

REPAIRING HISTORICITY

Bennett Gilbert

ABSTRACT: This paper advances a fresh theorization of historicity. The word and concept of historicity has become so widespread and popular that they have ceased to have definite meaning and are used to stand for unsupported notions of the values inherent in human experience. This paper attempts to repair the concept by re-defining it as the temporal aspect of the interdependence of life; having history is to have a life intertwined with the lives of all others and with the universe. After separating out the looser uses, surveying some of the literature, and defining what needs to be done, the paper examines shortcomings in the very different and widely influential conceptions of historicity of Koselleck and Heidegger. It then advances a new conception and fits it into the theoretical and moral capabilities of the philosophy of history as a core of philosophical anthropology.

KEYWORDS: Historicity; Temporality; Philosophy of history; Koselleck; Hartog; Heidegger; Gadamer; Ethics

1. IN NEED OF HISTORICITY.

In creating new historical approaches throughout the human and social sciences during the last fifty years, many scholars have used the word “historicity” to signify the special status of the historical subject, inquiry, approach, or concept they use. These usages stray far from the conceptions of historicity of Count Paul Yorck von Wartenburg, Martin Heidegger, and others, which founded an ontology of human life that could have something like complexity, depth, value, and interest for us beyond the boundaries of conventional historical inquiry. In Yorck’s words, “the germ cell of historicity” is “something that lives” taken in its “entire given psycho-physical reality.” This something was the human person; its

entirety, the circumpressure of history binding it to its self-reflexivity.¹ It was to be a bulwark, built upon the reformed humanism of hermeneutics, against a positivist reduction of human meaningfulness. Anthropologists, literary historians, theorists of art, and wide-bore speculators about society, culture, and human existence alike use historicity under this broad approach to mean something very special and potent, although they use the word in many different ways.

But Yorck's ground of "something that lives" has come to pose a very difficult problem for the idea of historicity that is different from what he might have expected. The challenge today to support a defensible concept of meaning and value in human life comes only in lesser part from the form of scientific reduction that worried philosophy early (and later) in the twentieth century. The more potent challenge now comes from the critique of the thinning distinction between the human and the natural and the many powerful reasons to hold these together in one system of values.² The idea of historicity should now serve us to address the problems of value as posed by integration of the human and natural worlds, different from and in addition to the problems of value to which the distinction between the human and the material was addressed. "Historicity" is a battleground for this re-evaluation. The concepts must be freshly theorized.

My first aim here is to apply a siccative to the range of ideas that the word currently expresses. The baggy use of the term by thinkers in many fields weakens the philosophical worth of the concept. Sometimes it slips into being a factual externality, quite opposite to Yorck's and Heidegger's ideas; and many times it is even a nearly empty signifier. Within the philosophy of history, it is

¹ *Briefwechsel zwischen Wilhelm Dilthey und dem Grafen Yorck v. Wartenburg*, Halle, Max Niemeyer, 1923, 71–72, 69, 109, as cited and translated by Ingo Farin, "Count Paul Yorck von Wartenburg," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/yorck/>

² The hard line between the organic and the inorganic is weakening as well. Also we are by now familiar with the interdependence of the human with the machinic and know that human dependence on technology has deep ontological implications. As practical problems in historiography, these developments will be accommodated by historians' creativity. As theoretical problems, I leave them for another time, on the premise that historicity is an attribute of consciousness and so can, for now at least, be restricted to living things; indeed, extending it to all life as a speculative matter is already a very large stretch, in part because the science of the matter is far from settled. Beyond these concerns, the argument that all events and entities are interdependent because they are part of the same causal sequence that is reality does not eliminate the present approach to historicity just because this claim is so universal that it cannot negate all attempts to make distinctions for various purposes.

used both in a banal semiotic range and in some very influential, more sophisticated forms.

In this framework, the most conceptually sophisticated versions of historicity—the historic-theoretic concepts of Reinhard Koselleck and François Hartog and the philosophical ideas of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer—deserve a critical examination with the aim of seeking a justifiable idea of historicity that better serves the moral, cultural, and social aim of understanding our relation to the past by replacing the old easy idea of defining history as the human thing absent from the natural. Critique of these thinkers is the second aim of this paper.

The last part of this paper will argue for a conception of historicity that responds to the broad re-evaluation of the cosmic interdependence of life. Historicity thus renewed denotes the intertwining of one's life with other lives and with all life. This meaning best applies historicity to those issues in which, in my view, philosophical anthropology rooted in philosophy of history ought now to work; it is the meaning that the word historicity can now denote for which it is really worth keeping, refining, and using the word.³ We must see this universal historicity as best we can see it from within the human point of view that we cannot escape even as it enlargens and develops in our hands. Think of this essay as a reparative project.

2. DISAMBIGUATING HISTORICITY.

Anglophone philosophy of history is obliged to squeeze many meanings out of the word “history.” Because of this I start by stipulating two disambiguations.

(1). In Biblical studies historicity has a tight technical meaning: when these scholars invigilate the historicity of an action or event that the Bible, especially the New Testament, recounts, they are specifically asking, did it really happen or not? In philosophy of history the best practice will be to separate the use of historicity to mean an event's or person's factuality, as in this technical usage in Biblical scholarship, from that which is proper to the consciousness of historical experience and, more instantly, in terms of what philosophical good we want the concept to do, with an eye to the ultimate moral good we want to do when

³ I discuss these issues, and my general views, in *A Personalist Philosophy of History* (Routledge, 2019).

theorizing concepts of value.

(2). Sometimes “historicity” is used to refer to the fact that a person, object, or event is of interest to historians or to non-academic but disciplined historiography.⁴ Instead, let us call this “historicality,” for something has this historicality because it has a tangibility and an allure we call the historical.⁵ This distinction is useful, though not absolute: for example, both notions concern time, which provides them a porous boundary.

The simplest use of historicity is to mean nothing other than the just quality or state of having a history—that is, of being a being with a history or of being a group of beings with a history or histories. The loosest use of the term has little or no more content than this. Writers use it when they want it to do very special, hard, and vital work for their scholarship, even when they have thought through or researched much about the concept. But even within philosophy of history, where we expect specialization, there is a zone of imprecision in which we find definitions akimbo like cowlicks. Let just a few examples from recent philosophy of history stand for many. Here are several admirable recent papers and books that discuss historicity from various points of view without ever managing to define the word. Each of the following uses historicity in theorizing from a different point of view.

Sometimes the term is used so casually as to suggest almost nothing of its meaning. In one case, the abstract tells us that the paper aims “to investigate the historicity of disciplinary forms” of historiography,” yet it appears only once more, where it seems to be a synonym for subjectivity, at least in so far as both refer to mobile and multiple “categories” of temporal change; there is no further definition.”⁶ In another case, it appears to be just a marker for something’s having

⁴ I make this distinction as a way of using English words to differentiate these two concepts. The German use of *geschichtlichkeit* does not make this distinction, and translations into English sometimes use both historicity and historicality to mean the same thing, as, for example, in Chris Lawn and Niall Keane’s *The Gadamer Dictionary*, London: Continuum, 2011, 81.

⁵ This stipulation roughly accords with the development in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of definition B.3 of “historic” and definition B.1.b of “historical” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁶ Rodrigo Turin, “Between the Disciplinary Past and the Practical Past: Figurations of the Historian in the Crisis of the Humanities,” *Tempo*, vol. 24, no. 2, May/August, 2018, 189–205, [doi: 10.1590/TEM-1980-542X2018v240201](https://doi.org/10.1590/TEM-1980-542X2018v240201).

been in the historical past.⁷ One interesting paper follows a sociological literature on historicity but avoids every philosophical aspect of it.⁸ It seems that in such cases the authors do not know that the term has philosophical depth built up over two centuries; or they do not think the term has, or could have, any further determinate content that is useful today; or that they have not considered the matter while concentrating on concepts more central to their work.

In other cases, the author gives substantial attention to “historicity” but in a way that raises questions that are better examined than presumed answered. One serious and comprehensive phenomenological study builds to a climax around historicity, but explicitly defines it only as the quality that separates the human from the natural.⁹ In a book that makes a significant and resourceful contribution to the place of pragmatism in philosophy of history we read that “Historicity refers to the determinate contents through which transitions occur.” This is a “slide” of historicity into externalities, which, though not exactly so-called objective facts, endanger personal and human meanings.¹⁰ In such usages, Hegel’s original idea of historicity as “that exceptional mode of the self-relation of self-consciousness” to its own history by which Spirit, or Life, knows itself seems continually to slip down into the descriptive.¹¹ Finally, one of the most important recent papers in philosophy of history gives a sophisticated, and advanced theory of present and future historicities in which the word “history” or “the historical” (in the sense to which I stipulated above) could be substituted for “historicity” at almost every point.¹²

These loose usages account for part of what Henning Trüper calls “flatness”

⁷ Antonio Y. Vasquez-Arroyo, “Critical Theory, Colonialism, and the Historicity of Thought,” *Constellations*, vol. 25, 2018, 54–70, [doi: 10.1111/1467-8675.12348](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12348).

⁸ Marc Ereshevsky and Derek Turner, “Historicity and Explanation,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2019.02.002>.

⁹ Richard Campbell, *Truth and History*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992, 395–411.

¹⁰ Colin Koopman, *Pragmatism and Transition: Historicity and Hope in James, Dewey, and Rorty*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009, 16.

¹¹ Herbert Marcuse, *Hegel’s Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, trans. Seyla Benhabib, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1987, 323.

¹² Zoltán Boldiszár Simon, “The Transformation of Historical Time: Processual and Evental Temporalities,” in *Rethinking Historical Time*, ed. Marek Tamm and Laurent Olivier, London, Bloomsbury, 2019, 71–86.

of the term.¹³ By this he means that it promises more than it delivers. He attributes the degeneration of the concept from its origins in hermeneutics, rich with experiential and existential meaning, to a successful structuralist and post-structuralist critique of subjectivity. A wide range of thinkers pick up the hollow fragments of the concept that remain, and their use of them betrays “a chimeric beast” due to mere magical thinking or a kind of nostalgia for autonomous personhood. He concludes that the concept of historicity is addled and unfixable—he gives it “a diagnosis of catachrestic blockage.”¹⁴ Even though some of the uses mentioned above arise from much more than a sentiment of re-enchantment, many others among the hundreds of thousands of uses that searches of databases return do turn into a pulpous All-One because they reach for a real significance they had not rigorously worked out. But the failure of “the promise of wholeness and appropriation” by phenomenology does not mean that there can be no real depth to the concept, any more than baggy, unsophisticated uses vitiate it.¹⁵

Trüper also argues that because history, meaning historiography, both distorts reality by abstracting details from the universe of facts about the past—generally for the purpose of giving accounts of causal relations—but also cannot represent the past with full ontological truthfulness since historians exclude and include facts, it must operate on the basis of a desire for truth and meaning that is nothing more than a desire to transcend finitude.¹⁶ Marjorie Grene noted this problem in 1978 in simpler form: that we are more complicated than both our histories and our ontology.¹⁷ Building provisionally on her argument with some terms I have added from American Pragmatism and personalism, the complex inter-relationship of our inner selves and the natural world is the condition of culture specific to the inquiry of conscious beings into their world; and this is neither an ontological conundrum nor a logical or semantic puzzle but our unavoidable and undividable moral lives. I will develop this provisional thesis as a repair of

¹³ Henning Trüper, “The Flatness of Historicity,” *History and Theory*, vol. 58, no. 1, March, 2018, 23–49, [doi: 10.1111/hith.12098](https://doi.org/10.1111/hith.12098).

¹⁴ Trüper, “Flatness,” 46.

¹⁵ Trüper, “Flatness,” 36, referring to Heidegger.

¹⁶ Trüper, “Flatness,” 27–29, 34. I summarize and simplify his complex argument throughout his essay.

¹⁷ Marjorie Grene, “The Paradoxes of Historicity,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 32, no. 1, September, 1978, 15–36.

the concept with ideas other than those dead-ends that Trüper dissects out of existential phenomenology and out of post-modernist critique.

3. EXCAVATING HISTORICITY.

In order to repair historicity, we have to understand that historicity was and is itself a reparative concept. There is a mandorla of meaningfulness around the word. People use it, however fecklessly, to help repair the broken connection of human action to values, of our life within nature to our aspiration to be good and just as well as to survive, of what we empirically know to what we desire to speak of morally. On a broad view, it was devised in order to help fill the vacuum that the vast battery of dehumanizing technological and societal mechanization created for most thinking people. The term is but one piece of the multiform and polygonal responses to the supposed disenchantment of the real world over the last two centuries. It was and is a marker for the meaningfulness of experience and the values of human existence that the concept the word names came to be invented. At the point in time in which philosophy of history in its canonical modern sense was initiated, the problems of squaring a moral order with the temporal and logical orders of disenchanted nature enveloped a lot of the axiology, culture, anthropology, natural science, psychology, and general philosophy throughout the nineteenth century until the force of historicity—a word and concept first unfolded by Hegel—emerged in the work of Dilthey.¹⁸

On this understanding of the desire for a powerful and meaningful concept of historicity, Trüper is right. And it is not only a set-theoretic approach that can undermine an ontology for historicity, it is weaknesses in the ontology that generated the original dominant understanding of historicity that also undermine it. But it is to neither an ontological, nor an empirical, nor a logical approach that we must look if we are to find a use and significance that the term can aptly express. Rather, the “desire” for magic that troubles Trüper is so ancient,

¹⁸ Naturally there are huge parts of the history of the philosophical use of this concept that I will not treat here. The development of “historicity” from Hegel through Heine and Haym to Dilthey and Yorck, with most attention paid to the stages of Dilthey’s conceptualization, is described in Leonhard von Renthe-Fink, *Geschichtlichkeit: Ihr terminologischer und begrifflicher Ursprung bei Hegel, Haym, Dilthey und Yorck*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1968. Gerhard Bauer’s *“Geschichtlichkeit”: Wege und Urrwege eines Begriffs*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963, takes in a wider perspective—from Vico to National Socialist use of the concept to post-war thinkers and even the natural sciences.

perennial, and universal that it ought not to be dismissed on the basis of the one kind of ontology that generated it or of its set-theoretic logic. These matters are narrow in comparison with the “desire”: the desire to gain by inquiry the accumulated story of our actions and behavior some truthful self-understanding of “the place cleared within nature for the possibility of the human” (in Grene’s words) that will help us guides our lives through the most desperate difficulties.¹⁹

Having set aside the less than adroit usages referred to above and before arguing an affirmative account of repaired historicity, a critique of the two fully developed and influential uses of “historicity” that today dominate philosophy of history will help to show what how the tradition of the concept has formed and to specify what is needed to meet a profound new twist in the problem of human meaning. Looking at these from the wide points of view of our self-understanding and grounding of meaning rather than for their failings as ontology or as logic, we will see what they would have needed, and what we now need, to understand historicity as a morally—that is, an ethically, politically, socially, and culturally—reparative concept, that same need behind the loose or flat usages which fall short of fulfilling it, and the same need that Trüper gives up on. The critique of these two kinds of historicity will suggest that revised and updated ideas of personhood and human existence can form a conception of historicity that will serve the cultural and moral purposes of philosophizing a human past no longer fully distinct from nature’s past. These two established kinds of historicity are (1). the historic-theoretical and (2). the phenomenological.

(1). In Reinhard Koselleck’s theory of history what we know as history is the invention of the laying-bare epoch that began with the turn of the Enlightenment into that specific historical consciousness which followed upon the French and Industrial Revolutions and which is common to scholarly knowledge of history, and perhaps to all awareness of the past, since then. The past that had been the cosmically pre-determined divine plan, iterated like a liturgy, changed into a collective of non-repeatable events requiring detailed research if it is to exist at all. *Geschichte* was the name then given to this corpus.²⁰ We see history, not as God does but as witnesses do, by being aware of what it is to witness, that is,

¹⁹ Grene, “Paradoxes,” 34.

²⁰ Reinhard Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, 27–37.

properly to aver what one knows from one's experience by self-awareness of one's place in history. Koselleck calls this "positional commitment."²¹ This experience to which historians testify is that of their own accumulated knowledge, a comprehension of what they know and how they conceptualize what they know that sublates mystery.

Historicity then is one type of self-aware historical existence invented by and for a time and place to do a specific job.²² This was "to subject historical time to a critique which could only be derived from an understanding of history itself"²³; and it issued in historicity and philosophy of history as the form of thought that developed to an unprecedented and very high degree the principle that the "temporal experience of reality and the productive exploration and inspection of this lived reality condition each other and belong together inseparably."²⁴ Philosophy of history exists, or existed, as the phase of the belonging-together of conception and production, action and self-reflection that was, or is, the object it works upon. "Historicity" worked to arrest that content before its own understanding of a temporality of ceaseless change swept the present out of its conceptual domain. Historicity was to prevent this "presentism" from eating itself, to give to that order of things the stability it needed to engender its goals, to protect the victors of the revolutions of the *Sattelzeit* from those who wanted more revolutions in accord with the order of time and justice.²⁵ It was devised as a rein upon the wild beast of time. It is thought's self-repair of the problem of the moving present.²⁶

François Hartog, in part following Koselleck, argues that historicity is multiple and that each historicity is one specific, long-dominant, circumscribed, mortal "regime of historicity," and that there will be others. Comes now the end of ours, a different historicity to follow it, as if on a track or belt inevitably moving

²¹ Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 136–140.

²² Reinhard Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner, et al., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001, 2–3.

²³ Koselleck, *Practice*, 119.

²⁴ Koselleck, *Practice*, 46–47.

²⁵ Koselleck, *Practice*, 83.

²⁶ I present here only the aspect of Koselleck's thought most proximate to my purpose, so it should be noted that his historicity is grounded in a group of ideas that issue in his theorization of the history of concepts, including repetitive structures, "simultaneity of the non-simultaneous," and, most famously, "space of experience and horizon of expectation."

along to a dumpster.²⁷ In this sense, the historicity that was supposed to stop historicization failed. As a way to observe temporalities, which supposedly braid themselves together or which historians assemble in their constructions, regimes of historicity are transient, mutating according to the conceptions of historians.²⁸ Hartog explicitly points out that historicity is not “an external standard” but “is constructed by the historian,” a “tool....to examine our relations to time historically.”²⁹

For Koselleck and Hartog, historicity is both the medium and the object of historiographic inquiry. Modern history goes through it and to it. Into historicity both topic and method integrate. Koselleck’s historicity is still ideal, in that both its constituents are constructions; at the same time, it is also real and objective, in that historicity is subjected to scientific study. It becomes an externality, of the type noted above. This study of historicities is theoretical in the Kantian sense, especially in the rather dry form of intellectual history that Koselleck, along with others, invented. This historicity thus follows historicity—that which interests the historians—with its self-reflective maintenance of the objective stance of empirical examination (somewhat trimmed) amidst our limiting determinations. But when historicity is generated by interests in the historical, there is no purpose or content left for the concept of historicity, because it has been channeled in such a way that only one kind of knowledge and one kind of meaning safely emerge from a method designed to blunt our situated dispositions in order to produce factual truths.

But of course the case that the objective kind of knowledge and meaning is

²⁷ François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, 104–114ff.

²⁸ Hartog regards modernity as an age in which “the present” replaced both past and future. I regard this use of “presentism” as one of a body of usages of the term that is even more tangled and inconsistent than “historicity” in philosophy of history and across philosophical fields. For this reason and for the sake of economy of space I do not here further address this aspect of his thought.

²⁹ Hartog, *Regimes*, xv–xix and 16–18. Following Koselleck, Hartog also describes historicity as “generated by the distance, and tension, between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation” (17); he also views historicities as ways “the present has been construed” (195; cf. 28–29); and he also says (following Marshall Sahlins) that a historicity is a “how past, present, and future are articulated” (40). Yet are these things confined to historians as their tools? Are they not part of everyone’s mentality? Even if we set aside the question of the compatibility of these and other statements in *Regimes*, the relationship of historians to everyone else “within” or with respect to history is a problem in this kind of approach to historicity—and a moral problem at that.

good and useful does not mean that there are no other useful kinds. For the knowers, that is, all those who, living in temporality, receive the experience of the past, knowledge and meaning are not of one kind alone. There is more than one kind of knowledge and meaning for cognizing persons, whose complexity is closer to infinity than even the uncountable set of past facts. As Montaigne says, our inquiries are endless, the mind's nourishment consists in amazement and uncertainty and keeps us in wonder, knowledge is ambiguous and flowing like water endlessly rolling over a riverbed, we always stretch our thoughts out and endlessly advance them.³⁰ In addition to becoming a sort of positive reduction, this kind of historicity has no resources for more current issues of meaningfulness.

(2). Historicity under the phenomenological approach takes the contrary course: it precedes historicity, is the opposite of an externality, and addresses a full range of meaningfulness unconstricted by scientific knowledge.³¹ A different problem arises.

The most famous conception of historicity is Heidegger's stunning unwrapping of it out of the massed factuality of historiography (*Historizität* or, as he calls it, "historiology") in sections 72–77 of part two of *Being and Time*.³² Like a poor person finding a bag of gold, or as if by surprise a wall comes down that reveals an unsuspected room in a house, the power of the statement follows immediately upon its announcement, appearing as self-evident, completely revealed upon seeing it, like the unanticipated gold or the unknown room. The claim and its consequences, which Heidegger circles round and round, reveal themselves in one moment, so to speak. But if we look at this move just on its own, its probative reach is limited. Historicity appears in it in a space evacuated by empiricist construction of experience of the past and by "scientific"

³⁰ Michel de Montaigne, "On Experience," in *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech, London: Penguin, 2003, 1211–1212.

³¹ It should be noted that, despite the opposition here between phenomenological approach to the concept of historicity and the way in which Koselleck and others use it, Heidegger and others influenced some historians, including Koselleck, in various ways. And it must also be noted that the way in which I criticize Koselleck's views is not the same way in which a phenomenologist might criticize them, although the critiques overlap in some measure.

³² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 2010, 355–383 (German 372–404).

historiography.³³ The claim for historicity itself is what deports or sets aside historiography.

Beneath his exposition, Heidegger silently asks us whether we can psychically tolerate a final understanding of that sum of human experience called history that lacks any axiology. If “history” is just the action of physical, or even social, cause and effect, and assuming one can no longer believe in its teleology, then it has no meaning. Heidegger implicitly makes this claim, we all sense that it is a correct analysis, and most of us would be disappointed to find that it is true or to learn that we must stop inquiry at this point. Therefore, if history is to have meaning—this is a rough and broad way of putting this desire—there must be some other depth to inquire into. This is *geschichtlichkeit*, historicity. We take it by default, as it were, just where we want to find and grasp it. It appears right there as a something outside of the rationalist and empiricist, scientific or logical terms that must invalidate our consideration of it before we started or got very far. Such is the way of insight and is in this case an insight of genius.³⁴

But upon accepting this pathway from historiography to historicity, from what we have in the practical operations our intellect to what we suspect or at least desire to be at the foundation of thought, and experience, and even being, we must also recognize a pathway back to historiography. Without this, “historicity” either is merely a genteel declaration of the degeneracy of positivism or a suave but hollow promise. The track runs both ways; the train must be able to back up as well as go forward, to serve both depots, to cart what they share. How can there be historicity without history? It cannot be, and therefore the mutual linkage ought to account for their interdependence. Otherwise, historicity does not give us any actual contexture of meaning. The integral force of the original intuitive claim for historicity would fail without a way back to the forms of meaningfulness of human experience that historicity is supposed to support. If it fails, we would have to say that Heidegger managed to achieve the generative

³³ Heidegger’s target, narrowly conceived, was the positivist historical theory then dominant in Germany; but once he approached history from the thematization of temporal experience developed by Edmund Husserl, his critique had a much wider and more profound range.

³⁴ Cf. Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Intuition and Expression. Theory of Philosophical Concept Formation*, trans. Tracy Colony, London, Continuum, 2010, 45–48.

solipsism that Husserl worked so hard to avoid.³⁵

Does Heidegger show us this way “back”? To be clear, I speak here solely of the early Heidegger as he speaks up to and in *Being and Time*.³⁶ He adds to the basic realization of historicity the other parts of Dasein, such as thrown-ness and care.³⁷ However, these are inward matters. They do not link one person to other persons. His Dasein with its (or her) death-oriented historicity is like a convex mirror, isolating and rather forcefully miniaturizing and essentializing (in a very informal sense of the word) the life within.³⁸ We can see that move as the kernel of this notion of historicity when in 1920–1921 he describes our reception of the world around us as the “intensification” (*steigerung*) of a manifold that envelopes and can distract us, an inward clarifying of the obscuring abundance of our social and common experience.³⁹ In *Being and Time* this is an *Innerweltlichkeit*; it becomes the “existential interpretation of the *historicity* of Dasein,” “the authentic disclosedness (‘truth’)” (*Erschlossenheit*) that is distinct from, though immanent in, historiography.⁴⁰ Against it the “changing appearance and disappearance of events” is inauthentic, and yet it must be that Dasein is exposed to these events and must return to be among them in order to take advantage of its own possibilities for authenticity.⁴¹

The domain of the manifold from which Heidegger seeks relief he calls the

³⁵ Enzo Traverso in his intellectual history of the Europe of two world wars, *Fire and Blood: the European Civil War 1914–1945*, trans. David Fernbach, London, Verso, 2016, 196–199, reads Heidegger not only as isolated from society but fearful of it, specifically arguing that his *Sorge* was really fear.

³⁶ In his exhaustive study of Heidegger’s concept, Hans Ruin says that “The specific “theory” of historicity advanced in *Being and Time* is only a way-station....” in his *Enigmatic Origins: Tracing the Theme of Historicity Through Heidegger’s Work*, Stockholm, 1994, xiii.

³⁷ The issue I discuss here is to be distinguished from the possibility of a “Heideggerian ethics of care” as developed by Babette Babich, Michael Theunissen, and others.

³⁸ Heidegger, a close reader of St. Augustine, formed his notion of our orientation toward death on Augustine’s idea of our *intentio* toward the future (making it present in the soul) but substituted death for the afterlife with God that Augustine held we reach toward.

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology. Winter Semester 1919/1920*, trans. Scott M. Campbell, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, 191 (App. B, sec. 21).

⁴⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 377 (397).

⁴¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 361 (379). The phenomenologist Claude Romano expressed this problem in Heidegger with great precision in a recent lecture “From Event to Selfhood: An Intellectual Journey” that he has posted at

https://www.academia.edu/2834448/Identity_and_Selfhood_Paul_Ricoeur_s_Contribution_and_its_Continuation

“with-world” (*Mitwelt*), and his early attempt to maintain a link to collective life he calls *Mitgeschehen*, or events-with-others.⁴² In *Being and Time* their descendent is “being-with” (*Mitsein*), or empathy. It is the only resource for solving the kind of problem I have described, since the events in the circumpresuring external human world always turn out to be inauthentic; and yet the account of *Mitsein* as empathy (*Einführung*) is just a grudging sketch, a rare peeling buoy-bell obscured in the surging sea of Dasein’s concern for itself.⁴³ “The ownmost possibility is nonrelational”—because and only because Heidegger provides nonrelationality as tautologically included in ownmost-ness.⁴⁴ There is a considerable literature attempting to show that the account of empathy in *Being and Time* is adequate, but the claim is almost always presented as a “fleshing out,” a “leaping ahead,” “a creative restructuring,” or as “going beyond a beginning.”⁴⁵

In sum, Koselleck-Hartog historicity falls unacceptably close to a positivist explainer, even as its valuable historiographic production aims to understand the course of thought by political and social theoretical concepts. Heidegger’s historicity, on the other hand, in its discompassionate heroic-poetic stance, by which it searches out stillness to liberate awareness and to re-ground meaning, was responding to the challenge of positivist reduction but, even setting aside its defects with respect to human caring and collective relationships, still leaves us to find a way to face the newer problem of the interdependence of all forms of life.

⁴² See Christian Ferencz-Faltz’s parallel reading of the early work, “The Element of Intersubjectivity: Heidegger’s Early Conception of Empathy,” *Contemporary Philosophical Review*, vol. 48, 2015, 479–496, [doi: 10.1007/s11007-015-9350-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-015-9350-4).

⁴³ Notably Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 267 (278) and 121–122 (125); and as *Einführung*, 124–125 (128–129).

⁴⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 252–254 (263–265).

⁴⁵ See Peg E. Birmingham, “Logos and the Place of the Other,” *Research in Phenomenology*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1990, 34–55, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156916490X00036>; Fred R. Dallmayr, “Heidegger on Intersubjectivity,” *Human Studies*, vol. 3, No. 3, July, 1980, 221–246, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02331811>; Irene McMullin, *Time and the Shared World: Heidegger on Social Relations*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2013, which offers the most affirmative account of empathy in Heidegger; Mahon O’Brien, “Leaping Ahead of Heidegger: Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity in *Being and Time*,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2014, 534–551, [doi: 10.1080/09672559.2014.948719](https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2014.948719); Frederick A. Olafson, *Heidegger and the Ground of Ethics: A Study of Mitsein*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998; Robert D. Stolorow, “Fleshing out Heidegger’s ‘Mitsein’ (Review of *Time and the Shared World: Heidegger on Social Relations* by Irene McMullin),” *Human Studies*, vol. 37, no. 1, Spring 2014, 161–166, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-014-9309-1>; and Jin Xiping’s critique, “Heidegger’s Conception of Being-with (*Mitsein*) and His Simple Designation of Social and Political Reality in the *Black Notebooks*,” *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, vol. 11, no. 3, December, 2016, 415–429., <https://doi.org/10.3868/so30-005-016-0030-8>.

4. REPAIRING HISTORICITY.

The problem that our notion of historicity must now address is not only what meaning there is in human history but also how to maintain any such meaning when it must enter into closer integration with nature than we were accustomed to conceive of. Where philosophy of history from Vico to Collingwood and after has taken historicity as the attribute peculiar to humankind that distinguishes it from the natural, historical inquiry follows powerful philosophical developments and scientific discoveries in seeing that whatever it is that is human—even the uniquely human—has come to be within the processes of a natural cosmos; and also that the domain of the natural cannot be understood as mechanism or as matter in the conventional sense, for we cannot escape the inherent structure of our ability to know. Physical nature and life of all kinds have a reality that always exceeds our ways of segmenting them and our definite conceptions of either domain.

In this sense we must always strain to grasp reality more deeply. But there is another sense in which understanding this principle is not only an instrument for the voyage of our intelligence into what hitherto was unfathomable. It is also an urgent matter.

The first lesson a disaster teaches is that everything is connected. In fact, disasters, I found, ... are crash courses in those connections. At moments of immense change, we see with new clarity the systems—political, economic, social, ecological—in which we are immersed as they change around us. We see what's strong, what's weak, what's corrupt, what matters and what doesn't.⁴⁶

Rebecca Solnit wrote this in response the worldwide epidemic of the novel coronavirus known as Covid19 in the first half of 2020. We are not immune: not as bodies or as selves or as spirits, not as groups or nations, not as a species, neither externally nor internally. We and the world around us are co-terminous in fundamental and ineliminable ways. Life, pursuing its uncountably many courses, shares the resources of its world, both spreading out and meeting among them.

History must therefore be the site of our interdependence with all life. *Historicity is the temporal aspect of the interdependence of life; and human historicity is the*

⁴⁶ Rebecca Solnit, "'The impossible has already happened': what coronavirus can teach us about hope. In the midst of fear and isolation, we are learning that profound, positive change is possible," *The Guardian*, April 7, 2020.

conceptualized condition of all that persons do for and to each other in history in response to history. Having history is to have a life intertwined with the lives of all others. Our historicity occurs in our relationships with all that affects us and all that we encounter as we inquire into the world that we experience. “Having” historicity is the state or attribute of all persons acting in the temporalities in which they experience life’s self-sustaining operations in an enduring universe.⁴⁷ This includes our vulnerability as well as our flourishing.

This definition of historicity is a stipulation concinnated within the framework laid out above of the reparative project to give a worthwhile explanation of meaningfulness (or “understanding”). It is conceived so as to avoid the faults found in other accounts of what it is for humans to have history; and also to allow for meaningfulness to be found in the accumulated human past, as against the difficulties for such a notion raised first by the breach with metaphysical grounds of moral value and, latterly, by both extension and by new lines of thought, raised upon our improved knowledge of the unity of human experience and the non-human world. When human experience can no longer be opposed to nature by calling it history, we must re-describe what having a history is for all beings. One great task for the philosophy of history is to insure that this integration of the human and the natural by its capacity to nourish our relationship with people who lived before our time and with the past in general, as theory, knowledge, or experience, however far this goes toward or falls short of fully leveling the two, enriches our the accuracy, usefulness, and moral weight of our response to history-nature rather than deflate or impoverish it.

Three advantages of this concept of historicity already appear. First, it is congruent with the problem itself of somehow integrating history and nature while allowing for judgments of value from the human perspective. It does not directly “solve” this problem, but at least it is not based on denial of the problem, nor does it deflate judgment or understanding. Second, this enables us to create responses to history without tying our responses to historicity, i.e., to the

⁴⁷ For present purposes, I define a temporality as an individual or group lived experience expressed as a schema of time; and/or as the theory of time necessary support and/or understand to the actual beliefs or practices of a group. A temporality can “objective” mechanical time, or lived time, or any form of historical time. Also, non-humans can have temporalities; and, although we humans have minimal cognitive access to these, we somehow, with uneasy appreciation, try to take them into account from our point of view as our lives are intertwined with the lives or existences of the rest of the universe.

historical particulars that interest us. It thus gives philosophy of history its proper broad purchase for theorizing culture and as philosophical anthropology, rather than limiting it to historical theory or methodology, as I hold Koselleck historicity does. And third, it is adequate to history. It covers the history of all the kinds of things that enter into our historicity by our encountering them in history. Independent of any and all neo-materialisms or their descendants, being without regard to whether we learn that reality is ultimately energy impulses or data bytes or vital spirits or hard matter, this conception allows us to think about all the moving parts we must apply to historiographic accounts that concern all kinds of living things and the cosmic and local histories of the resources they use.

In sum, this definition meets the complexity of the problem and of the experiential knowledge that brings us to face the problem. But what then of meaningfulness and of our most important values? The capacity of historicity for meaning is more important than the capacity for complexity, although the two things are related. A repaired historicity suggests that historicity includes something by means of which genetic or structural complexity cannot deflate the human values arising from our whole experience encountered in history. Without demonstrating this, the thesis that meaning is wholly a phenomenon emergent from complexity would take the form of limiting the complexity of the whole. This result would be self-contradictory; but, beyond this, it is even more important to state why historicity has a moral weight that is not stopped by the ontology of our scientific knowledge at any present or future point.⁴⁸ How does this understanding of historicity lead us back to history—to collective human history, to other histories of the biosphere, and to the persons of all species whom historicity marks and who become historical, to their and our world of meanings, our moral world?

Let us return to the simplest understanding of historicity. If our (or any being's) "having" historicity means to be the kind of being that has history, then this quality must include something more than having a history in the sense of history as the flow of causally determined events. For, if to have history is simply this, then there is no need for a concept like historicity; Heidegger was correct in

⁴⁸ It is possible to argue that the notion that the fullness of reality is beyond our grasp is the great discovery of several streams of modern philosophy, as in the work of James, Dewey, and Whitehead.

this regard. Beings with historicity in this sense are just historical beings. If the word adds nothing, it's just another term for the imbecile jackhammer of fate and chance; or for the current dominant paradigm of scientific knowledge; or perhaps, in terms of social and intellectual history, for our own chosen amoral and selfish tumble through time by compulsive repetition of what the growth of *ratio*, machinic reason, and capital, which defines modernity, whether we start it from Plato or Gutenberg or James Watt or Charles Babbage or Henry Ford—that is, the will to knowledge as power that would strip away everything in culture except “*The will to grow ...everywhere written large, and to grow at no matter what or whose expense....the very screeches of the pipe to which humanity is actually dancing.*”⁴⁹ This is both the historicity Koselleck sees and the opposite of the historicity Heidegger wants to see.

Nothing compels historicity to be otherwise if we cannot show a different vision of our behavior and our existence—but *showing otherwise is the exact cash value of the concept*. Universal speculative philosophy of history was a succession of attempts to reach past the evacuation of meaning from our behavior that mechanistic philosophy and science caused us to feel. Along with the advantages mentioned above, the way of conceiving historicity that I propose, because it is conformed to a different problem, avoids reduction.

Furthermore, a substantive case can be made for meaning in historiography and reflection on the past in ways that this concept of the condition of historicity suggests. The interdependence of life involves all operations of all existents as both agents and patients. But as to human agents—and all non-human agents we recognize as persons as we come to know more about them: they participate in the maintenance and well-being of their lives in the largest possible capacity that we can know of. This indeed, is why we value the category of personhood, as a kind of illimitable comprehensiveness of conscious activity in all its dimensions intelligible to ourselves.⁵⁰ We can handily describe the practice of

⁴⁹ Henry James, *The American Scene*, in *Collected Travel Writings: Great Britain and America*, New York, Library of America, 1993, 400.

⁵⁰ My words here relies on a canonical formulation of the personalist principle by Randall Auxier as my reference point: “For all its vexing ambiguity, the term ‘person’ goes further than any other in collecting the values we associate with dignity, honor, knowledge, truth, and, so they say, every other fundamental value, excepting only the precognitive values (such as feeling, pleasure, and perhaps beauty), and perhaps not even these. Since the idea of knowing definitely presupposes “person” (a knowers who values the

this capacity in a word borrowed from John Dewey: inquiry.⁵¹ The life-supporting activity of historicity is a process of inquiry in which the agents learn of, experience, explore, and respond to their vulnerabilities. Their existential character derives as much from being patients as from being agents, from suffering events and actions as much as from causing them or controlling forces. This perspective of personhood can be a basis for respondents to history to reflect, write, or otherwise create, enhance, judge, and value those parts of the vast total of experience that interest them. And so the risk of automating or otherwise reductively treating history by linking it to nature brings us closer to the particular and special situations of persons in their historicity—in their responses to history—rather than removing us farther away.

This idea of historicity can take us even further. Historicity must be a good, else the concept could not be reparative; it would not have been needful; causal determination would have been enough. This good need not be teleological or transcendent, nor must it be neither. What is required for such a restoring and repairing good is that it be adequate to history—to that pastness through which it is sought and the events to which it responds—rather than separated from it. It therefore must name the inquiry common to the activity of agents as a whole, if not every actor, because every instance of meaning or value, like every physical event, and like every bioform, is profoundly interdependent with a vast number of other instances. And this common inquiry we can argue to be a good.

Seeking repair of this kind, Hans-Georg Gadamer held that we live in a contexture of meaning that is made by the “historical effect.” The past-carrying-forward, or tradition, is not only temporal existence, and not only the source of

cognitive act) at a very basic level, the issue of whether there is any way around using this idea has concentrated itself at two levels, one theoretical and one practical..... Still, ‘person’...is not self, not subject, not ghost in the machine, neither essence nor non-essence. If the idea has a meaning, it lies in the effort we exert in imagining one another, and the use made by the patient of such agency to some sort of social awareness of himself or herself, and to adjust that awareness to the demands placed on us by our situatedness. There is no reason *a priori* to assume that institutions, communities, animals, and ecosystems are incapable of assimilating the ways in which they are experienced into the experience that constitutes their forms of order” (“The Certainty Principle,” *Eidos: A Journal for Philosophy of Culture*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2018, 3; 4).

⁵¹ Development of this idea will be found in the section of John Herman Randall’s *Nature and Historical Experience: Essays in Naturalism and The Theory of History*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1958, called “Toward the Theory of History” (23–120), a thoroughgoing functionalist analysis that deserves more attention than it gets.

our self-knowledge, but also for him the creative energy with which we adapt.⁵² Tradition thus understood is indispensable to movement away from habitual or received views and ways of life. Under this view, part of the force of tradition is that it effects the critique of tradition.⁵³ Because tradition is something held in common by definition, Gadamer's view is that our understanding is not an atomized search but, as I put it, an interdependent one. This way of pushing finite temporality into common creative endeavor is Gadamer's advance on the early Heidegger. Gadamerian historicity *is* the moving force of life; and so, as the concept accounts for this order of things, what historicity *does* for us when we *use* it is to augment our awareness of this reality and therefore our openness.⁵⁴ But if historicity as a fact is an inescapable power over us, then why is historicity also a resting choice necessary for repairing our mistaking of tradition as carcerative rather than as liberating? Historical consciousness alone need not be prescriptive, however descriptive or profoundly emotional it is.

To find normativity, we must recognize that, behind debating how to tell the stories that are in historians' minds, philosophizing about the quality and condition of having history has a substance understanding the social bonds that enable us to live together in a world. Every person reflecting on the past, including historians, is not simply recording facts or narrating opinions; each, in addition, is making, or breaking, or re-making these social bonds by which universal interdependence can be turned into the good of flourishing life. Our lives are not only doing or thinking, acting or reflecting on our own private accounts. They are parts of the whole.

Our moral response to being parts of the whole, as enacted in reflecting on or studying the past and hence participating in the whole to greater effect and in higher degrees of intensity, must be to nourish and support these bonds. We do this to the degree that is most completely adequated to history by fully responding to the common opportunity that is life and to the common end in the grave that history tells us about. My concern here is not the epistemic, or theory virtues,

⁵² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, New York Continuum, 1999, 266, 277–280.

⁵³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300–306.

⁵⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 355–363. Gadamer defines historicity as our “standing and sacting” within the limits of finitude.

or even the performative virtues.⁵⁵ I am describing a moral ideal that not only applies to historians but that finds a special purpose, force, and effect in our relationship to all other beings through historicity, since our past is a vast aspect of the interdependence necessary for survival. All persons can sustain that bond by repairing it. This cannot mean to erase loss but to bridge it by the deepest and fullest connection with past persons of which we are capable as a moral ideal. This not mere empathy. It is the compassion to which recognition of the other brings us. If historiography is largely a body of interpretations that, arising from the consequences of the historical circumstances of their authors, institute exclusions, denials, psychic repressions, and real oppressions upon others, if, in short, history as a science and a study and a subjectivity is often an exercise of power, our moral duty that theoretically arises from historicity is not simply to explain the past under color of objectivity but, at the limit of our finitude, to be brutally spurred to improve our moral and social world by extending compassion to all our forebears in the face of the sublime and unfeeling power of that intertwines history and nature.

This is the moral coherence we can find in historicity, apart from the intellectual or historiographic coherences we seek or do not seek, while keeping our understanding of the contingency of the real world and avoiding theodicy. The particular, though capacious, purpose of understanding historicity is to wrap moral meaning into our reception of facts by illuminating the way that the moral force of being historical underlies the choices of moral agents to act as they do, at every moment they chose to do it, to make their lives meaningful. Under this reparative axiology, historicity is a way of looking at the work moral agents do in the situations that history puts them into—a particular frame of reference for human behavior that builds a moral perspective out of the hard facts of pastness. Through reflecting on the past, it can become part of a prescription we give ourselves in order reparatively to respond to history, change, and loss. We activate historicity from pre-condition to historical existence by our response with which to answer mere history. It can become the collective attempt to find a way back from disappointment or despair; and it has been this since the first

⁵⁵ For a summary of some of the literature on virtues in historical theory see Guy Axtell, “The Dialectics of Objectivity,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, vol. 6, 2012, 341–350, [doi: 10.1163/18722636-12341236](https://doi.org/10.1163/18722636-12341236).

understanding of loss and death. It might fail or be feeble; at best, it only just stands up to the onrush of events.

Bennett Gilbert <bbg2@pdx.edu>