

Phenomenology of historical time

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Philosophy has approached history with metaphysical and epistemological questions. The phenomenological approach to history differs from both the metaphysics of history and the epistemology of historical knowledge. Its focus is on *Geschichtlichkeit* (historicity or historicality), a term that has been used in the works of Husserl, Dilthey, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur. The question is not What *is* history? or How do we *know* history? but rather What is it to be historical? What is it like to exist historically? What does it *mean* to be historical? Dilthey wrote that “we are historical beings first, before we are observers [*Betrachter*] of history, and only because we are the former do we become the latter [...]. The historical world is always there, and the individual not only observes it from the outside but is intertwined with it [*in sie verwebt*].”¹ Phenomenologists want to know what it means to be a “historical being,” in Dilthey’s sense, and in what sense we are intertwined with history. They want to know how history is encountered, how it enters our lives, and in what forms of consciousness and experience it does so. In this essay I want to take up these questions, and sketch an answer to at least some of them. After that I shall make a few remarks about how they might relate to the standard metaphysical and epistemological questions.

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

¹ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VII, 5th edition, ed. B. Groethuysen (Stuttgart: B. Teubner, 1968), pp. 277-8.

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

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

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

I. Temporality

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

Like the Here in relation to the space I perceive and inhabit, the Now is a vantage point from which I survey a kind of temporal field encompassing past and future. Memory and expectation make possible an ongoing experience through which past and future form the horizon

or background from which the present stands out; together they give meaning to the present moment in which I experience or act. I hold onto a past as I project a future before me. These are essential features of human experience. It is not as if I exist in the present and just happen to have the capacity occasionally to envisage the future and remember the past. Rather, human experience just *is* a kind of temporal reach or stretch, as Heidegger called it. Husserl spoke of the horizons of retention and protention which constitute the continuity of experience, and are to be distinguished from acts of explicitly “thinking about” the future or “recollecting” the past. These latter elements of my experience may be absent; the continuity may not.

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

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

II. Being with others

The first-person character of our description so far might suggest that the discussion of my relations with others would start with how the *I* confronts the *Thou*. Traditional accounts, phenomenological and otherwise, of the social aspect of human existence have taken their start from the situation in which I experience the Other face-to-face. They have asked questions about how the Other can be an object for me which is nevertheless a subject, how I can know the Other’s thoughts and experiences when all I perceive is the body, and more generally

how I relate and have access to a subjectivity which is not my own. These are perfectly legitimate questions, and they are especially important if one wants to consider also the ethical dimension of intersubjectivity. These questions lie behind the classic formulation of the I-Thou relation in Martin Buber; and even Levinas, who is critical of many aspects of this whole approach, arguably still takes it as his point of departure. But it should be recognized that this approach concerns only one mode of being with and relating to others.

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

Husserl's approach to intersubjectivity initially took its point of departure in the face-to-face or I-Thou situation as a phenomenological problem. But he discovers another approach to being with others in his late work when dealing with what he calls the crisis of European science.² Husserl's treatment of consciousness had from the start taken scientific cognition as a primary focus, asking questions about how we move from the world of perception to the scientifically warranted judgments that make up our theoretical disciplines, including humanistic and psychological as well as natural sciences. For the most part Husserl's approach to these questions seemed to make the assumption that the individual subject, in pursuit of scientific knowledge, could simply transcend the limitations of its concrete social situation and somehow move directly to the truth. What he finally appreciated in his late work on the crisis of the sciences is that theoretical inquiry is necessarily an intersubjective affair. He recognized that, in the pursuit of theoretical truth, the individual always inherits this pursuit as an existing and ongoing activity of the society in which she or he takes it up. The problems and questions of science do not come out of the blue, but out of a tradition of ongoing inquiry. The individual not only inherits the questions but often builds on the answers already obtained by oth-

² See Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, tr. D. Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

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

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

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

III. "We" and the community

To correctly describe and fully understand this relation to others, characterized by co-participation or common endeavor, we need to introduce an indispensable new term, namely that of the group to which I

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

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

One thing to be noted is how such a community relates to the possibility of phenomenological understanding. Phenomenology is characterized, we noted, by the first-person character of its descriptions. By shifting our attention from the “I” to the “we,” it is not necessary to leave the first-person point of view behind; we merely take up the plural rather than the singular first person. This shift from the I to the We reveals an interesting connection between 20th century phenomenology and Hegel’s phenomenology, a connection that has always been murky and little understood. In the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* the author introduces the key notion of his work, that of Geist, by calling it “an I that is We, a We that is I,” in other words a plural subject.³ It is Geist that forms the true subject of the dialectical forms that Hegel describes in his phenomenology, and which later figures as the central concept in his philosophy of history. Hegel is often criticized for reifying Geist, giving it a life and a mind of its own independently of that of the individuals involved, and this criticism may in part be justified. But it is

³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) p. 110.

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

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

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

This is the same sense of identity that has been a subject of some controversy between communitarians and liberals in political philoso-

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

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

IV. Historicity

Much more could be said about various aspects and implications of the We-relation, but I want to turn now to its relevance to our topic. We

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

But there is more to it than this. Engaged in a community by using the term “we,” I enjoy a special relationship with my fellow members, as we have seen. But these fellow members are temporally differentiated in significant ways. Alfred Schutz spoke of the difference between contemporaries, predecessors and successors,⁴ but this distinction is much too simple. My contemporaries are further differentiated into elder and younger, distinctions which are more than just chronological. In family, ethnic and professional contexts, elders are traditionally considered more knowledgeable and more experienced, and act as parents, guides and mentors to the younger. Professional relations often mimic family relations, as in Germany, where the dissertation director is called the *Doktorvater*. Just as important as this benign relationship is the agonistic, indeed, Oedipal, struggle in which the young rebel against the domination of the old, break away and establish their independence. So often, of course, this classic youthful rebellion, instead of securing the emancipation of the individual from the group,

⁴ Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, tr. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967) p. 208.

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

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

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

identity as individuals and enters into our lives and everyday experience.

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

These examples remind us again of the temporality of historical existence. They reveal that such existence is often as much a matter of the future as of the past, as Heidegger argued. But we usually identify historicity with the manner in which the past plays a role in the present. What my analysis shows, I think, is that it is primarily as members of communities of various sorts that we experience the reality of the past in our present lives. It is here that such terms as “tradition,” “inheri-

tance,” “legacy” come into play. In the agency of the “we” the past is not just passively given; we take it over or, as Heidegger put it, we “hand down” to ourselves the legacy of the past. Communal existence is active in many ways, but a constant feature of its activity is the manner in which it appropriates its past. That this is an activity is evident from the varying forms this takes. We select from the past what we wish to take over and neglect what we wish to forget. Indeed, remembering and forgetting are central activities by which communities constitute themselves. Remembering leads to commemoration and memorialization, in which we celebrate our heroes and achievements in monuments and popular songs on national holidays. The silence of forgetting can seek to evade responsibility for evils such as slavery or genocide; but it can in some cases have the beneficial effect of overcoming past resentments and grievances. Some communities remember too little; others remember too much.

V. Phenomenology, metaphysics and epistemology of history

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

One way to put it is this: In keeping with the phenomenological approach, we have been asking after the meaning of history, that is, its meaning for us. The classical philosophers of history, from Augustine to Hegel, Marx, Toynbee and Spengler, wanted to know not just what history means to us, but what it means in itself, independently of our experience and involvement. For these philosophers meaning in history was the direction and even purpose in history, the intentionality, if you will, of a divine plan or a hidden reason which functions independently of, and sometimes contrary to, human purposes. This sense of meaning was also linked to the idea of theodicy, in which the “slaughterbench of history,” as Hegel called it, had to be reconciled with divine providence and benevolence. Sometimes called the substantive or speculative philosophy of history, this approach went out of fashion in the 20th century, after being debunked by thinkers from Karl Löwith to Arthur

Danto to Jean-François Lyotard as religion-in-disguise, as conceptual confusion, and as totalizing *grand récit*. For our purposes the point to be made is that this approach is metaphysical rather than phenomenological. It asks not how history is experienced or given, but what it is in itself. Does human history consist in a disconnected series of events and actions, or is there an order to its progression? Does it constitute an advance toward some goal, a decline from a golden age, or does it move in a circle? Of course we would all like to have answers to these questions. Husserl, in *The Crisis*, writing in a time of personal, political and historical crisis, in the Nazi Germany of the 1930s, is no exception, and he seems to flirt with these questions in his last work. But these are not phenomenological questions, and I think he realizes this.

It is possible, however, that phenomenology can consider these questions, not in order to answer them but to cast light on why they are asked. I see a certain parallel here – one of many parallels, by the way – to Kant’s transcendental philosophy. For Kant it was just as important to explain why metaphysical questions are asked as to show why they could not be answered. He claimed that our reason demanded the kind of satisfaction that could be provided only by the ideas of God, freedom and immortality. Similarly, perhaps our sense of history calls for the kind of wholeness and closure that the classical theories sought to provide. We want history as a whole to “make sense,” that is, we want it to form a large-scale narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Given the temporality of our experience, it seems a natural illusion – perhaps even a “transcendental illusion” in Kant’s sense – that we view the past as a series of steps preparing the way for the present. On this scenario, the present is the culmination and conclusion of a process, as it was for Hegel. Or alternatively, in a more Marxist perspective, the present is experienced as a decisive turning point or crisis in relation to an imminent goal, calling for immediate action. The idea of the End of History retains its appeal. It was revived, briefly and implausibly, by Francis Fukuyama in the early 1990s.⁵ But those who dismiss this idea should beware: it is apparently still popular among some of the big thinkers of the Bush administration.

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

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

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

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

If we are to understand historical knowledge, as philosophers, we must understand that it is only in the context of this lived sense of the past that there can arise anything like the cognitive and critical interest we associate with the discipline of history as it currently exists. This is the background against which questions can arise about what really happened and how and why it happened; this is the framework in which the methods, procedures and goals of an academic discipline

have been developed. Historians are too often conceived by philosophers as if their task was to construct *ex nihilo*, as it were, by reading documents or looking at monuments and heaps of ruins, a past with which they have no direct acquaintance. But as we've seen, awareness of the past always already exists in the form of the public or popular narratives associated with such issues as group, regional, ethnic or national identity. It is also found in the speculative excesses and *grand recits* that are encouraged by the rhetoric of political leaders. But this public or popular historical knowledge is heavily value-laden and derives its force from motives other than an interest in objectivity and truth for its own sake.

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

Thus we can distinguish between the prescientific or naïve sense or awareness of the past, on the one hand, and the critical-historical knowledge of the past, on the other. But it would be a mistake to see these two as if they were simply at odds, motivated by completely different interests. It is true that the former seems to be somehow merely practical and ethical, an expression of our need as persons and as communities to have a sense of our identity, while the latter wants to be disinterested and objective, concerned solely with getting the story straight, discovering the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. But there is

also a sense in which society delegates its practical concern for the past to its historians, and they take responsibility for it. We – and here I mean the “we” of society at large, not we as historians – want our sense of the past to be truthful, not mythical or fictional. We want it to represent what really happened, not what we wish had happened. We know the difference between truthfulness about the past and the self-flattery of retrospective embellishment.

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

VI. Conclusion

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

⁶ *Zeit und Sinn* (Frankfurt/M: Fischer Verlag, 1990).

have seen, cast some indirect light on these questions. But it does address the question of why we should be interested in the past at all.