The Experience of History

Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback

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.²


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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 be-
cause 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 metaphysi-
cal, scientific, ontological definition of time as chronology and succes-
sion, 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 un-
derstanding of the temporality of time is no longer a theoretical knowl-
edge about time, but, with Nietzsche’s own words, an “untimely ex-
perience.” 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 understand-
ing 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 un-
timely 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 experi-
ce 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. Be-
yond 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 pow-
erlessness 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. 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 bios with a recognizable life-story from birth to death, rises out of biological life, zoe.” 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 sui generis (though not 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 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 . . . .”

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, epistheme and 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 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. 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 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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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.”
8 Ibid., p.279.
9 Ibid., p.280.
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 furthermost 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. Because present time has

11 In the 13th 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.  

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 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-

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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 eidenai, in Greek, literally “having seen,” like Bewusstsein in German, for example. See Bruno Snell’s account on the Greek form eidenai. Snell, B. 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 praeens 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.” 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 feel 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. 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 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 schlechthinmigen Daseinsunmöglichkeit*).\(^{16}\) 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.

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.\textsuperscript{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 
de fined the ontology of life. Pindaro’s maxim “become in an experi-
ence what you are”\textsuperscript{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. \textit{This instant, mostly rare, of 
transparency of the self-awareness of reality, is what can be called 

\textsuperscript{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.”

\textsuperscript{18} Pindar. \textit{The Odes of Pindar}. Loeb Classical Library, London, Harvard University 
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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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

\textsuperscript{19} Nietzsche, op. cit., p. 330.

\textsuperscript{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 impossibility, 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.\footnote{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.} 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 poverty, and ultimately also their inner poverty – that it will lead to something respectable.”\footnote{Benjamin, W. “Erfahrung und Armut” in Sprache und Geschichte (Reclam: Stuttgart, 1992), p. 139, engl. transl. from Selected Writings, vol. 2 (Harvard UP: Cambridge, 1999), p. 732-36, in original.}

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 transformed 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 knowledge 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.
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,  
Ihrer seltsamen Begegnung Sinn.  
Und wenn dich das irdische vergass  
Zu der stillen Erde sag: Ich rinne.  
Zu den raschen Wasser sprich: ich bin.*