

ON THE METAPHYSICAL ROLE OF HISTORICITY

O papel metafísico da historicidade

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ABSTRACT

I argue that the philosophy of historicity forms the metaphysical core of the historical way of thinking and, therefore, is relevant as a philosophy of history and historiography. From this perspective, the scope of the theorization of history should extend to the substantive metaphysical ground in which the modern idea of history was built to disclose the main temporal character of the historical phenomena to which historicity refers. Hence, since my goal here is the clarification of the meaningfulness of historicity, I examine the philosophical tradition that investigates the transient nature of reality—a key feature of the historicity of existence represented by G. W. F. Hegel, F. W. J. Schelling, and, above all, Martin Heidegger—since this tradition includes especially valuable ontological arguments for illuminating hidden presuppositions in the still-relevant understanding of history.

Keywords: historicity; temporality; metaphysics.

RESUMO

Proponho que uma filosofia da historicidade é o cerne metafísico do modo histórico de pensar, logo, tão relevante quanto uma filosofia da história e da historiografia. Para o estudo do significado do caráter temporal dos fenômenos históricos, quer dizer, para o exame da historicidade, a teorização sobre a história deve ampliar seu escopo de investigação até o fundamento metafísico substantivo sob o qual a ideia moderna de história foi construída. Assim, na medida que a explicação do sentido da historicidade é o objetivo deste artigo, a tradição filosófica que investiga a essência da natureza transitória da realidade, representada principalmente por G. W. F. Hegel, F. W. J. Schelling e, sobretudo, Martin Heidegger, será examinada, dado que ela possui argumentos ontológicos valiosos para iluminar alguns pressupostos ocultos presentes no que compreendemos sobre o que é a história.

Palavras-chave: historicidade; temporalidade; metafísica.

Amid the revision and even rejection of many theoretical propositions regarding historicism, questions about the elementary temporal nature of history continue to play a central role in historical thinking. Reinhart Koselleck, for instance, argued that historical time is one of the most important concepts for understanding the social design of the experience of time from the historical perspective and the core of contemporary discussions of the multiple temporalities in history (JORDHEIM, 2012; MUDROVICIC, 2014). The significance of the “simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous” (LANDWEHR, 2012), the diagnosis of the contemporary socio-political uses of time (TURIN, 2019), and the concerns about the Anthropocene (CHAKRABARTY, 2017) are among the discussions that have built on Koselleck’s analysis of the meanings of historical time, which serve to demonstrate the power of this metahistorical category and the problematic nature of time for historians.

Nevertheless, as relevant and useful as these questions may be, other aspects of the temporal nature of history can be objects of inquiry. The present study draws attention to one of these aspects, the metaphysical ground that history still occupies as a phenomenon and knowledge. In other words, I propose taking a step back from Koselleck’s anthropological notion of historical time to clarify or, in some cases, question the very idea of time, which is sometimes taken for granted.

This query emerges from a philosophical approach to history involving the endeavor to arrive at a fundamental understanding of “the historical” that distinguishes history from historiography—the ancient distinction between *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum*—as well as from historicity, which is a 19th century conceptual novelty (Cf. KOSLOWSKI, 2005). In this context, historicity represents the introduction of the ontological gaze into “the historical”. Thus, while historiography would be the epistemologically justified and ethically based intellectual elaboration of history, assumed to be constructed on concrete experience, historicity refers to the abstract ontological feature derived from a temporal aspect that enables the historical experience (Cf. LYOTARD, 1954). Philosophy then emphasizes the notion of historicity as an elementary metaphysical principle based on the ontological understanding of the nature of history as, fundamentally, a logical problem regarding the ambivalent becoming and perseverance of existence, that is, an expression of the idea of time (Cf. ANKERSMIT, 2012, p. 29).¹

Historians should acknowledge that any question about time is entangled in a basic metaphysical puzzle since the well-known inconsistency derived from the being of time², and the temporality of existence is the root of all metaphysics. In fact, metaphysics depends on clarification of the meanings of time, and time is the main question in any and all metaphysical considerations (Cf. WHITEHEAD, 1978, p. 208-209; KUKI, 2012, p. 13-14; SILVA, 2019). In the words of Solomyak, “questions surrounding the metaphysics of time seem to be as substantive as metaphysical issues get—it would be difficult to dismiss issues concerning the nature of time as meaningless without dismissing metaphysics as a whole” (2018, p. 431).

The basic phenomenon of time, its transience, and its paradoxical nature, as an affirmation and subsequent negation of being—being that always *becomes* non-being—hence turns out to be the (il)logical core of the ontological design of history (BAUER, 1963, p. 119; VON RENTHE-FINK, 1974, p. 407; DE CARVALHO, 2022). In short, this temporal (non)sense is an enigma on which philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, F. W. J. Schelling, and G. W. F. Hegel worked carefully to codify a *philosophy of historicity*. Their findings show that “ontological inquiries belong to the philosophy of history no less than epistemological investigations” (SCHOLZ, 2014, p. 247) by demonstrating the reasons why and the ways in which metaphysical assumptions about the role of time in reality are unavoidable.³

Based on this philosophical survey of the metaphysical territory of history, I demonstrate the extent to which historical, concrete reality can be understood or theoretically justified by means of an investigation into what is disclosed as the historicity of existence—not the supposed context of an entity, event, or phenomenon but its very temporal nature. Therefore, I investigate *philosophies of historicity* by conducting a metaphysical analysis of the historical character of existence in general. This step back regarding the so-called “substantive” *philosophies of history*, then, involves the rediscovery of questions that remain central to historical thought despite their neglect in critical⁴ *philosophies of history* and *historiography*.⁵

The metaphysical claim about historicity through ontology

Since the publication of Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807), the ancient opposition between being and time has been challenged. Motivated by the incipient—but already relevant—modern historiography, Hegel, alongside Schelling, defined, from the standpoint of Kantian critique, the beginning of a *historical metaphysics* as an arrangement of elaborate inquiries into the role of time in the constitution of the human experience in relation to itself (the identity) and the *Otherness* that surrounds it (the difference). This manner of thinking starts from an assessment of “the historical,” *i.e.*, the temporal character or sense of existence that relates time to being by means of its metaphysical theorems. Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* (1927) represents the strongest ontological elaboration directly connected with this tradition (DERRIDA, 2013, p. 50), according to which being exists only and as long as there is time, for being is a temporal fact; that is, being exists to the extent that it is no longer what it was and will be.

Especially since Heidegger’s work on historicity, therefore, historiography is no longer considered the apparent negation of ontology (ANGEHRN, 2019). His approach, by developing a metaphysical doctrine of historicity, reveals the primitive aspect of historicism, which is the idea that supports epistemological propositions about the unique nature of each and every instant—the *historical principle* of Ranke (1954, p. 295; NIPPERDEY, 1975, p. 84)—and to which modern historical science remains subject (FACKENHEIM, 1961, p. 13). Beyond universalist historiography, Heidegger exposes the ontological foundation of the idea of historicism and the modern idea of history by scrutinizing the nature of time, stating that existence is [or can be] historical mainly because it is temporal (GA 2, 498). Time, a contradictory phenomenon that only exists when its existence is denied, *is* only as far as it *is not* anymore. That is, the *non-being* would be a necessary feature of what time is, the basis of the paradoxically perseverant contingent aspect of reality. It is in this sense that the finitude of individual and concrete existence—the fact of death—is the famous first step in Heidegger’s phenomenology toward the establishment of a principle about the nature of time that is not only epistemological, like Ranke’s, but also ontological.

Heidegger reaffirms the *temporality of time* expressly by saying that everything that exists has a beginning and an end. Meaning would reside in the end, in death, because the endpoint to existence formalizes a finite and understandable sense of the temporal experience (Cf. KERMODE, 2000). However, as a second step toward acknowledging the idea of historicity, Heidegger stresses ancient aporia on the ontology of time, particularly in relation to overcoming the finite limits of existence (GA 82, 230). That is, if time refers only to the limited aspects of individual existence, it becomes unclear how the reason or foundation of the historical phenomena could be justified or explained, which would involve, by definition, overcoming these very existential limits. History would be a phenomenon that expresses connections between common and differing existences and diverse spaces and

times, thereby surpassing the physical limitations imposed by individual births and deaths, beginnings and ends.

Death completes its own course, but it does not mean the end of human existence. With death a transition begins from here ἐνθάδε [*entháde*] to there ἔχει [*ékhei*]. This transition is the beginning of a journey that takes place through the mortal passage towards the new περίοδος θανατοφόρος [*períodos thanatophóros*]. The question that arises is the following: what surrounds humanity and what remains of it after its deadly and telluric course comes to an end? (GA 54, 143).

The theoretical answer to this question demonstrates that *the historical* is “what surrounds” and “what remains of humanity”—what, beyond the concrete, contingent, and finite, survives in the form of knowledge (ideas).⁶ The historical, then, consists of all that survives or surpasses death, and the historical phenomena by means of this *infinite* nature of time reveals a principle according to which time is not restricted to the concrete temporality or the finitude of existence but exceeds these limits in a metaphysical way. Human existence is not, accordingly, reduced to the interval between birth and death, to what is called its presence, its *Dasein*, being limited to its physical and anthropological conditions; on the contrary, human existence is marked by overcoming birth and death by means of knowledge, the ideal aspects of existence.

Existence has a metaphysical feature that finds its roots in the phenomenon of time. This metaphysical aspect of reality in general or of human life in particular reveals some theoretical characteristics of history that can only be accessed from an “anti-naturalistic” perspective (Cf. GABRIEL, 2017). The understanding of an event, a process, a phenomenon, or a life requires consideration of more than the interval between beginning and end. Rather, it is crucial to account for the previous meanings as well as the surviving meanings that pervade events, processes, phenomena, or lives. Such is the metaphysical basis of the historical regard: the historicity of existence.

In short, that restatement of metaphysics in the realm of philosophical thinking is one result of a broad process of questioning metaphysics itself by assuming the necessary ontological challenge of clarifying the roles of time and history in philosophical knowledge. Despite his repeated criticism of a certain form of metaphysics (ZAHAVI, 2008),⁷ Heidegger remains a metaphysician (MÜLLER, 1949) given his belief that “the fundamental ontology does not exhaust the concept of metaphysics” (GA 26, 199), at least to the extent that historicity summarizes the temporal character of concrete historical existence by means of an abstract metaphysical claim. According to Scholz, since the “historical sciences investigate the past and the development from the past to the present ... a metaphysics of time and change is required” (2014, p. 249). Heidegger provides, in this context, sophisticated metaphysical theorems about the historicity of reality stating not only that the time-like character of reality signifies the context that limits existence but also that historicity requires the acknowledgment that nothing comes from nothing—this being a primitive metaphysical principle about the pastness of what Heidegger calls *Dasein*, the presence, or existence, that is always in relation to time-like Otherness.

The metaphysics of contingency as a way to understand the meaning of historicity

Schelling did fundamental work on the task of understanding the temporal nature of reality from a historiological point of view. Taking a step back from Heidegger to understand more about what is at stake in the ontological theorems of historicity, Schelling helps to

organize a *metaphysics of contingency*, that is, a theoretical justification of contingency as a reason, or “groundless ground” (BRUFF, 2018), for existence that, according to him, is found in the past as a principle. In so doing, Schelling shows that his “governing concern is to develop a set of intellectual (and aesthetic) tools to conceptualize and articulate the distinctive nature of the past” (WELCHMAN; NORMAN, 2010, p. 42-43). In this specific sense, he is concerned with the same phenomenon that Heidegger finds in his investigations into the ontological relationship between being and time, namely, historicity. Particularly in the incomplete *Die Weltalter*, in which Schelling is essentially concerned with the human relationship with the past, he examines various temporal dimensions (Cf. GABRIEL, 2014, p. 41; WIRTZ, 2018) and offers particular explanations of the source of contingency and the phenomena of passage and transience. The ages of the world, according to Schelling, are precisely its past, its present, and its future as dynamic experiences of the human spirit (SSW VIII, 234). However, the past would be prominent as a special occurrence across the entire phenomenon of time, as it has a particular metaphysical and ontological quality, “in itself neither being nor non-being” (SCHELLING, 2002, 173). Accordingly, in the past, there is no present presence, no *affirmation of being*, nor a total absence of being as an *absolute non-being*, projected but still-non-existent, no not-yet imagined future, no categorical affirmation nor denial of existence. There is, rather, a mixture of shared and uncanny contradictory qualities, for the past would exist simultaneously as the being and non-being of time. Alternatively, it could still be said that, for the past, as a phenomenon, its presence is absent, and its absence is present once it is acknowledged. Though logically inconsistent, the phenomenal character of the past is, thereby, consistent with the very abstract nature of time in that it is contradictory by definition, consisting of both being and non-being (hence Schelling’s “in itself neither being nor non-being”). The past, then, displays these unique characteristics regarding temporal phenomena because it contains the elementary contradictory nature of time within itself.

Thus, for Schelling, “all life must pass through the fire of contradiction; contradiction is the engine and the core of life” (SSW VIII, 321). The fundamental contradiction, time, identified in the past, corresponds to this “fire,” and all passage or contingency manifest, indeed, phenomena derived from the quality of “pastness” in time. By definition, the passage of time assumes the existence of the past. The notion that the past is the origin of the passage of time and is at the core of its contradictory essence thus supports Schelling’s notion “of a beginning before the metaphysically understood origin” (GABRIEL, 2014, p. 44), a conceptual beginning for temporal phenomena with *the past (not the present) as the image of contingency*. Then, since any statement about the reality of time—or, more precisely, about the past—has originated in metaphysics, as Hilda Oakeley asserted, “a proof of the existence of the past which may be called metaphysical . . . [is] derived from the fundamental fact of the passage” (1932, p. 242). Though not concretely demonstrable (THOMAS, 2015, p. 949), a metaphysics of the past can, theoretically, postulate pastness, as the being and the non-being of time, as a phenomenon derived from the aforementioned basic temporal contradiction.

Briefly, Schelling helps to explain why history deals with the main feature of time, its contingency, and why history, while being epistemologically connected to individuality at the present presence of existence, extends beyond the limits of finite present beings owing to the uncanny virtues of the past. This past would be not a simple *modus* of time. It is rather the ontological explanation of the contingent reality that surpasses the limits of the presence of things, showing the presence of non-beings—the pasts—in what is called existence. Accordingly, historicity would be a result of the past’s fundamental nature as an expression of being and non-being reality, that is, through the acknowledgment of the

past as a metaphysical (or ontological) principle. This principle is the minimum element of time that, alongside Ranke's epistemological *historical principle* regarding the individuality of any phenomena, characterizes historical existence as simultaneously real, consistent, and contingent, inconsistent.

The metahistorical aspect of historicity

While Schelling's contribution to the discussion of these issues is substantial, Hegel is the most important figure in and the basis of all criticism of philosophies of history, having remained at the center of a debate about philosophical identity in relation to the historical phenomena for "what came after Hegel was either derivative, or it was a rebellion of the philosophers [and historians] against philosophy in general, rebellion against or doubt of this identity" (ARENDR, 2002, p. 345). By introducing the metaphysics of the *contingent* into philosophy and the ontology of *existence* into history, Hegel raises issues that are problematic from both perspectives.

Nevertheless, the most evident errors in Hegel's historical thought are his propositions about the forms of historiography and several of his epistemological interpretations of the progressive nature of *Weltgeschichte*. In these propositions and interpretations, he postulates the controversial universalist principle of the *impulse of perfectibility* (Werke 12, 74).⁸ In the *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte* (1822-23), a clear example of the philosophical theologizing of history (Cf. LÖWITH, 1949), he transposes elements of Christian messianism onto the broad and general modern idea of history. From an ethical-political point of view, then, Hegel is equally misguided in assuming a Eurocentric interpretation of his metaphysical system of world history in the *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (1820), a work that describes, especially in its final paragraphs, the movement of the *absolute Spirit* (or history) as the exclusive march of Nordic and Germanic peoples, circumscribing the historian's task within modern Europe. Hegel's "hermeneutics of freedom," according to Walter Jaeschke, imposes on those who seek it the recognition of this *progress* of Western and Christian freedom as a global necessity (2016, p. 380).⁹

Despite these well-known ethical and epistemological problems with Hegel's work, his reflections on and questions about the historical character of existence in relation to the *human mind* [*Geist*] remain relevant. In other words, while his *philosophy of historiography* should be treated with suspicion, his ontological investigation into the metaphysical ground of history has merit. No metahistorical process of *recognition* [*Anerkennung*] of the humanity of the human through the development of speculative *identification through differentiation* has yet received as fundamental an abstract and systematic exposition as the explanation that Hegel presents in his phenomenology—and, indeed, many have followed his basic scheme, from Karl Marx to Axel Honneth. The functioning of the remembrance process, the relationship between the ideal and concrete worlds (which surpasses ancient dualism), the demonstration of the historical character of thought itself, the metaphysics of time, contingency, and history developed by Schelling and Heidegger—all of these developments unquestionably trace back to Hegel. Hence, philosophies of historicity draw on Hegel to understand humanity, not in terms of evolutionary progress, but as a "synthesis of need and freedom" (FERREIRA DA SILVA, 2009, p. 111).

This return to Hegel is, then, necessary to reexamine the metaphysical centrality of the historicity of existence described by Schelling and, again, especially Heidegger after him. For Hegel, this historicity resides in the historical character of the *re-memorization* or *re-interiorization* [*Er-innerung*] (Werke 3, 590-91) of all possible knowledge that is found in the historical-existential process of concreteness, which exists always with respect to a definite

context. In that sense, according to Markus Gabriel, the current thinking in philosophical anthropology correctly establishes that “how we conceive of ourselves as human beings in part determines the moral value of our actions,” so there is, then, the need to “recognize fully that our essence as human beings is a function of the historical structure of our mind as *Geist*—i.e., of our capacity to create images of what it is to be human being and act in accordance with these images” (GABRIEL, 2017, p. 215).¹⁰ For this reason, it is possible to establish a foundation for epistemological possibilities about knowledge as well as the power of political ideologies, for the various ethics of peoples, and for the cultural myriad that constitutes humanity. Such an approach does not deny the anthropological and naturalistic perspective but improves on it through a philosophy based on metaphysical arguments about history.

Clearly, none of this argumentation implies the existence of one moral and political “universal subject.” Nor does it mean that, from an anthropological perspective, some people are “savages”—those who have not yet recognized themselves as historical—and some are “civilized”—those who recognize themselves as historical.¹¹ On the contrary, if a metaphysical and existential inquiry into history reveals anything, it is that humanity can assume multiple characteristics owing to the nature of its possibilities (Cf. GABRIEL, 2017, p. 213). Further, historical metaphysics doesn’t require the human mind to be a “poor abstraction” compared with the “rich[ness]” of anthropological and historical “diversity” (Cf. GRENE, 1978, p. 20) since, by definition, it comprises many concrete minds. That is, a philosophy of historicity involves the discovery of humanity from a necessarily existential point of view for any and all human existence in relation to its Otherness (human and non-human). Contrary to Michel Foucault’s conclusion in *Les mots et les choses* (1966) that *l’homme s’effacerait* [the human will disappear], historical metaphysics reevaluates old questions by renewing the idea of humanity and avoiding misunderstandings between existing and its own becoming since the contingent aspect of reality has a shared metaphysical basis, namely, past time.

The philosophy of historicity as a metaphysical inquiry into history

Historical research never reveals “history,” for it always already carries an opinion about the meaning of “history” in an unreflective or supposed self-evident way; historical research only wishes to confirm what is already solidly confirmed by the research itself, showing the absence of thought about “history.” (GA 54, 142).¹²

Heidegger argues that the writing of history does not discover its meaning. Nevertheless, it does assume one meaning for history. The essence, or what is presupposed by the idea of history, is determined only by the inquiry into the historical or temporal character of existence, that is, by a *philosophy of historicity*. Historiography, in this sense, involves considering time as an object always represented from a particular epistemological and ethical point of view. And, for that reason, historiography does not discover “the historical” (Cf. WALTON, 2019). Thus, a reflection on the historical character of existence occurs in the context of thinking about the historical, but not in its empirical conception in the form of historiography. Not even through the history of historiography can the metaphysical meaning of what is history be disclosed.¹³ The fulfillment of this task requires asking, in an honest and direct way, what history *means*, why *there is* history, and in what ways history *exists*. These interrogations, roughly, are found not in historiographical investigations, but in existential, ontological, and, above all, metaphysical questions *about the being* of history, “a theory *about* history” (SIMON, 2019, p. 60), which means a *philosophy of historicity*.

According to Manel, “some are afraid that the philosophers of history might seduce us into bad habits. Granted. They are as dangerous to the development of the historian as poets and novelists, and they are as vital to his existence” (1960, p. 343). That is, the choice of a more anthropological and concrete approach to historical reality, though relevant to historiographical research, does not obviate other questions about the abstract nature of the phenomenon of history but, in fact, enables new paths for new questions. Accordingly, to understand history as a phenomenon and the historical character of existence as an expression of the inconsistent and contradictory reality of time, a methodological question must be asked regarding what it means *to be a temporal being*.

Certainly, none of these considerations suggest that philosophers are better able to write history (RICŒUR, 1985, p. 350) than historians. The point is, rather, that there is no way to avoid or renounce¹⁴ a *philosophy of historicity* as a metaphysical path to address questions that, because of the restricted scope of conventional epistemology, *philosophies of history* and *historiography* are not able to answer. A philosophy of historicity is required, then, to understand the still often neglected ontological assumptions embedded in history and historiography.

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Notas

- ¹ See Augusto de Carvalho. A lógica do tempo e de outras palavras fundamentais. *Trans/Form/Ação* 43/3, 2020. (p. 187-192)
- ² See, for instance, McTaggart's arguments (1908).
- ³ In a way, this essay responds to Bevernage (2012) proposition, but from a speculative or philosophical standpoint.
- ⁴ It is worthy to note that R. G. Collingwood was one of the firsts who has kickstarted this “critical” metaphysical overview on history, stating that only the problem of “causation” (1940, p. 338-346)—having as a method the exam on the language—would be sufficient to sustain historiographical science. A good synthesis on the various contributions and debates around that “analytical metaphysics” about history can be found in Doris Gerber's *Analytische Metaphysik der Geschichte. Handlungen, Geschichten und ihre Erklärung* (2012). For arguments about the insufficiency of analytical and critical *philosophies of history* and *historiography*, see Herman Paul (2015, p. 9-15).
- ⁵ The useful distinction between *philosophy of history* and *philosophy of historiography* is properly explained by Aviezer Tucker (2004).
- ⁶ See Augusto de Carvalho. Das potências da memória. A afirmação da transitoriedade histórica e da eternidade das ideias. *Kriterion* 61 (p. 107-129); See also Augusto de Carvalho, “The Meanings of Historicity—the End and the Beginning,” in *Geschichtstheorie am Werk* (2022).
- ⁷ Mainly in *Was ist Metaphysik? And Die ontotheologische Verfassung der Metaphysik*. Heidegger's critique of metaphysics as *onto-theo-logy* (GA 11, 51-80) is a well-known topic of philosophy: a critique of metaphysics as the theological search for a single explanatory principle for everything.
- ⁸ I am referring to Hegel's complete works [*Werke*] (1986), followed by volume and page number.
- ⁹ It is noteworthy that Klaus Vieweg (2020) recently have contested the accusation towards the “colonialist character” of Hegel's thinking.
- ¹⁰ Markus Gabriel opposes this interpretation of historicity to Heidegger's historicity (2017, 218). However, Gabriel's historicity agrees substantially with Heidegger's.
- ¹¹ See the misunderstanding of Claude Lévi-Strauss on the problem of historicity (1962). David Carr shed light on this topic, stating that “perhaps we should conclude that [Levi-Strauss] ‘peoples without history’ represent not the absence of historicity but another one of its forms.” (2016, p. 276).
- ¹² See also GA 38, 94.
- ¹³ Valdei Araujo clarifies the history of historiography as “the analytic of historicity” (2013). It was an important step forward for the existential acknowledgment of historiography.
- ¹⁴ A reference to the well-known chapter from *Temps et Récit* (1985), “*Renoncer à Hegel*.”

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