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## AN EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

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# ABSTRACT

In this paper we delineate the conditions and features of what we call an existential philosophy of history in relation to customary trends in the field of the philosophy of history. We do this by circumscribing what a transgenerational temporality and what our entanglement in ethical relations with temporal others ask of us as existential and responsive selves and by explicating what attitude we need to have when trying to responsibly respond to other vulnerable beings in our historical world of life.

**Keywords:** Historicity, Ethics, Otherness.

## INTRODUCTION

It is often argued that philosophy of history is different from a philosophy of time, mostly because philosophy of history is thought to be about the logic of historical method and the possibility of knowing past events and their interconnections, as well as the narrative structure of historical writing, while philosophy of time concerns metaphysical issues such as the nature of time and the possibilities of time apprehension. Yet the very concept of history is temporal and depends on our apprehending time. "History," contends historian Marc Bloch, is a study "of men in time" (Bloch 1954, 27). This is generally taken to suggest that temporal otherness is integral to the idea of historical consciousness. Historical inquiry means that we relate to a changing world, primarily to the world that was. But integral to historical consciousness is also, in Bloch's estimation, a relation to other persons who lived back then, with whom we are generationally connected (Bloch 1954, 22-29). In the task of knowing and understanding the past, historical inquiry is a relationship to a human past. This means that a philosophy of history cannot concern accounts of temporality in general, but must relate to a temporality that to some degree concerns the connectedness of human life. Such a philosophy of history would exceed history understood as mere changes from presence to absence, or absence being a condition that we must uncover and retrospectively make present again in historiography, memory, and related experiences. Instead, to make the connectedness of human life our temporal point of reference is the start of what we call an existential philosophy of history.

Bloch's classical account, however, is often challenged on the claim that natural historical phenomena are also part of history although they are in principle excluded from the historian's craft (eg. Tamm and Olivier 2019). In this way, the contemporary discourse of philosophy of history is extended onto a philosophy of time that concerns the passage of time in general, with no human point of reference. One talks about conceiving unprecedented changes, the anthropocentric epoch of humanity within the passage of geological time, as well as the possibility of a history without humans. This equates a concept of history with a metaphysics of time that is to its core concerned with explaining change. If history is what has ceased to be, the condition that is past and

temporally irrecoverable, what more is there to say with regard to those persons who are not contemporary with ourselves?

In this regard, it would be important to emphasize that the predominant conception of history as a cosmology of changing conditions, designating that which is no longer present but which influences or determines what follows, is grounded in a philosophy of time that is concerned with presence and absence as ontological matters—as states of being that are more or less formal and abstract and that are described in ontologies consistent with or in dissent from the Western metaphysical tradition. Therefore, we can reconsider time by asking, what is the difference between understanding temporality as an ontology of change and understanding it as our relation to other persons who are not our contemporaries? There are numerous ways to re-theorize historical time, but this question is the one that is asked from the existential point of view.

When trying to reconsider the concept of history by raising this question, there seems, at first glance, to be no very deep difference between passage of time and non-contemporaneity as ways of circumscribing temporality. We easily regard change in itself as either the ontological essence of time or as the temporal ideality or effect that is a precondition for any notion of causality and experience. The metaphysician would claim, with Françoise Hartog, that we live in a current “regime of historicity” that will collapse and that will find its temporal successors (Hartog 2017, 106). The philosopher of mind would claim, with Immanuel Kant, that temporality is, the inner form of the experiencing subject’s apprehension (Kant 1998, A32-34/B49-50); time “determines the relation of representations in our inner state” (Kant 1998, A33/B50). Metaphysics in this sense is a mere extension of the apprehension of causal time, as it invites a speculation about one notion of time coming to an end, while simultaneously not understanding that such speculation does not break with customary ideas of time at all but rather empowers change as the sole essence of temporality. If regimes of time change, like the self that has changed and is no longer what it was, or like the surface of the world that has changed and the people who lived back then are gone, the very process of change becomes the common denominator for our idea of apprehending temporality. This is the case regardless of whether we speak of an eroding rock, of ourselves, or of past generations in a temporal human lifeworld.

In truth, however, the phenomenology of time consciousness often breaks with the ontology of change by elaborating Kant's notion of time as the inner form of the experiencing subject's apprehension, by relating time consciousness to memories and expectations, and by furthermore taking this temporal ideality to the core of descriptions of subjectivity and intersubjectivity (Ricoeur 1990, Part 1). As David Carr suggests:

your "now" is as much a mark of your otherness and differentness from me as is your spatial "there," because it is a point of view on a different time, a past and a future which are different from mine. In that sense it is a temporal point of view which in principle I can never occupy. (Carr 2014, 180)

Thus, our understanding of each other as temporal others designates how we are intersubjectively entangled and, by extension, how we respond to and are responsible for the other who is not ourselves. But even if the phenomenological account acknowledges the experiencing subject's apprehension of temporality, it does not necessarily deflate the significance of change for subjective experience. The givenness of the present and the impossibility of the absent usually persist even phenomenologically. In this regard, the idea of change as the essence of time tends to be shared even when we think of a phenomenology of time consciousness.

Carr continues:

Clearly time is experienced in the ways we divide it up, the manner in which we structure it is in terms of events and pattern of events. What is our relation to our own past? As we experience the cultural present becoming the cultural past, what is more important, sameness or difference, continuity or change? This is the place to consider the well-worn distinction between cyclical and linear conceptions of time. Time is change; but is change significant or insignificant? (Carr 2014, 181)

If change is at the center of temporal apprehension and of our idea of history, we must, however, ask for its significance. Carr invites our asking, for instance, how and in what sense change is significant to our entanglement in relation to those who have preceded us. This is where the existential and lived experience of being in time with those who are not contemporary with

ourselves arises (see Ruin 2018). It is also where any metaphysics of time that holds ontological absolutes of presence and absence appears as less relevant to our being with and responding to temporal others. Accordingly, it is important to outline a philosophy of history that takes seriously the mortal and often non-contemporary other as the ethical contexture in which our questions about temporality and history emerges.

## **HUMAN EXISTENCE AND TRANSGENERATIONAL TEMPORALITY**

The difference between the two ways of relating to time and history we have described—the metaphysical/phenomenological ontology of presence-absence and the existential entanglement with temporal others—is not merely aspectual. It has important existential implications as to how we come to understand ourselves as involved in a historical lifeworld. This transpires in the sense that the notion of temporality as change seems to be insufficient with regard to other persons' not being our contemporaries, and in the sense that our relation to them marks a very different temporal understanding than a mere passage of time. Our either being or not being contemporary with each other in life suggests not only that we cannot be identical to each other, that we cannot live in exact the same time and place as the other but also, more importantly, as Carr suggests (2014, 179-181), that our existence as personal selves is one of acknowledging the other as a finite, temporal other in our standing in relation to the other who is another than ourselves. Thus, acknowledging the other who is not ourselves, or the other who is not contemporary with ourselves, is not simply to avoid platitudes, such as the realization that we lived at different instances on earth. It is rather to recognize that our selves are made possible in relation to the temporal others, for instance: that were born by the one before us and will give life to the other after us; we will die one after the other, in turn we will bury each other; we will benefit from and be burdened by what those not contemporary with ourselves have done. Thus we are generationally connected to each other in the sense that we respond to the ones that are temporally other than ourselves (Fritsch 2018, 52).

The existential difference between temporality as change and temporarily as non-contemporaneity can be shown through what temporal relations these concepts lets us capture, and what ethical significances they bear (see Lévinas 1987, 91-94; Fritsch 2018; Ruin 2018).

Whereas it would be possible to say that we are not the same persons we were earlier in our lives or that the world as a whole is not what it was, it is not possible to say that we are not contemporary with ourselves or that the world is not contemporary with itself. But it is, on the contrary, possible to claim that we are not contemporary with temporal others, with the persons who lived back then. The having-been or will-be testifies to a previous or coming condition of an entity that changes, whereas the person who is not contemporary with ourselves marks a bond to those who live at another time; and thereby the concept of non-contemporaneity illuminates how we are caught up in a life with our predecessors and the afterlife. Before its being an ontological statement of how the world is structured, non-contemporaneity invokes our acknowledgment that we stand in an ethical relation to those of another generation.

In *Taking Turns With The Earth* (2018), Matthias Fritsch highlights the importance of rethinking the transgenerational possibilities of being a self, as well as the existential phenomenological obligations of acknowledging responsibility for (in the sense of our responding to) passed and future persons in a transgenerational life. In order to explicate the ways in which we are entangled in a responsibility for the other, or in transgenerational reciprocity, Fritsch argues that

it is critical to overcome a presentist, nongenerational conception of the self and its time, one that views the present as cut off from the absent past and the absent future. This view of time, we have seen, makes responsibility to future [and past] people seem anomalous and problematic from the beginning, for such responsibility would have to cross the abyss between presence and absence. (Fritsch 2018, 80)

Transgenerationality does not undo our using the concepts of present and absent other or presence and absence in general, but it does challenge the customary ontological categories of presence and absence, as well as the necessity of thinking that the possibilities of responding to a past and future others are always mediated to the extent of being impossible. It helps us reconsider



exactly what ethical significance these concepts bear as they, in ethical terms, cannot be what determine our relations to temporal others who have ethical integrity. Fritsch continues:

Stretching the living out toward the future pulls future people into the presence of the living, whose contemporaneity is thus put into question. Undoing the assumption of co-presence among the living by recognizing the temporal alterity (and natal mortality) in the now-living other renders the temporal distance to future people less anomalous. It thus leads us to stress, among other things, (asymmetrical) overlap among generations, intergenerational communities, and institutions, the dependence of many of our current projects on future [and past] people, and so on. (Fritsch 2018, 81)

Stressing the transgenerational possibilities for self-understanding and action, involves the non-contemporaneity of other persons and thus shows this multitude of asymmetrical ethical relations between persons. But this recognition can also, as Bennett Gilbert has argued, be taken to galvanize our very situatedness within a world of life in general and thus becomes "our moral response to being parts of the whole" (Gilbert 2020, 73), which we do "by fully responding to the common opportunity that is life and to the common end in the grave that history tells us about." (Gilbert 2020, 73) This ethical ideality implies our performatively sustaining or repairing "our relationship to all other beings through historicity, since our past is a vast aspect of the interdependence necessary for survival" (Gilbert 2020, 74).

In this respect generational temporality and reciprocity invokes an existential philosophy of history that goes beyond taking historical consciousness, or historicity, to refer merely to our being sensitive to temporal change. It has ethical ideality that enables us to think beyond historicity as a strictly human matter into our situatedness in a world of life. When we regard those of previous generations as Thou's with whom our relations are intimate and ethical, rather than distanced and observational, we are finding the best position from which to extend ethical ideality in to various kinds of others in authentic ways, rather than in groundless, or selfish, or heedless ways that pretend to give us more understanding than they really do (Buber 1937, 6).

Through this extensive historicity we thus take a detour into what it would mean to live in a world or life (Gilbert 2020, 73-75), or what it would mean to share a terrestrial existence where living beings take turns (Fritsch 2018), but we also take a detour into what it means for us to live within a tradition. In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer stresses the importance of taking seriously what it means to live within a tradition and thus what it is that differs the temporal understanding of a hermeneutic consciousness from a descriptive historical consciousness.

“Historical consciousness,” Gadamer contends, “knows about the otherness of the other, about the past in its otherness, just as the understanding of the Thou knows the Thou as a person” (Gadamer 2006, 354). In the historical mode we understand the other as other exactly in the sense that we know the past as something different from the present, a condition that is irrecoverable and gone. This is not necessarily to reduce the past into an aspect of the present, because through “the otherness of the past” the historical consciousness “seeks not the instantiation of a general law but something historically unique” (Gadamer 2006, 354), a unique temporal instance or condition that can be objectively uncovered and described. But, Gadamer stresses, this appeal to a historical consciousness creates a dialectical illusion because it never invites a real reflective situated response to the past. “By claiming to transcend its own conditionedness completely in knowing the other,” historical consciousness “is involved in a false dialectical appearance,” as it counts itself out from the reflective relationship with temporal others (Gadamer 2006, 354). In this case there is no possibility of being moved by what has happened and by those who are not contemporary with ourselves, which suggests that the historical attitude is seriously in existential denial. To take temporality in an existential hermeneutic sense is exactly to recognize the moral bond between us and temporal others as a reflective I-Thou relationship, where we ourselves may be fundamentally changed through this relationship. Gadamer argues:

A person who does not admit that he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what manifests itself by their light. It is like the relation between I and Thou. A person who reflects himself out of the mutuality of such a relation changes this relationship and destroys its moral bond. A person who reflects himself out of a

living relationship to tradition destroys the true meaning of this tradition in exactly the same way. (Gadamer 2006, 354),

In other words, like the I-Thou relationship that is constituted through our inevitably approaching each other from different places—primarily in the sense that we are different persons having lived through different experiences, but also that there may be a temporal and cultural distance between us that enables certain kinds experiences and makes other experiences impossible for us to live through—we must recognize that historical temporality is also a mutual relationship between us and temporal others. This is fundamentally recognized through asking the temporal others a question and letting them speak to us. “In human relations the important thing is,” Gadamer says, “to experience the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs” (Gadamer 2006, 355). In the existential hermeneutic relationship, we are importantly responsible for seeing the other and letting her speak to us in our reflective conversation with her who is other, contemporary or not, than ourselves. We are guided by a question of doing her justice. “But ultimately,” Gadamer continues, “this openness does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, anyone who listens is fundamentally open” (Gadamer 2006, 355). We must be open to listening to concrete temporal others and to our tradition in order to understand not only the other but where we ourselves stand within this I-Thou relationship, as well as how we should respond by being situated within it.

The ethical importance of Gadamer’s claims could be shown through the paradigmatic example of the Thirty Years’ War that is often used in the philosophy of history to show the otherness of the past, and sometimes even in attempts to show that our relationship with temporal others is fundamentally broken (Danto

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1 “The word ‘prejudice’ etymologically breaks down into pre-judice or pre-judgement. Judgement is not possible without the ‘pre’ that comes before it. All judgements are conditioned by prejudgements. This is an older, pre-modern sense of prejudice to which Gadamer wants to draw our attention, whereas the familiar understanding of prejudice is unreflective judgement or over-hasty reasoning, resulting in the bigotry of purely subjective opinion or the unreflective parroting of purely received wisdom. The point being made here is that judgements are made possible not by an abstract and neutral reason but a set of prereflective involvements with the world that stand behind judgements and in fact make them possible. A condition of making reflective and evaluative judgements about the world is the possession of prejudices: without prejudgements there can be no judgements.” (Lawn and Keane 2011, 96).

1985, 152-153; Roth 2020, 8; see also Ahlskog 2020). Existentially, the first thing in relation to a person who lived through the Thirty Years' War is, of course, that we ourselves cannot have a first-person experience regarding what it was like to participate in or live through that war, but that we must understand that we have a relationship to what it was like to live back then. In this sense we ask a question to a historical other as a reflective Thou, a reflective Thou that we ourselves are responsible for seeing, from which a changed understanding of ourselves is possible from what this Thou lets us see. We may ask what the Thirty Years' War implied, or what it was like to take part in it. By asking these questions, we can reflectively understand, on the one hand, that a person who lived during the Thirty Years' War himself could not see that the war lasted for 30 years, but that this way of describing the event expresses a posteriorly constructed historical relationship to it. Perhaps a person who lived then did not even perceive that the war was continuous in the way we now think. A person who took part in the war could, for instance, not see the institutional changes that this conflict resulted in much later. But through the question, on the other hand, we can also understand a vulnerable human reality of misery and death that is essentially connected to what it was like to live then, despite the fact that it is a conflict that took place a very long time ago, which means that no living person today has any remaining war trauma as a result of it, and that the societies that were then destroyed are no longer burnt down but have been rebuilt. The question thus opens up a reflection on how we ourselves stand in relation to what is being told—in terms of our being presently living Europeans or Americans, Lutherans or Catholics, or something else—and the reflection is called upon us as an ethical relation in which we respond to what has taken place, and to what will continue to be spoken of and retold.

## **HISTORICAL INQUIRY AS AN EXISTENTIAL I-THOU RELATIONSHIP**

Even if it makes sense to say that the reflective I-Thou relationship with historical tradition is not always, or even primarily, a relationship with a particular person in flesh and blood, and in that sense is different from a direct I-Thou relationship with another person speaking to us, Gadamer shows that a

true existential philosophy of history implies that the ethical bond to temporal others is not undone by their not being contemporary with ourselves (Buber 1937, 11; Lévinas 1987, 94). The transgenerational nature of historical knowledge therefore makes the I-Thou relationship essential to it, as we have argued. Then what are the reasons that someone could hold that philosophy of history is not well advised to so value this personal relationship as to make itself existential?

The most direct objection comes from a majority of philosophers and practitioners of scientific historiography. In principle, they object to personal involvement and to “advocacy” in historiography, both on an empirical and a conceptual level, because advocacy, they hold, can lead to epistemic irresponsibility (the thought is often in line with Bloch 1954, 139-141). Any scientific endeavor should avoid epistemically irrelevant values and judgements in order to meet scientific standards (see Douglas 2009, 71-79). The fear that this objection to advocacy warns against is that personal involvement distorts the ascertainable facts and the relevant processes of reasoning in order to force historiographic accounts to validate unwarranted, often predetermined, conclusions. The reasons that someone might behave irresponsibly is, for instance, her higher-order ethical, religious, or ideological convictions or commitments; individual financial desires or needs; bigotry and intolerance; and personal hatred and resentment. From the scientific point of view, it is thus hard to see why such powerful forces as these, which sometimes have the force of delusion, will be stopped by pursuing considerations raised by a universal ethical demand of the I-Thou relationship.

In a way, our familiarity with error, as well as the possibility of interpreting and arranging facts, is in itself one of the reasons that there tends to be an element of advocacy in every historiographic endeavor. Even if one claims such advocacy to be grounded in purely epistemic values and judgements, no position, however draconian its commitment to realism, materialism, or scientism, denies this, because evaluation are internal to any epistemic enterprise and are compatible with notions of making sense of the existence of objective reality (cf. McMullin 1983; Kuhn 1970). As has been shown for instance in *Verstehen* philosophy of science, the claim to “objectivity” is in itself to advocate a value discrimination between epistemically relevant and irrelevant values with regard to the inquiry at hand (Weber 1949; Rickert 1962, 13-21; Bloch 1954, 141-142). Thus, not all values, not even all ethical values, are values of the same kind. But

the existential approach to the work of scholarship need not necessarily lead to distortion and error, just as the realist approach does not entail that every result produced under it is correct. Higher-order commitments motivate everyone, in so far as what motivates someone must be named as her higher-order commitments, even if the principles by which we can understand them are comically self-interested, or malevolent and debased, or just unthought. It is important even in science to understand what values motivates us, what values bind us, and what values stands in our way. The I-Thou relationship is no less a universal feature of personal existence than is our fallibility and is no less important because of our fallibility.

It is true that restraint in the expression of opinion, belief, and moral judgment in a work of history is appealing. Quiet force of evidence and argument has dignity and need in principle never be awkward as it is, supposedly, free from ethical involvement. It has a simpler, grander, more noble power than shouting, blaming, nagging, exaggerating, scolding, litigating, grand-standing, preaching, and overacting. As intellectually and aesthetically satisfying as this scientific ideal is, the scholar is not free from ethical commitments just by being situated into the realm of epistemic values. Allan Megill argues that the historian's most important ethical commitment is to honesty, which does not give a pretense of overcoming the past's "breach with the present" (Megill 2004, 51). The I-Thou relationship requires honesty if it is to be sustained (Megill 2004, 49). He accurately calls the appeal to honesty "resistance to historiographic wish- fulfillment" (Megill 2004, 50). So certainly, in terms of the category of virtue, honesty seems to be one most important virtue. It is necessary to the missions of letting, helping, and making the dead speak for themselves. But honesty is not sufficient to these missions, and it is even less sufficient to the goal that her task imposes on the historian, namely to speak for the dead.

This is because speaking in our own voice for another and thereby letting her speak is a question of ethically responding to another person who can no longer speak for herself (see van der Heiden 2014). If I speak in my voice for you, I am ethically obliged to consider a question of my doing justice to you. I must question how I respond to you and how I let you speak to me. The answer to these questions is not solely to do so honestly. All those who seek or claim historical knowledge are necessarily speaking for themselves, in their

own voices, as well as helping or allowing past actors to speak. Speaking for one's self and for others is the existential situation that transgenerational finite temporality puts us into; and the ethical way to meet this situation is the I-Thou relationship. We are actors in this world in which honesty, as profoundly requisite as it is, never alone suffices for comprehension and persuasion. In short, we must be advocates; but advocates in this sense, which of course ought not be that practice of getting what we want at any cost which is blamed for dishonest "advocacy," that we must address ourselves to others by discovering what the I-Thou relationship must fully ask of us.

But what does the I-Thou relationship ask of us in our relationship to the past? In a way, one could say that the scientific attitude as such breaks the I-Thou relation, as it, in Martin Buber's terms, treats the other as an object that can be experienced and known. In this respect the I-Thou relation has been transformed into an I-It relation; the other has been made into an object of scientific investigation (Buber 1937, 39-40) Thus, even if we occasionally speak of the concepts of objectivity as an epistemic virtue, or of honesty and openness as ethical virtues, we still uphold the attitude of an I-It relation as long as our concern is to delineate the ideality of what a virtuous persona should consist of in relation to an impersonal object of historical inquiry. Being honest about a property or thing does not make it into my Thou. In contrast, taking the attitude of an I-Thou would mean that we truly "feel addressed and we answer" (Buber 1937, 6) to the other person by our standing in relation, whereas if we "do not serve it right it is broken, or it breaks me" (Buber 1937, 10). It breaks us in the sense that our own existence as well as the other's becomes imminent in a world of things, whereby we forget that such reification means to exist in denial of the other one as a Thou who ethically demands our attention.

The humanities often speak of other peoples' values, or of other persons, as objects of detached knowledge. Thus, we must steadily be concerned with a question of how the other should be addressed in order to not be appropriated into the world of things, how we despite our inquiry are guided by a question of responding to the other as a Thou. Jonathan Lear describes in the context of psychoanalysis how this meeting in human studies is also a meeting between two persons, and I-Thou relationship, where the analyst's "object" is another person who addresses you, a person whom the analyst must do justice; and

where a question of “objectivity” becomes a question of understanding the other person through oneself, inside this relationship. He writes:

The analytic process allows the analysand to relate to objects in new sorts of ways—to relate to them as distinct persons, having their own points of view—that is to relate to them objectively. This opens new ways of relating to others; but it also opens new ways of relating to oneself: for now one is able to live with others as the distinct and real people they are. Becoming objective in this sense opens up the possibility for true human intimacy. For previously one was not genuinely relating to another—or rather, insofar as one did relate to others, it was through the confusing fog of one’s own wishes, hopes, and disappointments, which were regularly experienced as being in the other. (Lear 2003, 47-48)

The nature of human studies thus follows the nature of ethical inquiry, which is to realize and enter an I-Thou relation, and to pass with, through, and beyond the virtue of honesty to more challenging, more fearsome, and more loving ways of being. As Lear shows, the epistemic standard of objectivity is in itself tied to an ethical question of our doing justice to another, our listening to her. Our passing beyond virtues is also true of any objection on epistemic grounds, because the fidelity to verifiability or falsifiability stands enclosed within the sphere of positivity as an ethical presupposition. Honesty if it is to be meaningful is thus a virtue that is socialized within positive science, even though the exercise of the virtue, or failure to exercise it, is the responsibility of an individual actor. This is the case even if we stipulate that individual agency is separable from the social nature of intellectual creditworthiness; and it is also the case even if one can argue that some group of virtues, rather than this one virtue, is involved (van Dongen and Paul 2017). Furthermore, adherence to virtues or to their opposite is estimated by intellectual inspection, although virtues themselves might include the non-rational, not falling outside the sphere of positivity. The I-Thou relationship is profoundly different in nature. It is an ethical realm different from virtues, with its own way of claiming our participation—a way that is closer to being a universal context than it is to the particularizing focus on the character of the persona that virtue ethics prizes due to its claim that the object of ethics is personal happiness in the way one lives one’s life (Korsgaard 1996, 167-169).



In this sense, the ethical task of historical inquiry exceeds the reach of the epistemic virtues. In being responsive to those they study, historians are not exempt from the universal ethic of the I-Thou relationship. This is not to say that this or that historian might not be responsible to different virtues in different circumstances. Rather the objection over the possibility of epistemic irresponsibility is a matter of more clearly understanding the ethical nature of historiographic practice. As such the value of the objection from epistemic responsibility arises from concerns within the philosophy of historiography, which by itself is a wide field that partakes of issues of method and also of substantive epistemological and ontological concerns from both the humanities and the philosophy of science. But we see in the existential point of view the direction in which to view philosophy of history as something larger than philosophy of historiography because it connects history to relational ethics as matters of first philosophy.

## **THEORIA AND PATHOS**

Reflection over the ethics of human studies or historical practice thus brings us to the question of how we should integrate the ethical universality of the I-Thou relationship with philosophy of history. Integration of a universalizing philosophical ethics and history into an existential philosophy of history is conceived on the basis of something that must be observed about philosophy itself—and even about conceptual thinking in general. The existential ethical standpoint gives us a simple but effective binary typology of conceptual thought. The first kind of philosophizing is *theoria* in the original sense of contemplation along with the sense of it developed in modernity as reflective looking and generalizing rationality that can be abstractive or inferential. The second kind of philosophizing is *pathos*. This comprises “feelings” in the sense of suffering, or in the sense of seeing the afflicted other. This might at first seem a lop-sided schema, of which one term is large and fat and the other term too narrow and overly specific. But by “suffering” we mean the entire spectrum of what happens to us by the fortunes of nature and by our own hands—our vulnerability, of which history and memory are the records; and we include the feelings of joy that successful response to our vulnerability to suffering brings us to our precarity, our

incompleteness, our relative powerlessness, personified by the Greeks as the goddess Amekhania (Herodotus, 1957-61, 8.111.1). This includes human self-destructiveness, guilt, and terror as causes and conditions of suffering—things that are vivid parts of modernity and post-modernity, although they are often known and named in many ages and places. Pathos also includes the resentments we form, which so grievously dominate human reactivity, when we do not process hurt or loss and act out of active unresolved conflicts.

The pair *theoria* and *pathos* are not the same as logic and feeling, nor the same as empirical inquiry as opposed to axiological thought, nor science and spirituality, nor the same as outwardness versus inwardness. Instead, they describe the most sincere conceptual engagements as understood from one's own existential situation. But this is not how *pathos* is usually understood. As Marcia Sá Cavalcante Shuback puts it in her reflection on what is involved in what she calls "engaged history": in the "concept of engagement it is the relation between the writer and the reader that is at stake, and not merely the choice of the author to write in an 'engaged' *pathos* for the suffering of others, the injustices of society and the political situation of the time." (2018, 165) If *pathos* is taken in its original sense, as a feature or rhetorical affectivity, the critique she puts forward is important because it targets the ethical irresponsibility of thinking that moral emotion is conjured up in the moral subject as a self-centered activity in the act of writing or reading. But *pathos* can also be taken as an existential attitude toward the other, and in that sense, it is closer to what Cavalcante Shuback calls "engagement" as our point of reference is fully the life of the other. It is not to simply write in a tragic or realistic mode of employment; instead, it concerns or responds to another person as a suffering and vulnerable fellow being (pace White 2016, 53, 62-63). Using a fully existential historical *pathos*, we engage, through transgenerational operations, with the whole hearts, minds, and lives of other persons in a way that includes their hopes, joys, happiness, and successes, as well as their suffering. All of this is historical because it bears the marks of our finitude and the certainty of our passage in time.

Thinking from *pathos*, then, is not an artifice or a trope or a device; nor is thinking from *theoria* just soulless instrumentalized reason. In the hands of well-meaning people, both kinds can be exercised ethically and as such could refer to vastly important values that the thinker aims to think through, enhance, and

express. Thinkers working in both kinds are broadly likely to value the decrease of suffering and the increase of well-being. But good intentions do not make a view of persons from *theoria* into a philosophy that cares for the persons who are its object. The difference pertaining to theory from *pathos* is the force that care for the complexity of the human person presents to *theoria*.

Humankind lives in many social and technological worlds. These worlds differ greatly from one another. Even in the age of globally dominant technologies, these vary because the forms of reason used in social organization and technological development are often altering and even splitting off from the traditional ratio that shaped Western ways and carried them across the globe. Euro-American ratio was itself never entirely unified, of course, because people changed the worlds they created in the passage of time. And so the mere changefulness and causal direction of the history of thought, society, and technology reveals beneath itself the address of persons to one another, motivated by and motivating the force of change. We say that this address, which has the I-Thou relationship as its ideal basis, breaks up the unifying impulse of the *theoria* view of causally-directed history. This is not to say that awareness of the suffering of others is always a motivation and certainly this is not to say that it always correctly motivates decision and action. But in thinking about how we organize and choose the manner in which we philosophize about the nature and history of human endeavor, it is *pathos*—the vulnerability one knows through one's own suffering and one's response to the suffering of others—that punctures *theoria* as a controlling disposition. It opens *theoria* to the whole lives of other persons as they actually live by staring at what it means ethically to respond to another. The I-Thou relationship is both behind and beyond the theoretical relations of observers and the observed, but also breaks right through the middle of such theoretical endeavours. This puncture, or breaking-through, is the track on which the existential approach to conceptual thought brings its own kind of philosophizing to the philosophy of history.

## EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND THE FIELD OF PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY TODAY

Much of what must be done to theorize knowledge concerns reflection on the relationship between what is known and how it is known. This involves the relationships between the observable, inferable, and logical structures of the known and the history of the knowing across individual, social, and other aspects; between the timeless and the time-bound aspects of thought; and between inquirers and the universe into which they inquire. In all these directions the field of the philosophy of history has a uniquely powerful perspective. The many kinds of philosophy of history testify to the fact that it covers more sides of the basic problem of the relations of humans, and perhaps of other conscious beings, to themselves, to one another, and to the world.

The academic field (including parts of memory studies) predominantly uses one or more of these approaches to philosophy of history. They approach our relationship to the passage of time from:

[1] epistemology, which includes both analytic methods and broader philosophy of science that looks at the past as the object of empirical examination;

[2] narrativist and post-narrativist theory, which as a whole remain within discourse tied to the realist and idealist fight within epistemology over the status of the external world and/or the nature of consciousness; and

[3] speculative philosophy, today including the recrudescence of universal history as "big history," credal history in novel forms, speculative realism and new materialisms, posthumanisms, and utopian and dystopian theorizations of futurity.

These approaches usually define or are updated so as to activate philosophy of history for a new epoch in general philosophy, philosophical anthropology, and theory of culture. Speaking broadly, this sphere of philosophy of history aims to overcome traditional issues of ontology, generally claiming to have done so, in order to meet the problems of a globalized humanity that must live among accelerating political conflicts and biological crises.

What it is necessary to avoid in all three types, in our view, is an increasingly imminent return of theorizing of the past to the philosophy of science and

to a revived view of history as primarily a matter of science about what can be known about the past. It seems that philosophy of history that takes ourselves within the human world and the lifeworld of nature as an existential and ethical situation is little spoken for in any contemporary philosophy of history that concedes reality to be, so to say, an object of positivity (whether objective or constructed) to be understood through *theoria*. This is the case even when, as in the case of postmodernism, the line of thought begins in anti-foundationalism. For every possibility of studying and theorizing a general relational mode among persons, and especially for the colorful panorama of different approaches to historical theory and to historiographic practice, we are obliged to understand the attitude to life it must lead to, if we are to be and understand ourselves as moral subjects, because each of us must choose to take up this attitude to life or to turn away from it. In the end, what a moral subject is, is a person who continuously determines such attitudes to life for herself and consciously acts upon them rather than takes or omits them by chance out of the philosophical possibilities that are part of her life. The need to understand the attitudes toward life that our interpretive strategies lead to inevitably comes to us from the other persons in our lives. Their existence makes it wrong to be heedless of them—to leave our values to intuitions or to will instead of making response to the pathos of other actual people the first concern of philosophy of history (Elgabsi and Gilbert 2020).

From the point of view that regards existence as the temporality in which the I-Thou relationship stands, any philosophy of history that does not take ethics as a perennial modality of matters that concern one's own life in the face of the lives of others is a philosophy that endorses the escape of epistemic judgment from ethical judgment. Any philosophy of history that attempts to escape reductive naturalizing has the potential to nourish our moral life; the concerns of these philosophers are cognate with such existential concerns for the meaning of our theories in relation to other persons as we point to in this paper. This means that virtually every theory, naturalistic or existential or of any sort, that enhances our feeling for the complexity of the history, nature, and future of human life, in recognition of existential-ethical concerns, can be good for us all. But changeable time is merely the raw material of human existence, the living tissue of which is our ceaseless historical need to know how to treat ourselves and others. As moral

agents, we seek to use or to cease using power against ourselves and others, which explodes out of our neotenic fear of death as the final meaning of change. Out of these temporalities are organized. Speculative philosophies of history that avoid reduction may recognize this, perhaps in useful ways, but still do not fill the needs that the lives of others bring to each. If philosophy of history is a reflection on our temporal being, it ought to work to meet our existential needs, since its core is the insistent responsibility in our living with the reality of generations both before and after our own—even if for philosophy of history the doing of this comes at the cost of exceeding itself.

N.B. *Ethics and Time in the Philosophy of History: A Cross-Cultural Approach* (Elgabsi and Gilbert 2023), a collection of commissioned papers edited by the authors, explores some of the ways of deepening philosophy of history suggested in this paper.

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