had, at his insistence, studied with Heidegger during the first two years of Heidegger’s Nietzsche lectures. Furthermore, Nishida, Nishitani, and Tanabe Hajime, along with thinkers like Abe Masao and Hisamatsu Shin’ichi, comprise a tradition of thinking that retained both its distinctively Japanese “personality” and “location,” yet engaged in a mode of thinking that was irreducible to either the Asian or the Western philosophical traditions. Yet in taking up the question of nihilism per se, which is to experience intimately oneself coming to be a question for oneself, Nishitani once again returned not only to the collective, but to the specific historical collectivity of Japan. What could nihilism mean for Japan when its very meaning opens up in a singular suspension of meaning itself? If nihilism interrupts the fundamental status of meaning per se, what kind of paradoxical yet distinctively Japanese historical meaning could such a question have?

Nishitani, knowing full well that professional philosophy was itself a by-product of the Meiji Restoration and therefore born of Japan’s rapid Westernization, argued that Karl Löwith was on to something

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2 Nishida is the undoubted progenitor of the Kyoto School, so much so that it is sometimes referred to as Nishida tetsugaku, or Nishida philosophy. This is not to say that everyone else in the Kyoto School was an epigone. Tanabe, who shall form the locus of the essay, had a famous series of arguments with Nishida and, whether or not they were justified, was not even on speaking terms with Nishida when the latter died in 1945 in the months before the war’s end. Nonetheless, the Kyoto School marks a singular event in the history of thinking: a manner of thinking, deeply attuned to the pulse of its times, that operates in and between Western and Asian modes of thinking, preserving both its Japanese personality and the expansivity and border-interrogating movements of philosophy itself. It is so far without clear parallel in the West. In this respect, I concur with James Heisig when he contends that the Kyoto School “is not an eastern thought diluted for foreign consumption, nor is it a simple transference that assumes a background in the history of oriental ideas. It makes an unsolicited contribution to world philosophy that both respects the traditions of philosophy and expands them. In this respect, the development of the school from Nishida to Tanabe to Nishitani is a rising crescendo. Never has the west produced an intellectual movement whose contribution to the east can compare with what these three thinkers offer the west.” Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 272. Hence cited as a parenthetical note in the text as PN.
when he claimed that Japan had uncritically accepted an historical tradition that had confessed that it was in a crisis regarding its own foundations. Japan had imported a dead god without importing the critical awareness of its demise. “We went through this crisis without a clear realization that it was a crisis; and even now the crisis is being compounded by our continuing lack of awareness of our spiritual void” (N, 175). Not only had Japan severed its roots, producing both ultranationalism and reactionary nihilism (two sides of the same coin), it had inherited a location and tradition of thinking that was announcing its own fundamental decadence. In this way, Nishitani turned to a thinker like Nietzsche, who, curiously, made it possible for Nishitani to retrieve Japan’s beleaguered Zen tradition. The Mahayana Buddhist tradition in Japan, and elsewhere, already had an ancient – but now opaque and sedimented – tradition of meditation on nihilism, and a series of techniques for activating nihilism, in its robust, affirmative, Nietzschean sense.

Yet if one allows this circle (the circularity of history itself) to continue turning, how does Nietzsche, returning with his activated Mahayana resources, then re-activate his original European setting? After all, as Nishitani argued, Nietzsche’s nihilism “was backed up by responsibility towards the ancestors to redeem what is noble in the tradition. His standpoint calls for a returning to the ancestors in order to face the future, or to put it the other way around, a prophesying toward the tradition” (N, 177). So how does Nietzsche prophesy toward the tradition when read prophetically from another tradition, especially given that said other tradition opens up again under the lens of Nietzsche’s creative and active nihilism? What is the Kyoto Nietzsche to us? What is it to us that Nietzsche is no longer simply a “good European” but a good, albeit inadvertent, Buddhist? This forms the central question of this essay, an essay devoted to the question of history in the plurality of its trajectories. How did Nietzsche intrude upon the historical situation of the Kyoto School and how does this intrusion, in its turn, intrude again upon our own historical situation, especially given the fact that Nietzsche, right from the beginning, was unzeitgemäß, an intruder into history par excellence?

I will take this question up not with a further examination of Nishitani’s reading of Nietzsche, but by turning to another, in some ways even more remarkable reading, namely that of Tanabe Hajime. In so doing, thinking itself finds itself amidst a great self-aware circle of
historical complications. Nietzsche was a thinker deeply articulate about the self-overcoming movement of the valances of thinking, including his own. In this reading of Tanabe’s reading of Nietzsche, we will locate three intertwined and elliptically progressive strands. (1) The valences of Nietzsche’s thinking undergo a performance of their own operations and re-merge, for the moment, in dialog with the pure land or ground of thinking via Tanabe’s retrieval of Shinran and the True Pure Land sect (Jōdo Shin-shū) of Buddhism. (2) In so doing, Tanabe not only locates the circle of self-overcoming in Nietzsche’s thought, but in thinking itself, albeit with a critical awareness that this can only be done within thinking’s present historical location. (3) Finally, this movement, twice thought and twice played, re-merges a third time as we reflect on Tanabe’s reflection on Nietzsche’s reflection on the movement of thinking. All three circles come to tell us variously of the adventure of difference in its ceaseless, circular becomings, amidst its diversely determined locations.

I

At one point in Tanabe Hajime’s (1885-1962) stunning Philosophy as Metanoetics (1946), his magnum opus and one of the seminal texts of the Kyoto School of Philosophy, he locates the central problematic of metanoetic philosophy and philosophical metanoetics (circularly mediating movements) in response to a problem that Shinran (1173-1262), the founder of the Pure Land Shin sect (Jōdo Shin-shū) of Buddhism, called honganbokori. Roughly, the later is the aporia that arises when I realize that if I seek nirvana, then I inadvertently reinforce the very

3 For example, at the end of the first book of Zarathustra, he claims, “Verily I advise you: go forth from me and defend yourselves against Zarathustra! And better yet: be ashamed of him! Perhaps he deceived you.” Also Sprach Zarathustra (1883-1885), Kritische Studienausgabe vol. 5, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag and Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), 101. (Translations are my own.) Later in the “Tomb Song” in Book Two, Zarathustra proclaims, “And only where there are graves are there resurrections” (145).

4 Tanabe Hajime, Philosophy as Metanoetics, trans. Takeuchi Yoshinori, with Valdo Viglielmo and James W. Heisig (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Hence cited as a parenthetical note in the text as PM. Although it has almost become fashionable to castigate the work of translators, I would like to this opportunity to praise the extraordinary work that Takeuchi, a fine thinker in is his own right, has shared with us.
thing (namely the ego) that nirvana seeks to eradicate. If I do not want to be enlightened, if I do not dare think that I can be enlightened, if I do not somehow venture the arrogance that I may deserve to be enlightened, if I do not vow to seek *satori*, then I will not inaugurate the practices that direct me towards *satori*.

However, the very ego that desires to acquire *satori* is the very ego that blocks access to *satori*. Does not the second of the four noble truths locate the source of human turmoil and suffering in the unquenchable thirst of desire? Is not desire for the Pure Land an especially grand version of desire’s impossible quest for satiation? Is it not the ceaseless cravings of the ego that demand a final transport from its own sufferings? Is not the very desire for heaven paradoxically the symptom of the disease of desire itself? Our desire for heaven is the hell of desire itself.

*Honganbokori* is pride in one’s trust of the Amida Buddha and is thereby the hope or even the assurance that one can inaugurate one’s own liberation (entry into the Pure Land) (PM, 12). The ineluctable aporia or antinomy of *honganbokori* derives from the very desire that initiates the path to *satori*. Desire wants *satori* because it somehow wants to unify itself with the enlightened state, wanting a “unity founded on the principle of identity” (PM, 15). But “since the Buddha is the one who seeks nothing, one falls into self-contradiction if one desires directly to become the Buddha. But if one does not seek at all to become the Buddha, one will never be able to awaken one’s Buddhahood” (PM, 8).

This antinomy also emerges in the very desire to read well, to initiate a line of understanding between the desiring subject and the text itself. Yet the desire that draws the reader to the text is the desire that obfuscates the reader’s access to the text. An enlightened practice of reading in the desire to read well requires that the desire that inaugurates the way of *satori* does not survive as the desire that initiated it. One dies to the text just as much as one dies to oneself, allowing the text, or the pure land, to question one and to transform one into a question. Hence desire somehow has to perish, to die to itself, in order to be reborn as no longer the desire that initiates but as the resurrected and enlightened desire that is wholly otherwise than what it once was.

To consider the Buddha as the one who seeks ‘no-thing’ means that Buddhahood is inaccessible to those who make it the object of their search, since their efforts drive them in exactly the opposite direction.
Only those who can resign themselves to accepting the total annihilation of all objects of desire as well as all desiring subjectivity—only those whose desire is free of all desire—can face their own death with “naturalness” and be restored to life as one who has died to the world and to self. (PM, 119-120)

In the case of an enlightened practice of reading, then, the desire to embrace the text that initiates the act of reading must die to itself in the very act of reading. The one who has come under the enlightening force of the text is not the one who wanted to or even could understand the text. The two selves, the latter born out of the ashes of the former, stand in discontinuous and, as we shall see, circular relationship to each other. An enlightened reading is a resurrection.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Tanabe’s metanoetic reading of Nietzsche, a thinker whose *Also Sprach Zarathustra* “had been a closed book to me. No matter how many times I tried to read it, I could not understand it. But now it has become one of my favorite books, and this is due, strangely enough, to metanoetics. In the doctrine of the superman, which at first seemed so contrary to my own way of thinking, I found proof of metanoetics and could hardly contain myself for joy” (PM, 115). Tanabe, the Hegel scholar and partisan of Shinran, the lover of Kierkegaard and defender of the interconnectedness of all human beings, indeed, of all sentient beings, the religious thinker who uses words like metanoesis, resurrection, and grace, could not, prima facie, seem farther away from Nietzsche. “Not without reason, his thought had long been a locked treasure house as far as I was concerned. Now that metanoetics has given me a key, it seems worthwhile to try and open it up and have a look inside” (PM, 102). In fact, Nietzsche would also remain impenetrably obscure to “ordinary, ignorant people like me” (PM, 102) because Tanabe, no matter how much he tried, would never be able, so to speak, to read Nietzsche on his own steam (jiriki). He required power from somewhere radically other (tariki), wholly otherwise than himself, as if alterity were required for the epiphany of Nietzsche’s legibility. The circular overcoming of honganbokori that occluded Nietzsche for Tanabe is the very self-overcoming that Tanabe, resurrected as the one who can read Nietzsche, finds dramatized by the (near) sage or shengren5 Nietzsche.

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5 This is a Daoist term, also taken up in the Mahāyāna tradition, to name one whose consciousness transcends the range of even the best lived quotidian life. The shengren does not abandon the quotidian, but she or he experiences it in a non-quotidian way.
The godless and heartless, hammer-wielding iconoclast reappears, “beneath the exterior garments,” as having “the heart of a sage overflowing with infinite love” (PM, 113).

In what follows, I would like to “read” Tanabe’s “reading” of Nietzsche, knowing that “reading” itself, certainly at least my “reading” of Tanabe’s “reading” of Nietzsche, emerges from the ashes of my own honganbokori. In these three circles (my reading, Tanabe, and Nietzsche), or, as we shall see, in these three discontinuous ellipses, Nietzsche emerges as proclaiming the very same circle, what he called the “eternal return of the same” and “self-overcoming” and what Tanabe links to the circular structure of metanoetics, which had already to be in play for it to appear either in a reading of Nietzsche or Tanabe on Nietzsche. The eternal return of the death and resurrection of reading had to be in play for the eternal return to be “read” in Nietzsche as well as Tanabe.

II

The above discussion of enlightened practices of reading requires the reciprocal play of death and resurrection. “It would not be going too far to say that the only way for old fools like me to become disciples of Nietzsche is to walk the way of metanoetics” (PM, 115). To read Nietzsche, indeed to read at all, even to think at all, one must first die to oneself. It is this mood of death and collapse, of the shipwreck of a life built exclusively upon the delusion that one lives by one’s own means, of the moon becoming visible only after the house has burnt down, that opens Tanabe’s own text written in the final months of the Second World War. “In my case, metanoesis was aroused because I had been driven to the limits of my philosophical position as I confronted the desperate straits into which my country had fallen” (PM, liv). Writing in a Japan on the brink of ruin brought the failure of Tanabe’s own thinking into dramatic relief. What could one say? What words were adequate? In a way, Hegel was not just to die at the gates of Auschwitz, but amidst the unfathomable heat and black rain of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as well as the dark specter of Imperial Japan’s quest for domination of Asia.

Yet Tanabe does not mourn his own lamentable fate, as if the erstwhile honor of philosophy were being sullied by its internecine con-
text. Surely, Tanabe was not working in the war factories, or champi-
oning the cause of Japanese imperialism. Yet he proclaims first and
foremost his own guilt, his own failings, and announces with great
repentance the scales which ineluctably obscured his own philosophi-
cal vision as if he were Oedipus, who, in an act of auto-enucleation,
repented for an act for which he could not be reasonably held responsi-
ble. Like Oedipus, who did not denounce the Gods or life itself, who
prima facie seem like worthier and more reasonable culprits, Tanabe,
an exhausted Kyoto professor of philosophy recovering in the moun-
tains and retreating from the quite reasonable fear that Kyoto would be
destroyed (and, as one might remember, Kyoto was one of the early
candidates for the atom bomb), holds himself first and foremost re-
 sponsible. Tanabe was not an architect of a New World Order. He had,
as his tombstone proclaimed, searched for “truth, and it alone” (PM,
vii). Yet Tanabe hastened not to disguise his own guilt – and thereby
preserve his own ego – in the more deplorable actions of others.

Such repentance reminds me here of Levinas’ partiality to
Dostoyevsky’s insistence (in the voice of Alyosha Karamazov in The
Brothers Karamazov) that “we are all responsible for everyone else –
but I am more responsible than all the others.” I do not hide my ego
behind the failings of others. “Of course, I despise the shamelessness
of the leaders primarily responsible for the defeat who are now urging
the entire nation to repentance only in order to conceal their own com-
 plicity. Metanoesis is not something to be urged on others before one
has performed it on oneself” (PM, lx). Metanoesis, the circle of repen-
tance that leads, in the loss of the self, to conversion, to the rebirth of a
new self, is the way or Dao⁶ of zange, that is, zangedō. (Metanoesis,
derived from the Pauline writings, names both repentance and conver-
sion. I repent because I converted but I could not have converted had I
not repented.) It is a circular way of death that gives rise to new birth,
which gives rise to death, which gives rise to new birth.

⁶ Dao is the groundless ground of beings, the hidden mother of all things. It is not a
tacit substratum of things, a secret ground. The way of things is not the method of
things. Dō is the Japanese reading of the Chinese character Dao and is also used in
compounds that name many of the arts whose circular and ungrounded development
cannot be reduced into the linearity of a method or a task. Shodō, the way of writing
(calligraphy), chadō (the way of tea), kendō (the way of the double-edged sword),
bushidō (the way of the samurai), etc., are not crafts in the sense of a technē, where
one methodically moves towards a goal held in advance.
Tanabe repents that his, or any philosophy, could ever hope to have done enough, even though, as the honganbokori of philosophy announces itself, this failure can only be born of the necessity for philosophy to want always to do its utmost and act as if it could finally say enough. Furthermore, this is identical to the problematic of the way of metanoesis or zangedō. If I succeed in repenting for the very finitude that has already betrayed the absolute nothingness of the Pure Land, then I affirm the very thing that continues to block utter difference (pure nothingness), namely the ego that has succeeded in repenting. Honganbokori is the ineluctable conceit of the ego that expects to be rewarded in the Pure Land, or simply to have articulated the Good and remunerated the debt incurred by the demand that we act always as if we could have acted on behalf of the Good without being able to know altogether what this would have looked like. It is somehow to act as if one should have succeeded, knowing also that of necessity one has already failed. “I feel especially obliged to share in the corporate responsibility for irrationalities like the injustice and prejudice evident in our country. I feel responsible for all of the evils and errors committed by others, and in so doing find that the actual inability of my philosophy to cope with them compels me to a confession of despair over my philosophical incompetence” (PM, 26).

Tanabe’s solution to the problem of honganbokori is the circular structure of upāya (“skillful means”). This is a classic term in the Buddhist tradition that names the capacity to speak in the language of prevailing discourses. That is to say, in speaking not in my terms, but in terms that are not my own, I attempt to say what is true in a language that is, in itself, not true. I try to tell true lies. I attempt to speak the truth in the language of the false. I do not lose the true in the false nor do I assume that the false is the true per se. Upāya is the true as the false and the false as the true. This as or qua is a critical term for the whole Kyoto School and is carefully and critically deployed by Tanabe. As or qua or sive translates the Sino-Japanese copula soku, which, for Tanabe, as we shall see, names a pivot around which opposites progressively turn without a Hegelian resolution or mediation (Aufhebung).7 Discussing this term in relationship to Nishida’s famous

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7 Takeuchi notes that soku “functions as a sort of pivot around which two terms revolve and interchange with each other as mutually defining elements in a single dynamic” (PM, 297). Jan van Bragt, in his introduction to Nishitani’s Religion and Nothingness, explains that he translates soku as sive, evoking Spinoza (e.g., Deus sive natura). Put between two contradictory concepts (for instance in the formula, ‘empti-
articulation of the absolutely contradictory identity of being, James Heisig notes that Nishida, in refusing “self-identity” as “A is A,” was not therefore affirming the inverse, namely “A is not A.” (The denial of the principle of identity, in relying upon negation, paradoxically affirms what it seeks to deny.) Nishida, as well as Tanabe, was rather saying “A *soku* not A,” which is something more like “A-in-not-A is A.” What is otherwise than A within A is also A, but in a way opposite to the way that A is A. “The copulative – in – translates a Chinese character of notorious ambiguity (usually pronounced *soku* in Japanese). Its meanings include ‘i.e.,’ ‘at the same time,’ ‘and also,’ ‘or,’ ‘forthwith,’ and ‘as such.’ The common ingredient is the connecting of two items or attributes, the second of which is attached to the first as a matter of course” (PN, 65). For Nishida and Tanabe, one could say then “that ‘A transforms B and B transforms A’ in virtue of ‘something common to both’” (PN, 66).

Hence, the “not A” or “B” that volatizes every A is, to use Schelling’s term, a “barbarian principle” and an “irreducible remainder [nie aufgehender Rest]” that operates more like Plato and Schelling’s μη όν, which is not to be confused with οὐκ οὖν, the mere negation of being. The οὐκ merely marks the dismissal of A as not being the case. The μη όν, however, does not negate A and, in fact, Schelling endeavored to do something that for the Kyoto School goes back at least as far as Nāgārjuna, namely to think without negation and thereby without discrete identities. The μη όν names that which opposes A within A and hence cannot

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8 Nishida also deployed this term in his final and breathtaking essay, “Nothingness and the Religious Worldview” (1945). “Buddhism expresses this paradox through the dialectic of ‘is’ and ‘is not’ (*soku hi*). I am indebted to Suzuki Daisetsu for showing me the following passage in the Diamond Sutra: Because all dharmas are not all dharmas. Therefore they are called all dharmas. Because there is no Buddha, there is Buddha; because there are no sentient beings, there are sentient beings.” Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview, trans. David A. Dilworth (University of Hawaii Press: Honolulu, 1987), 70. Nishida also traces this to Nāgārjuna, whose “eightfold negation denies every possibility of objective predication,” but which does not result “in a dialectic of substance that becomes subject in the Hegelian sense” (71). In this last essay, Nishida also embraces Shinran and *zangedō*. “There can be no religion of self-power [*jiriki*]” (80). Religious repentance “must be an abandoning of the self in its existential depths—a feeling of shame concerning the very existence of the self” (77). Towards the end, Nishida and Tanabe seem very close, although some critical nuances separate the two projects. For an account of this, see Nishitani Keiji, Nishida Kitarō (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1991), esp. 161-191
in any way be assimilated by A but which nonetheless belongs to A. “A” and “not A” are more like contraries that belong to the deeper life of a unity. In the Kyoto School, as well as with Schelling, we find something like what William Blake in *Jerusalem* attempted to activate in his own thinking, namely, thinking without negation but rather with the progression of contraries. “Negations are not Contraries! Contraries mutually Exist: But Negations Exist Not: Exceptions & Objections & Beliefs Exist not: nor shall they ever be organized for ever & ever: If thou separate from me, thou art a Negation.”9 In this way Tanabe and Schelling – and even Nietzsche – endeavored to think the progression without the resolution of contraries, for self-identity does not mark a discrete identity derived through negation. In this way, Deleuze was right to defend Schelling as a thinker of non-negating difference.

How unjust, in this respect, is Hegel’s critical remark about the black cows! Of these two philosophers, it is Schelling who brings difference out of the night of the Identical, and with finer, more varied and more terrifying flashes than those of contradiction: with *progressivity*. Anger and love are powers of the Idea which develop on the basis of a μη ὄν - in other words, not from a negative or a non-being [οὐκ ὄν] but from a problematic being or non-existent, a being implicit in those existences beyond the ground.10

Tanabe was much closer to the Schelling that emerged after the appearance of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* (1807). For Schelling, the progression of opposites does not admit of any kind of closure or mediation and continuously demands that the terms perish absolutely to each other and not forgo their opposition. Only in the love that is the affirmation of the *soku* (without having first demanded the resolution of opposites) is there the discontinuous progression of thinking. “It is therefore through the Other-power [*tariki*] of love, not through the self-power [*jiriki*] of reason, that ethics achieves fulfillment as an ethics of *gensō*. In this sense, Schelling’s logic of conversion and transformation

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accords with what I have described above as metanoetics, and I can agree with it completely” (PM, 139).11

Upāya in this respect is the movement of contraries by which one says the true by way of the false and simultaneously repents for having ineluctably betrayed the true in the false. This is not an avoidable mistake. It is the condition for the possibility of speaking at all and hence conversion’s constant circulation with repentance. In upāya one gains oneself by constantly dying to oneself – becoming utterly a question to oneself - in the soku circulation of metanoesis. One sacrifices one’s own power (or jiriki) and is resurrected as Other-power, as the gift or grace of tariki.12 “It is no longer I who pursue philosophy, but rather zange that thinks through me” (PM, 1). But since upāya, the becoming the proxy of Other-power (tariki) or absolute difference, is still jiriki soku tariki, the self is both grateful to have become the gift of tariki, yet repentant that every reception of the radical Other’s gift is also a betrayal of its absolute alterity. Hence, every grateful reception of the gift is also an acknowledgement of the radical finitude of the recipient and thereby a new occasion for zange or repentance. In every minute, the way of zange is both repentance for the betrayal of the Pure Land and grateful acknowledgement of the ongoing gift of the Pure Land, its (to use Tanabe’s adaptation of Daoist language) “action of non-action,” or “effortless naturalness,” or “action without an acting subject.” Thus, in every minute, seen from zangedō, there is a circle of repentance and conversion, of death and resurrection. The death in every minute is what Shinran called ōsō, the expulsion, the way to the Pure Land (absolute alterity, the nothing, the Great Death), living sub specie mortis (PM, 127). Resurrection is the gift of tariki or Other-power and hence is gensō, the return from the Pure Land in order to aid others and to

11 This is not to say that Tanabe is completely in accord with Schelling. Tanabe found Schelling’s account of love (as the pivot of the circular progression of thinking) to be too abstract. “In this sense, we may say that Schelling’s thought stops at a metaphysics of love without arriving at a religious witness to love” (PM, 142).

12 Tanabe alludes, as did Nishida in his final essay (“Nothingness and the Religious Worldview”), to a conflict between the common perception of the Zen tradition, which seemed to praise one’s capacity to achieve one’s power on one’s own (jiriki) and the True Pure Land sect, which seemed to praise the need for the grace of Other-power (tariki). Yet as both Nishida and Tanabe saw very clearly, there is no jiriki without tariki and no tariki without jiriki. Both express contrary aspects of a prior ontological unity. I have no power all by myself for my very self is the Other as myself. Yet if the Other is simply the Other, then the Other is not a matter of my responsibility, my witness, the locality that is the my of affirmation itself.
engage the new moment compassionately. Zangedō is the eternal revolving circle of ōsō and gensō, of departure and return, of eviction and reunion, of death and rebirth, as the autoproduc
tive circle of difference.

Upāya is the capacity to use the opposite of oneself to express oneself. It was typically used to describe the capacity of Buddhist monks to find ways or “skillful means” to express difficult thoughts in ways that the unenlightened could hear. That is, they had to speak the truth in the language of their acolyte’s wrong views and deluded ideas. For Tanabe, the Pure Land always speaks in the language of the impure land, silence always speaks in language, the infinite always expresses itself as the creaturely, the Dao births itself as the ten thousand, and the absolute future always ironically displaces itself as the present. The absolute uses the “skillful means” of the finite to express itself and enlightenment, responding to the ineluctable upāya of absolute nothingness, accepts both the gift and repents for its betrayal of absolute nothingness. It “is the world of mediation through which such a reciprocal transformation enables relative beings to move toward nothingness and to return to the world to serve as a means of enlightenment and salvation for others” (PM, 22).

The self, then, is a kind of pivot, the soku, around which opposing forces turn. The soku is the copula around which opposites circulate elliptically, much in the same way that the Zuangzi (Chuang Tzu) speaks of the Pivot of the Dao. The self is upāya, the skillful means of nothingness to express itself as something and for the ongoing satoric realization that something is fundamentally an expression of nothing. “The relative self, then, as being that serves as the medium – or means (upāya) – of absolute nothingness and yet remains opposed to nothingness, contains within itself the relative independence of being independent of the absolute” (PM, 22). But for the pivot really to turn, its center really must die to itself, as the Great Doubt expresses itself as the Great Death. “No one can live a genuine life except through death. Living in death, acting as one who has died, becomes the way to true life” (PM, 163). As Zen Master Bu-nan advocated, “while alive be a dead man.”

13 In the second of the Inner Chapters (“All Things Being Equal”), the Chuang Tzu (Zuangzi) argues that “When even This and That have lost all sense of themselves, we call it the Pivot of the Tao, and when the pivot is born into the middle of the great circle, it serves without end.” The Essential Chuang Tzu, trans. Sam Hamill and J. P. Seaton (Shambhala Publications: Boston, 1998), 11.
In a remarkable reading, a reading that demanded the Great Death inherent within the enlightened or metanoetic practice of reading, Tanabe links the circle of zangedō (jiriki soku tariki and tariki soku jiriki) to Nietzsche’s self-turning circle of the eternal return of the same. Despite being unable to understand Zarathustra for years and having written him off as a fad of the Japanese youth, Tanabe returned during the height of the war to read Nietzsche and found him to be the exact opposite of what he had thought earlier. Nietzsche’s circle of absolute affirmation in a crucial respect expresses Tanabe’s circle of absolute renunciation. Even though Nietzsche seems to enter the circle from the opposite side than does Tanabe (affirmation rather than renunciation), he too affirms the circle (albeit as a near “sage”14 and hence in a way not accessible to “old fools” like Tanabe). Both circles overcome the ego that would produce its own difference (honganbokori solved by Nietzschean self-overcoming). “In this sense the structure of metanoesis is one of infinite spiral process. It is, so to speak, an ‘eternal returning’ (Nietzsche’s ewige Wiederkunft) in the true sense of the term, namely a genuine ‘repetition’ through the power of the transcendent, and is therefore the fulfillment of the movement by eternity” (PM, 5-6).

If one translates the eternal return into the language of karma, in which the past exacts a vice grip on the present, relegating the present moment reactive, to the gnashing teeth of the “it was” in the ressentiment to a present it cannot affirm, the circular satori of the eternal return can be heard in another register. According to the Buddhist notion of karma, which sees karmic links of the past as reaching back to an infinite past, there is no escape from karma: each present moment is ordained by the karma of the past” (PM, 111). In response, the eternal

14 “Although fundamentally a sage, Nietzsche was not without his imperfections, a finite historical individual forever denied the fullness of his sagehood. We would do better to say that he was not an actual sage but only a potential one. The way of Zen, which seeks to awaken people to the Buddha nature latent within them, is close to the thought of Zarathustra here in its teaching of the will to power” (PM, 113). Nietzsche, who reminds Tanabe of the “Buddhist bodhisattva-ideal” (PM, 113), speaks to the circular structure of this ideal. The sage is not an identitarian state that, once achieved, endeavors, like the conatus, to preserve itself. The sage is always born anew, always dies anew, is always on the way to a boundless love for all sentient beings, but, as something finite, always a living, metanoetic contradiction: a finite being loving infinitely. The very force of infinity (= the force of death) demands that the finitude of mortal love always die anew. The boundless love for all sentient beings is always soku the fallenness and location and karmic, historical constraint of one’s location.
return does not ask the present moment to be otherwise than it is, that is, it does not react against the karmic necessity of time. *Amor fati* loves the moment – each discontinuous moment – without asking that it be like the moment before. It loves the moment καθ’ αυτό, in itself, without asking that it be for me. As Nietzsche proclaims of the eternal return in Zarathustra, “So das ist das Leben? Wohlan! Noch einmal!” So that is life? Well then! Once more! This affirmation of each moment as the proxy of life is also therefore the renunciation of any moment as adequate to life in itself. The affirmation of eternity in each moment is done anew in every moment as the present moment dies to the past moment. *Karma* is not a continuous hold of the past on the present. It is the karmic spell of the past as the residue that threatens to take away the novelty of each new moment. Affirmation soku renunciation, to coin a phrase, renounces the now to preserve in affirmation the discontinuity of all nows.

In slave morality, as karmic pressure “reaches its peak, the wheels of time grind to a halt and finally cease to turn. Life passes into a state of stagnation and suffocation” (PM, 111). *Karma* asphyxiates the self-turning wheel of the child. “But if life, faced with this outermost limit, can move beyond itself, abandon itself, and accept death, the time of the present, which has stopped, will be transfigured into the fullness of a moment possessed of the weight of infinity. Here is the manifestation of infinity transcending life and death” (PM, 111). It is the manifestation, following Dōgen (1200-1253) of the moon in the dewdrop, of the metanoetic circulation of an absolute future in the dewdrop of karmic constriction. The eternal return is thinking, dying to itself, in order to be itself, such that the very copula (the *be*), expresses the eternal circulation of honganbokori and redemption, of gift and betrayal, of karma and the *amor fati* that preserves the alterity and discontinuity of each moment. The eternal return is itself, like time, by continuously overcoming itself. What then is the Übermensch but a sage (PM, 101), a site of the pure love of the time of the other, an egoless affirmation of the eternal return as the love of the Pure Land of absolute difference (the ōsō of the way of death in every moment) in intimate circulation with the gensō or return to the world? This circulation has no ego, no center around which the circulation extends itself with variable circumferences.

To adopt the precision of a geometrical metaphor, the circularity we are speaking of here may be likened to a series of ellipses, each of
which enjoys its own variable eccentricity, unlike the repetition of concentric circles drawn one on top of another. Just as it is impossible to determine the enveloping curve that embraces the whole series of ellipses like a universal concept, so, too, the ‘universal now’ is not an integral locus to be grasped by intuition but something infinite to be realized only through one’s action. That is, the unity of time in the present is not a static, self-enclosed unity, but a dynamic, open unity that holds within itself a contradiction of opposites: a return soku departure. (PM, 132)

The metanoetic pivot, the eternal return of the same (thought variously as either renunciation soku affirmation or affirmation soku renunciation or, to use Nietzschean terminology transfigured into the life of ellipses, hammer soku philosophizing with a tuning fork) is not a repetition of a self-same operation. This was the failure of the Hegelian dialectic, namely, that it refused to die of its own antinomies. Rather it is repetition, to borrow a phrase from Deleuze, as “the differenciator of difference,” of difference repeating itself as difference, as the repetition of itself as the self-displacement of itself, of a discontinuous flow of circular movements (the spinning pivot of the soku of death and resurrection) that do not emanate from a shared center. The spinning pivot of soku does not retain its center in time. Rather, time is the resurrection of new centers out of the Great Death of former centers. There is no integral locus by which to center thinking in order to pre-

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15 “In spite of that, Hegel holds firm to the self-identity of reason, confuses it with the unity of the transcendent action-faith of religion through the transformation of nothingness in absolute critique, and clings throughout to a logic based on self-power in line with his efforts to establish a system similar to Greek ontology” (PM, 55). It is in this sense that Adorno, in his Negative Dialectics, once described the Hegelian dialectic as the “belly gone mad.” Tanabe here also locates the elliptical progression of thinking in the philosophy of Schelling and his critique of Hegel. “The synthesis of the present in history cannot take the form of concentric circles drawn about a single focus because the congruence between the past and the future is one of analogical similarity and can only yield a whole of partially similar circularities: the two centers, or twofold essence, are unified without weakening the opposition between them. This is also the internal, dual structure of freedom, whose unity is a personal unity of love, not a synthesis of identity based on reason. This sets Schelling’s thought apart from rational philosophies built on the principle of identity” (PM, 135).

16 Vide Deleuze, DR. “Given two heterogeneous series, two series of differences, the precursor plays the part of the differenciator of these differences” (DR, 119) “It is the in-itself of difference or the ‘differently different’ - in other words, difference in the second degree, the self-different which relates different to different by itself” (DR, 119). It “perpetually displaces itself within itself and perpetually disguises itself in the series” (DR, 120).
vent it from dying of its own antinomies. Thinking cannot orient itself to its own activity, but rather is itself discontinuously amidst the self-displacing pivot, giving birth to itself anew, and in its gratitude for the gift of each new moment, for the gift even of reading, knows nothing of hoarding, only the Great Compassion (Mahākūrana) born in each moment of the Great Death.

In this sense, the Kyoto Nietzsche, the Nietzsche re-engendered in accordance with the allowed by the generosity of his experience of thinking, returns as the Zarathustra written “for everybody and for nobody.” In this era in which we constantly seek the new Nietzsche, the Kyoto Nietzsche teaches us that Nietzsche can only be Nietzsche in ever being Nietzsche anew. As Nietzsche already knew about himself, there is no pure Nietzsche. Yet the impurity of thought soku the eternal regeneration of thought is a Nietzsche who returns to us with a new opening. New places and new voices allow Nietzsche to rescue the Buddhist tradition from the narcissism of the New Age Movement (which ironically operates in perpetual flight from the renewal of thinking) and bring it to bear on the generosity and generativity of thinking and on the very real problems that Nietzsche rightly insisted belonged to our time.
On Being Downstream

Mats Rosengren

Thinking in history requires some reflection\(^1\) – perhaps not primarily on the concept of history, but rather on the notion of thinking in history. Once we get a grasp of what this “thinking in” could mean, other things will, I hope, follow. Hence, as a way of introducing my thoughts on this topic, I would like to reflect upon the meaning of a metaphor I stumbled upon in one of the texts of the French/Greek philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis.\(^2\) The metaphor to which I refer is “being downstream” (être en aval), qua description of our historical and social situation.

There are, of course, several different senses in which being downstream can be understood in connection with history and time. Most evidently, perhaps, the notion of downstream evokes a river that flows from a perhaps unknown source or origin towards its goal (the sea) – in this respect, the metaphor tends to guide our thinking about history, about our being in time and in history, towards a conception where time flows, irrevocably, independently, not heeding our human needs and preoccupations, following a pre-established direction, where we, as it were, are more or less reluctantly washed away with the flow. Ever since Heraclitus\(^3\) this image has been an integral part of Western thinking, ceaselessly subjected to different interpretations, but none the

\(^1\) I have previously written two texts in Swedish on this subject: “Den ohörda tanken, den slumpartade formuleringen och den nytänkta idén – skäl att bry sig om filosofins historia” [The Unheard Thought, the Random Formulation and the Newly Thought Idea – Reasons to Care about the History of Philosophy], in Mats Rosengren and Ola Sigurdson (eds.), Penelopes věv [The Cloth of Penelope], (Glänta production: Göteborg, 2003); and “Skapelse ur intet” [Creation out of Nothing] in Res Publica, no. 58, 2003. The present essay restates, reformulates and develops themes from both of these texts.


\(^3\) Cf. Fragm. no. 12, 49a, and 91.
less always implying that change, time and therefore history has a direction whether we like it or not. We may succeed in building some barriers and, for a time, be able to divert the current from its main course, but in the end the flow of time will carry us all away towards whatever end or telos it itself is approaching.

Moreover, the image being downstream in history or time evokes a difference in level: What has happened before is upstream; what is to come, what will come to pass, is even further downstream. And we are all familiar with how differences in elevation tend to transform themselves into differences in value: the metaphor might seem to imply that everything was better before the present, and will be worse in the future – the water used to be clearer and fresher; after us, it will be even more polluted. In this sense the notion of being downstream is a nostalgic one – expressing a longing for times past and shores long passed, and urging us to look for the faraway source or origin whence it all sprang forth.

But the value-transformation may work in the opposite direction as well. The trickle, coming from a small source lost in the high, barren wastelands of unfriendly mountains, gains strength, flows more easily, grows mighty and strong as it reaches the valleys and becomes a majestic river in the flatlands, where it unhesitatingly chooses the easiest course towards its goal – the sea, farther away still. If you interpret the metaphor in this way, what is better, richer and more desirable for us human beings will constantly be found downstream, and the final goal, the sea, even if forever unattainable, will represent an ultimate value, that which gives meaning and purpose to time, history, and to us all.

The three interpretations mentioned this far all convey what I would like to call a heteronomous notion of history and time – that is, a notion of history as something given and immutable, its laws and properties given once and for all by nature, God, or whatever. Of course, this notion does not utterly exclude human influence on the events of history, which would be absurd. To a large extent however, it presents history as pre-determined by laws and conditions beyond human reach, laws and conditions that we have to accept and subordinate ourselves to.

The interpretation I favor is quite different, much less intuitive and not evocative of a river at all, or even streaming water. For me, the notion of being downstream, is consonant with being thrown into water that is already there – in puddles, canals, small lakes and swamps. In
this marshland the water flows to and fro, currents are created, grow in
strength, diverge, concord, diminish and disappear. Canals go dry,
others overflow, puddles stagnate and evaporate, others are re-
connected to the bigger lakes and so on. No direction is inscribed in
this interpretation, no from where to there. In these marshes of history
every position we may take or find ourselves in is always already
downstream – in the sense that there is always water there before us,
filled with toxic or nourishing particles and debris, the remains of ear-
lier happenings in the marshes. Nor is there a difference in value im-
plied by this interpretation – the different parts of our marshland are
just different, other in relation to each other, more or less suitable for
different purposes, nothing more.

The purpose of this metaphorical exercise is, of course, to try to say
something comprehensible about the way in which we affect ourselves
and are affected by history while creating philosophy as well as other
things. It should already be quite clear that I reject the notion of His-
tory, and even of Time, as something with its own unalterable proper-
ties, affecting us human beings in predetermined and unavoidable
ways.

But I am not rejecting the notion of change. And I am not implying
that change could, as it were, go both ways: what is changed is
changed into something other, and even if it were changed “back
again” it would not – in the strict sense that I am concerned with here –
be the same again. At the very best it would be “an other same” – that
is something that for some purpose or other can serve as the same thing
as that which was there before.

But does not this imply that I accept a general direction after all? Well, yes – a direction in change: that which has changed cannot return
to exactly what it was. For us human beings, aging is an example of
change that we cannot hinder nor reverse, try as we might. And aging
may of course be seen as giving our individual existences a direction –
from the cradle to the grave, so to speak. But our way of experiencing,
or living, aging is by no means an unavoidable fact, identical for all
members of the human race, then, now and forever. Nor is it a fact of
nature, in a traditional objective, ontological sense – but it is of course
an unavoidable aspect in our human lives, as we know and experience
them. But to promote even the most evident and tangible of human
experiences to an ontological condition strikes me as an unacceptable
anthropomorphism. Such a “promotion” would, as it were, “cover
over” our very same human activity, i.e., the transformation of a specific experience to an objective condition for all human life, by instituting this condition as a natural one beyond our reach. So, while I, along with everybody else, obviously have to deal with aging as an irreversible process of change in my own life, and in the world we live in, I do not accept an overall ontological direction governing all changes.

But there is interaction, of course – one change affects, and is affected by, what surrounds it, and may cause other changes. There are large areas, or magmas to use one of Cornelius Castoriadis’s central notions, within our human world in which changes are predictable, even foreseeable – according to scientific laws for instance – and where consequences can be calculated and evaluated. No human life as we know it would be possible if this was not the case.

Not all domains or magmas in our world are subject to such predictability, though, nor are the relations between the domains one of simple, or even complex, causation. In the fabric of our world there are thresholds, interruptions, gaps as well as series, chains and connections. And this means that, if we are to try to understand our world and our being in the world, we must abandon several myths about ourselves and our world:

First of all we have to reject the notion of universal causality, for example the myth of the river of Being flowing from its source (“the Big Bang,” for instance) towards its ever faraway goal. Then, and in accordance with this, we must reject the idea that Being is One – that everything that is, is a variation of one and the same basic Being. And we must abandon the notion of Being as being universally rational – the idea that our human rationality is capable, in principle, of unveiling all the enigmas of Being and eventually to create a Theory-of-Everything. Finally, we must accept that we are capable of creating our world, indeed, that we already are creating our world – in an ontological as well as in an epistemological sense. Indeed, to my mind neither history, nor time, nor our world is something that we endure. On the contrary, they are our proper creations.

Creation
To elucidate this, I fear, far too condensed introduction, I will need to address the question of creation more directly – and to this end I will
make use of Cornelius Castoriadis. His position in this matter is radical:

[T]here is creation in being, or, more precisely, being is creation, vis formandi: not creation of “matter-energy” but creation of forms. There are always necessary but not sufficient conditions for this creation. Creation, as far as form – eidos – is concerned, is ex nihilo, but it is not in nihilo, nor cum nihilo. What is the point in adopting a term with such a loaded history? On the one hand, to end the subterfuges and the sophistries concerning the question of the new: either there is creation, or the history of being (and consequently of humanity too) is an interminable repetition (or an eternal return).

One reason for taking Castoriadis’s position on the question of creation seriously is that this “question of the new” is in fact inevitable, in science as in everyday life. The last fifty years of research in epistemology, political and social theory, as well as within the human sciences in general – with its emphasis upon the social construction of facts, the production (as opposed to gathering or collecting) of knowledge, and the intrinsic and unavoidable relations between knowledge, power and our all too human desire for truth – would seem more or less nonsensical unless some kind of genuinely human capacity of creation of new “things” is presupposed. And this should come as no surprise, since we do create new things all the time – from making bread to composing music, from building houses to making friends. Creation is an everyday affair, part and parcel of our human lives.

But human creation is infinitely more complex than these ordinary activities may lead us to believe. The examples just mentioned all stress or assume acts of creation as things done intentionally, by an individual intending to create a more or less definite something, whereas the most important (and perhaps most insidious) forms of human creation are not attributable or reducible to individual, conscious intentions – at least not in general or in simple or obvious ways.

4 “[I]l y a création dans l’être, ou, plus exactement, que l’être est création, vis formandi: non pas création de ‘matière-énergie,’ mais création de formes. De cette création il y a chaque fois des conditions nécessaires mais non suffisantes. La création quant à la forme, à l’eidos, est ex nihilo, mais elle n’est pas in nihilo, ni cum nihilo. Pourquoi adopter ce terme à histoire chargée? D’une part, pour en finir avec les subterfuges et les sophismes concernant la question du nouveau: ou bien il y a création, ou bien l’histoire de l’être (donc aussi de l’humanité) est interminable répétition (ou éternel retour),” in “Complexité, magmas et histoire” in Fait et à faire – les carrefours du labyrinthe V (Seuil, Paris, 1997), p. 212. The translation is my own.
Colors, to take one of Castoriadis’s favorite (and problematic) examples, do not exist in nature, they are human creations. It would hardly make sense to ask for the intentions lurking behind the creation of orange, or to try to find out the intended meaning of the visual spectrum. Castoriadis writes:

To the question “Why do certain classes of living beings grasp certain electromagnetic waves as colors and as these colors?” there is no answer, [...]. This faculty of making be, of bringing out of itself modes of being, determinations and laws [...] is what I call radical creation.5

It seems to me that we have good reasons to follow in Castoriadis’s wake and accept that we humans are – always in specific and changing ways, but not always, or rather quite seldom, consciously – creating our own facts, our own truths, our own possibilities. In a profoundly cosmogonic and ontological way we do create our world in doing politics, science, peace and war. And this is why we so badly need to address the problems of creation, not only in relation to literature, poetry or art, but in the very core of the scientific endeavor as well as in our historical existence. We must at least try to answer the following questions: How does this human creation come about? What can it achieve? Are there limits to our ability to create, and if so, what are they? In short – how are we to understand this creation in which we are all engaged?

Out of nothing?

Let me turn more directly to Castoriadis’s radical and problematic notion of creation. In another one of his many formulations concerning creatio ex nihilo, in Fait et à faire, he writes:

5 Cornelius Castoriadis, “Done and to be done” in The Castoriadis Reader, ed. and transl. David Ames Curtis (Blackwell: Oxford, 1997), p. 404. This theme is also developed in “Anthropologie, philosophie, politique” in La Monté de l’Insignifiance – les carrefours de labyrinthe IV, p. 110 and onwards, where Castoriadis states that “L’imagination commence avec la sensibilité; elle est manifeste dans les donnés les plus élémentaires de la sensibilité. [...] L’imagination incorporée dans notre sensibilité a fait être cette forme d’être [les couleurs] qui n’existe pas dans la nature (dans la nature il n’y a pas de couleurs, il n’y a que des radiations), le rouge, le bleu, la couleur en général, que nous “percevons” – terme abusif certes – et que d’autres animaux, parce que leur imagination sensorielle est autre, ‘perçoivent’ autrement.” (p. 111)
It is clear that social-historical creation (as in any other domain, for that matter), if it is unmotivated – *ex nihilo* – always takes place under constraints (it does not occur *in nihilo*, nor *cum nihilo*). Creation does not signify, not in the social-historical domain, nor anywhere else, that anything can happen anywhere, at any time and in any way.\(^6\)

Castoriadis’s focus is thus unmotivated creation – that is, the “capacity to make emerge (*faire émerger*) that which is not given, nor derivable, via combinations or in any other way, from what is given.”\(^7\) Castoriadis returns to this point throughout his work, incessantly insisting on the crucial difference between *causing* and *conditioning*. But how are we to understand this cleavage within the domain of human creation? How is the necessity of such a distinction founded by Castoriadis?

It seems to me that the main reason for Castoriadis to insist on creation as conditioned and not as caused is that the alternative is fundamentally absurd. If we do not reckon with our ability to create *ex nihilo* (in the sense that Castoriadis gives to this notion) we would have to admit all kinds of oddities. We would, for example, have to accept that everything that now *is*, from hairdryers and hot-dogs to symphonies and quantum-physics, is out of necessity; and therefore, in a sense, it has been there (where?) ever since the Big Bang (or what ever *arche* you choose). Or, if it is not already there, at least that “everything” is fully explainable in casual terms – a position that Castoriadis calls “the myth of being as determined.” This critique is obviously formulated from within our human situation, following a rationale that one may call immanent (be this term not excessively burdened with metaphysical signification). It may be summarized as follows: Since the notion of universal causality and “the total rationality of what there is” seems to be at odds with the way the world actually presents itself to us, and with the way *we* are in this world, we have to assign to causality and rationality their proper place and range – that is to the strata in the

\(^6\) “Il est clair que la création social-historique (comme du reste n’importe quel autre domaine), si elle est immotivée – *ex nihilo* – a toujours lieu sous contraintes (elle ne se fait ni *in nihilo*, ni *cum nihilo*). Ni dans le domaine social-historique, ni nulle part ailleurs, la création ne signifie pas que n’importe quoi peut arriver n’importe où, n’importe quand et n’importe comment.” *Fait et à faire – les carrefours du labyrinthe*, (Seuil:Paris, 1997), p. 20. The translation is my own.

\(^7\) “Création: la capacité de faire émerger ce qui n’est pas donné, ni dérivable, combinatoirement ou autrement, à partir du donné.” “Anthropologie, philosophie, politique” in *La Monté de l’Insignifiance – les carrefours de labyrinthe IV*, p. 110. The translation is my own.
magnas that actually, inevitably and necessarily are “ruled” by the ensidic logic – no world is even thinkable without an ensidic dimension.

“Ensidic thinking” or “ensidic logic” is Castoriadis’s shorthand expression for the kind of thinking and logic that he calls “ensembliste-identitaire” – that is, thinking based on the idea that all aspects of being are specific differentiations of a determined original element, an element that therefore should be considered to constitute the unity, identity, or essence of these aspects of being. The ensidic logic rejects the possibility of human creation and, thus, posits the origin of the laws of our world (natural laws as well as social ones) outside of our world and society. In this respect the ensidic thinking is heteronomous and tends to “cover over” the fact that man and society inevitably are autonomous – that is that they posit their own laws. Needless to say, Castoriadis claims that ensidic thinking has been dominating Western thought ever since philosophy was created.

As soon as we have rid ourselves of these imperious and heteronomous notions of causality and rationality, we realize that if there is (to be) any world at all, it has to be created in some way. And since the options of God or of evolution both seem to presuppose the very notions of universal causality and/or saturating rationality that we are trying to avoid, and since the world undeniably is there, we are left only with ourselves and our autonomous ability to create our own world. Hence, in order to understand ourselves and our world, we have to presuppose that we are endowed with a radical imagination that makes it possible for us to create out of nothing – that is to create new forms in and for our world. (This is of course a very rough sketch of what I take to be the main arguments supporting Castoriadis’s notion of radical imagination and creation.)

But this unmotivated creation, this creatio ex nihilo, is, as Castoriadis says in the piece I just quoted, not to be thought of as a random upsurge of hitherto unknown forms, thoughts or things. It is a conditioned creation, a creation that “always takes place under constraints.” And these constraints are of many various and immersed kinds: social, historical, conceptual, corporal, biological, psychical, and so on. The task of describing exactly the ways in which they limit and constrain, and the way they support and condition our radical imagination is immense, and I will not even try to approach this question here.
Let me instead follow another route: If we are able to create out of nothing, if we all have it “in us” to be the origin of our world, then we urgently need to rework our conception of origin. The Italian philosopher Fabio Ciaramelli suggests, in his detailed analyses of Castoriadis’s notion of creation, that we should conceptualize the activity of radical imagination – that is creatio ex nihilo – as a “temporalization of the originary.”

To say that the originary is temporalized is, at least in my interpretation, to say that the originary is not an origin, but an ever present originating. Not a thing, a point, an arche but an activity or rather a movement, a change. This way of conceiving the origin is by no means only a creation of Castoriadis’s. For example, Jacques Derrida has, in several of his early works, conceptualized this ever present movement as différance, and he has to my mind convincingly shown both that the classical conception of origin (arche) is and has always been faulty, as well as how the logic guiding the “metaphysical cover up” of this fact works. This change or différance – itself unexplainable, yes even unthinkable, as long as we remain only within the framework of ensidic thinking – is, as it were, what makes originating possible. Another way to phrase this would be to say that what presents itself to us as an origin (that is, origin in the classical, heteronomous sense) must, to be able to thus present itself, always already partake in the movement of originating. But exactly what does this movement do (if one will permit me this somewhat intentionalistic language)? It engenders meaning for beings, it presents a world to one or several beings, a world that has some sense for them. Being in general is chaos, Castoriadis claims, it is the complete absence of meaning and sense, of form, and is therefore not liveable for any creature. “Creation emerges,” Ciaramelli explains, “in order to cover over the Chaos that nevertheless manifests itself in and through such an emergence.”

Thus we are entitled to draw the following conclusion. Since there is a world (the world we all are living in) that presents itself to us,

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9 Jacques. Derrida has, in his essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Social Sciences,” shown that to rework the concept of “structure” and “centered structure” is also to rework the concept of origin and of all the concepts that are “in system” with it. I have tried to state some of the consequence of such a reworking in my Doxologi- en essä om kunskap, Rhetor, 2002.
10 Ciaramelli, op. cit., p. 48
through always already present social-imaginary significations,\textsuperscript{11} as a diversity of meaning (a stone has meaning for us, as well as a word or a cosmogonic theory etc.), there must be an originating movement that “makes sense” for us, that institutes the social-imaginary significations that we live through and by. Furthermore, this must mean that whatever the world is, it is at least organizable in a way that is in some minimal sense meaningful to us. This creation of a world endowed with meaning is what Ciaramelli calls (if I have understood him correctly) “immanent creation.”\textsuperscript{12}

There is no possible way for us to “go beyond” this immanent creation, since this creation is the very creation of our world. The world is given to us – we may be bats or human beings – as being already there, something that we cannot doubt or question (in the sense that we cannot seriously, in practice, doubt our need for food or water if we want to continue on existing.) And it is given to us the way it is given to us because we are what we are.\textsuperscript{13}

This notion of immanent creation should not be understood as implying that there is a non-immanent creation as well. Ciaramelli writes, in somewhat Heideggerian language, that:

\begin{quote}
...this does not signify that behind the ontic origin, which each time is determinate, there exists a stratum of being – an ontological dimension – that one should attempt to discover or unveil or recollect: in that case one would once again, despite everything, be thinking the origin as a determinate event – that is as the upsurge of a tode ti – and one would overlook the originary qua self-advent.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

In fact, if there are Gods, theories or even a universe at all it is because they have been created by us human beings through the unfolding of this immanent originating movement – the “figure and its horizon created together,” as Ciaramelli puts it.\textsuperscript{15} And these figures have, to the extent that they are already present in our human world, been instituted

\textsuperscript{11} Why not just talk about “social significations” \textit{tout court}? In “Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary” Castoriadis explains: “I talk about imagination because of the two connotations of the word: the connection with images in the most general sense, that is, forms (Bilder-, Einbildung etc.); and the connection with the idea of invention or, better and properly speaking, with creation.” \textit{The Castoriadis Reader}, ed. and transl. David Ames Curtis (Blackwell: Oxford, 1997), p. 321.
\textsuperscript{12} Ciaramelli, op.cit., p 49
\textsuperscript{13} I touched upon this idea of Castoriadis’s above – see footnote 4.
\textsuperscript{14} Ciaramelli, op.cit., p. 47
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. p. 48
as social-imaginary significations and incorporated in the magmas of the society in which we happen to find ourselves. And we ourselves are, as Castoriadis once said, but walking fragments of the institution of our society:

History is creation: the creation of total forms of human life. Social-historical forms are not “determined” by natural or historical “laws.” Society is self-creation. “That which” creates society and history is the instituting society, as opposed to the instituted society. The instituting society is the social imaginary in the radical sense. The self-institution of society is the creation of a human world: of “things,” “reality,” language, norms, values, ways of life and death, objects for which we live and objects for which we die – and of course first and foremost, the creation of the human individual in which the institution of society is massively embedded.16

We may now return to our initial metaphor – on being downstream – with a perhaps more developed idea of how the waterlands in which we find ourselves affect us, and of what they contain. The marshes in which we wander are magmas of social-imaginary significations instituted by those who were here before us and transmitted, upheld, transformed and communicated through different kinds of institutions: language, of course, and habits, ways of being in the world, practices – but also and more concretely political systems, schools, laws, trade-agreements, etc. These social-imaginary significations are the forms in and through which we live, they present a world to us.

What about philosophy?

But how, if at all, does this conception of society and history as creation affect how we do philosophy today? Is there anything specific about this creative approach to questions related to history and thinking that has not already been developed within, say, the hermeneutical tradition and contemporary constructivist epistemology?

I think there is indeed something yet to be developed here, even if the affinities with both hermeneutics and constructivist epistemologies are many and undeniable. In the beginning of this text I briefly men-

tioned three myths or ideas about ourselves and our world that we have to abandon if we accept that history and society is auto-creation – the three ideas were, as you will recall, the notion of universal causality; the idea that everything that is is a variation of one and the same basic Being and the notion of Being as universally rational. Once we abandon these notions we find ourselves in a consciously autonomous position – that is in a position where it is clear to us human beings that we institute our own laws, be they natural, social, or historical. But our instituting creativity is, as we have seen, not totally free or random: it is a conditioned activity, inevitably taking place within the constraints of a specific social-historical situation, within the specific social-imaginary significations that constitute the situation. So I am not implying (nor is Castoriadis, for that matter) that our ability to create could be an argument in favor of crude historical revisionism – the atom-bomb was dropped over Hiroshima, and the Holocaust really took place, there is no doubt in my mind about that. But these facts only exist as social-imaginary significations within the dominant doxa of most of our scientific and political communities – nowhere else. And these communities, as well as their doxai, are ever-changing, but not according to a pre-established order or necessity – which makes it all the more important to reflect upon the ways in which historical change is created (not takes place) and the ways in which facts, fictions and truths are instituted (not found, given or unveiled). And this is a political as well as a scientific task.

In philosophy, where the affinities with the hermeneutical tradition become clear and obvious, this task would amount to, among other things, a need to be aware of the social-imaginary significations that condition our thought (i.e. to do history of philosophy as well as critical conceptual and ideological analysis); how they have been understood in the past; how they can be interpreted in the present; how they were created and how they have been transmitted and upheld; what possibilities they offer us today, and what they deny us. The philosopher has to deal with the significations that are always already there – and they may take form in concrete instituted and institutionalized social demands, like the practical constraints of his or her discipline – but is at the same time not constrained by a notion of pre-established tradition, following its own rationale from ancient Greece and onwards. And this will, I hope, affect at least the way philosophy is done and thought. Let me, to end this somewhat erratic discourse, give you
an example – and it is, as you may guess, not chosen at random – as a way of *showing* rather than stating what I mean:

In a recent text Jesper Svenbro, philologist and poet working at the Centre Louis Gernet in Paris, the perceptual theory of Empedocles is discussed. By way of introducing his topic, Svenbro makes use of Wittgenstein’s familiar discussion of the duck-rabbit to bring out the peculiarities of the Greek expression *bleponta ou blepein*, “to see without seeing.” An illiterate person who looks at a row of letters is in this situation. He sees only one aspect of the scribbles – the letters (the *grammata*) – but he does not see what they mean (he cannot see them as *stoikheia*, as a meaningful sequence of letters): He sees without seeing. Put with other, more Wittgensteinian phrasing: He is blind to one of the aspects of what he actually sees. Svenbro then proceeds to a discussion of the *Optics* of Euclid, and shows that for the ancient Greeks, the gaze was thought of as a “visual ray” (*rayon visuel*) going *from* the eye to the object seen. After these preliminaries, Svenbro is prepared to attack his principal subject: The perceptual theory of Empedocles. His point of departure is fragment 84 (in the Diels-Kranz edition) where the human eye is compared to a lantern, prepared by a man who is venturing out into a stormy night, and therefore needs to shelter the light inside the lantern from the violent winds. In the analogy the pupil is like the light inside the lantern, projecting its fire through the vitreous body (the transparent shelters in the “windows” of the lantern) out into the world.

Svenbro then confronts Jean Bollack’s interpretation/translation of the fragment. Bollack says that Empedocles’ only concern is with the anatomy of the human eye – not with the gaze. For Bollack, the pupil is like the lantern taken as a whole, and therefore the analogical counterpart to the vitreous body of the eye will have to be the stormy night. Interpreted in this way, the fire of the eye – that is “the gaze” – never leaves the eye, but stops, as it were, at its “threshold.” One reason for Bollack’s interpretation seems to be that he wants to save Empedocles from stating something foolish. And he is not the first one to forward such an interpretation. Aristotle had pointed out that the perceptual theory of Empedocles does not seem to be consistent: “Sometimes he says that we see in the way described by the analogy, sometimes that we see due to the emanations from the things seen.”17

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17 *De sensu*, 438a.
But Svenbro does not accept Bollack’s way of trying to help Empedocles save face – instead, he shows that Bollack’s interpretation is faulty, and that one has to accept that Empedocles actually states that there is fire, or rather the light of fire, emanating from the eye. And – to explain how Bollack could be so mistaken – he evokes Gérard Simon who claims that the epistemic break between ancient and modern optics is so complete that ancient optics, and the knowing it represents, has become all but “unthinkable” for us moderns.

Svenbro himself is not entirely convinced by Simon’s arguments. In a somewhat surprising move he refers to Oliver Sacks and his book *Awakenings* from 1982. Sacks describes the case of a patient which seems to suggest that perception is of an almost teleological, pre-modern if you like, nature: He writes about a female patient – Hester – suffering from “kinematic vision” (i.e. that her visual perception is cut up as if in different frames):

Thus, on one occasion, when Hester was being visited by her brother, she happened to have kinematic vision at about three or four frames a second, i.e. a rate so slow that there was a clearly perceptible difference between each frame. While watching her brother lighting his pipe, she was greatly startled by witnessing the following sequence: first, the striking of a match; second, her brother’s hand holding the lighted match, having “jumped” a few inches from the matchbox; third, the match flaring up in the bowl of the pipe; and fourth, fifth, sixth, etc., the “intermediate” stages by which her brother’s hand, holding the match, jerkily approached the pipe to be lit. Thus — incredibly — Hester saw the pipe actually being lit several frames too soon; she saw “the future,” so to speak, somewhat before she was due to see it… If we accept Hester’s word in the matter (and if we do not listen to our patients we will never learn anything), we are compelled to make a novel hypothesis (or several such) about the perception of time and the nature of “moments.”

Svenbro comments: “Could it perhaps be the case that visual perception is inseparable from thought? In any case, the quote relates a state of affairs that is quite uncomfortable for ‘us moderns,’ a state of affairs that reasonably should undermine the assurance with which ‘we’ imagine the visual perception.”

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18 Oliver Sacks, *Awakenings*, 1982, p. 102-103, the quote and the reference are taken from Svenbro’s text.
Svenbro then returns to Empedocles and fragment 84. He acknowledges that even though the gap between ancient and modern experiences of perception is not as evident or clear as Simon claims, the modern conception of light nevertheless has no counterpart in the ancient world. The ancient concept of light seems to be an “undifferentiated” one, where one and the same term can be used to designate either physical light (the light of the sun) or psychical light (the light of understanding). If this is the case, then we do not have to accept that there is an inconsistency in Empedocles’ theory of perception: Seeing works in fact both ways – physical light emanates from the objects we see, and the light of understanding emanates from our eyes. And then, perhaps, Aristotle’s remark concerning Empedocles – “One moment he says: we see like this; the next: we see like that” – should not be understood as pointing out an inconsistency but rather as a statement about his theory – “He says: one moment we see like this, the next like that,” i.e. that Empedocles conceives of perception as a double movement, one active, the other passive. An idea that seems to be consonant with fragment 88 in Diels-Kranz

... from both there was one vision.

Svenbro’s way of arguing is entirely consonant with the position that I am sketching in this paper:19 With care, historic and linguistic knowledge and meticulous attention to details he sets different (social-imaginary) significations in motion; in addressing his problem he makes use of what he finds useful, like the famous *bricoleur*, without being constrained by heteronomistic notions of how one is to treat a philosophical problem – and in the process he manages to make a case for a critical attitude towards our own cherished beliefs. He invites us to enrich our understanding, not only of Empedocles’ theory, but of our contemporary concept of perception as well, by pointing to aspects of which many of us were unaware – as if we were in the position of a person who cannot see the duck in the duck-rabbit, but who can be taught to do so. Finally, he does not say but he demonstrates that philosophy is and has always been a creative discipline.

I have chosen to conclude my text with this example, since it shows, I hope, what it could mean to think in the marshes of history, where no

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19 But I do not, of course, claim that Svenbro does actually agree with me on this. But he has agreed to figure as an example in my text, for which I am very grateful.
directions are prescribed, surprising connections are allowed, and may produce new and other forms of thinking – yet unseen.
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The Past’s Presence

Essays on the Historicity of Philosophical Thought

Throughout the discourse of modern philosophy, the problematic relationship between thought and history has been a recurring theme. Tensions between historicist and ahistoricist conceptions of philosophy continue to pervade the debate. In October 2003 an international symposium under the title “Thinking in History” was held at Södertörn University College. The symposium gathered a number of philosophical researchers who presented material addressing the general problem of philosophy’s conceptualisation of its historical situatedness. Most of the essays presented in this volume originate from this symposium. Several contributions stem from the phenomenological tradition, particularly from the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Friedrich Nietzsche is also a recurring reference. In addition, the volume contains essays relating to Spinoza’s, Castoriadis’ and the Kyoto School’s varied understanding of history.