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Knowledge, Temporality, and the Movement of History

Søren Gosvig Olesen. *Transcendental History*. Translated by David Possen. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013. 199 + xiv pp.

Søren Gosvig Olesen's *Transcendental History* is an ambitious attempt to bring together different strands in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and deconstruction under the common moniker of “transcendental” or “speculative” philosophy and to argue that such approaches are rooted in a specifically transcendental conception of history. Olesen develops and defends the claim that history understood in this sense (often expressed in the English translations of the authors under consideration as historicity or historicity) is the fundamental condition for human knowledge and, thus, that the human being is a necessarily historical being.

Drawing on twentieth-century authors ranging from Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, Canguillhem, Koyré, and Bachelard to Derrida and Agamben, he argues that “transcendental history” conceived as a “movement of knowledge” is epistemologically and ontologically more fundamental even than time. This conception of history “has gradually superseded other putative definitions of the transcendental, such as language, intersubjectivity, life-world, and human finitude” (xiii). This claim is supported by a detailed study of the development of the conception of the subject through Western thought, with significant reference to historical figures ranging from Plato and Aristotle through Augustine and Aquinas to Leibniz, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, and with special attention paid to the development of transcendental thought in Descartes and Kant. The book is at once an ambitious attempt to explain and defend “the good old word transcendental” against its continental and analytic detractors, and to defend a specifically transcendental conception of the philosophy of history and its importance for understanding knowledge. The work is insightful and provocative on both fronts.

Because of the great breadth of thinkers treated in the work, it will not be possible to comment in any detail on Olesen's nuanced individual interpretations of the authors he considers. Suffice it to say that his discussions evidence expertise not only concerning the primary texts at hand but also careful and

prolonged study of the secondary literature. Since these different interpretations are woven together to develop a complex argument over the course of the book, I will attempt to trace the argument through Olesen's major claims, with comments along the way. I conclude with some brief critical comments on the book as a whole.

1 History and the Transcendental Tradition

The book's stated goal is not to give a straightforward examination of the philosophical-historical origins of the continental genres of speculative and transcendental thought but "to examine those genres' fundamental premises to the degree to which they persist in the very philosophical movements that one might conceive of as post-transcendental and post-speculative, such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, and deconstruction" (xi). Those fundamental premises are shown to be based in a conception of history in relation to human knowledge, developed through (and eventually, beyond) the philosophy of the subject. It is this movement through the philosophy of the subject and beyond it that is traced in the first two parts of the book.

In Part One, "Phenomenological Lessons in Thinking about History," Olesen examines the development of the notion of historicity (historicality) in Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida. The post-speculative, transcendental conception of the problem of history in the twentieth century starts with Husserl and continues to be of central importance for later figures in the phenomenological lineage.

For Olesen, Husserl's conception of history is rooted in "essential history" or "original meaningfulness" (*Sinnhaftigkeit*). History is understood as "an object's arrival at its own concept, and, by way of consequence, reason's arrival at its conception of itself as reason. It is in this sense, and only in this sense, that history is to be conceived as the absolute basis of knowledge" (14). For Olesen, the "movement" that is history is central not only because of its relation to temporality but because of its relation to the concept and, thereby, to knowledge and to logic.

The second "lesson in thinking about history" comes from Heidegger. Although the full notion of *Seinsgeschichte* arises only later in Heidegger's work, Olesen insists that it is already "underway" in *Being and Time*, a claim substantiated by Heidegger's remarks concerning "movement" and the relative ontological priority of temporality and historicality in the book's last two chapters. The connection between movement and the question of being leads Olesen to consider Heidegger's later use of "essence" [*Wesen*] or "essencing"

[*das Wesende*] to be of central importance despite its not often being treated by Heidegger as an explicit theme. The “lesson in thinking about history” to be gleaned from Heidegger, then, is that history is both movement and moment. “Human beings might arrive at it, but they cannot dwell in it. . . . A human being is appropriated [*Eriegnet*]. That is to say: human being is historical” (30f). For Heidegger, the sense of human being *just is* its relation to being.

Olesen’s third “lesson” comes from Merleau-Ponty and Derrida. Merleau-Ponty insists that the human condition is something we must *grow into*. The movement from the world of the child to that of the adult takes place only on the basis of repetition, and for Olesen—a point to which he will return again and again in the book—this repetition cannot be understood on the basis of language or time conceived as “things,” since these “exist only to the degree that they are *constituted*, but they are constituted precisely by those who are of them, by those who are *of* language and *of* time” (37f). This process of constitution is read as, in Merleau-Ponty’s (and later Agamben’s) formulation, the individual’s passage out of “infancy.” Olesen then turns to Derrida’s conception of history in phenomenology as “protohistory.” For Derrida, he claims, the contradiction inherent in Kant’s epistemological project lies in his static conception of the extension of knowledge through synthetic a priori truths. Kant fails to fully recognize the radicality of seeking the possible in the actual, conceiving mathematics, for example, as a land *to be discovered* instead of as a *process of discovery* or a possibility in a *movement* of actualization. Olesen here offers a much-needed antidote to the common misunderstanding of the transcendental project as taken up in the twentieth century: the possibilities that such transcendental approaches seek to uncover cannot be understood as mere ahistorical “instances” of unrealized actuality; “conditions of possibility” are not appealed to for the sake of generating lists of possibilities that are not actual but could have been. In these three opening “lessons,” Olesen introduces the central themes—the relation of the eidetic and the factual, the primacy of historicity and “essencing,” and the relation of repetition to conditions of possibility—that will be used to generate his positive thesis in the remainder of the book.

2 The History of the Subject

Part two of the book traces a “history of the subject” from its first modern “call” in Descartes to its eventual “shipwreck” in the mid-twentieth century. With Descartes, and then later in Kant, the I has taken God’s place as the central preoccupation of epistemology, and the human’s encounter with God is

transformed into the encounter with oneself, a move that reaches its apex in “self-sufficiency” of the I in Kant. Olesen reads Heidegger’s analytic of Dasein in *Being and Time* as a “radicalization” of Kant’s analytic, in which the question of the subject becomes the question of the subject’s *being*. Since the starting point is specifically *human* being, this amounts to giving up on all hopes of a view *sub specie eternitatis* and transforming the question of Dasein’s relation to time into the question of Dasein as its relation to time.

It is here that the analysis of Heidegger’s account of historicity in the first part of the book intersects with the “history of the subject”: the abandonment of the project of *Being and Time* without the completion of the projected third division of part one is read as Heidegger’s heeding of the warning of Kant’s paralogism, namely, not to ascribe specific content to the subject. The “heyday of the subject” in Descartes and Kant is thus seen as bequeathing a new philosophical problem: that of recognizing the role of the subject without ascribing specific universal content to the subject, since absent a God’s-eye view capable of foreseeing future realized contingencies, such content cannot be described but only presupposed. But on Olesen’s view this non-specific subject in Descartes and Kant, insofar as it is presupposed, is still problematically conceived “as a something” (75). (As discussed below, I do not find the reasons for this claim entirely convincing.)

This leads to the “shipwreck” of the subject, in which we have moved from the subject as liberator *from* God to the liberation of the subject itself by going *beyond* the self, a move Olesen locates in thinkers as diverse as Sartre, Ryle, G. Bachelard, Hesse, Althusser, and finally, in Lacan’s exposition of the “mirror stage.” While Olesen’s general point here is clear, the diversity of the thinkers to whom he ascribes this view leads one to wonder what exactly counts as “going beyond the self” on his view, a conception for which I could not find a unifying definition anywhere in the relevant sections. At any rate for Olesen it is not the shipwreck itself so much as the voyage leading to it that is instructive. The reader is thus brought back to the theme of movement, already developed in Part One, beginning from a reading of the “movement of reason” in Hegel as a corrective restatement of Kant’s conception of *Einbildungskraft* and ending in Husserl’s genetic phenomenology with the conception of philosophy and science as “the historical movement through which universal reason . . . is revealed.”¹ For Olesen, this marks the replacement of the question of the subject with more essential questions: “how shall we define the history that characterizes the being that is historical at every time?” (87); “the history

1 Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, translated and edited by David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 16.

of philosophy points beyond the subject and toward history. But whose history?" (89).

Olesen's answer, following Derrida's *Introduction to Husserl's "Origin of Geometry,"* is "transcendental history." This conception arises for Derrida "in the first attempt to mark a paradox. The regularities of geometry are ideal; that is to say, they are conceived traditionally as standing 'above time' and not as 'subordinate to history.' Nevertheless, the Pythagorean Theorem, for example . . . has validity purely and simply because I can reenact its proof" (90). Olesen goes on to claim that since this reenactment takes (factual) time, meaning presupposes reiterability. He seems here to be adopting the Derridean (re)interpretation of Husserlian ideality. To claim that the ideality of meaning is dependent on (and not merely demonstrated in) its reiterability is to follow Derrida in the view that iteration presupposes reiteration, against what we might call a more "orthodox" Husserlian view according to which the ideal meaning of the object, while under constant revision as part of phenomenology's "infinite task," is nonetheless presented to the subject as a transcendence in immanence and not primarily as a result of a structure of reiterability or a trace. Olesen's apparent adoption of the Derridean notion of iteration here is somewhat puzzling, given his siding against Derrida's rejection of history in favor of *différance* later in the book. (I return to this point below.)

It is this conception of history's "movement" as repetition or reiteration that for Olesen ultimately carries history "beyond the chronological," something he finds in Agamben's conception of "kairological history," which he then relates to Heidegger's account of temporality "temporalizing itself as a whole" in every Ekstasis.² In this light, the historical moment "is nothing other than a moment that we first define in hindsight; our definition of it always comes too late, for when we single it out from among others and with the help of those others, we do not see that it does not occur in this way, and that even the moment in which we find ourselves now cannot itself occur in this way" (93). The conception of history as the "movement of reason" constitutes yet another example of history's arriving at itself, transitioning from childhood to adulthood: human being is history "because it repeats the movement of becoming human" (98f). But in this movement of reason, it is ultimately only the "movement" that is the same. History never quite arrives.

2 See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962), §68d.

3 Transcendental History

This seems to be the reason that the eponymous Part Three of Olesen's book presents his conception of transcendental history, "a philosophical enterprise analogue to transcendental logic," as "a possible enterprise rather than an established one" (xiii). The historical in Olesen's sense is not given as a "part" of time, but as the relation *between* present, past and future "parts" of time. Thus "the problem of history" in its twentieth-century form

consists in the fact that a passage from before to after (or from one time to another, etc.) is presupposed in all knowledge of a thing *as* some thing. We should not conceive of this presupposition as though knowledge simply presupposed some given transition, some existing history. Rather, the presupposed transition itself contains a before and an after that must be conceived as the before and the after of *something* (or one time and another time must be conceived as a repetition, etc.). It is correspondingly naïve to conceive of knowledge, including historical knowledge, as grounded in a given subject. Rather, there is a reciprocity to the presupposition, so that the *one and the same* presupposes the *many* and vice-versa; identity presupposes difference just as difference presupposes identity. The problem of history is, finally, whether this presupposition—so strikingly unlike the self-grounding basis sought by the philosophical tradition—is philosophically definable at all. (113)

The problem of history arises in the recognition that neither the empirical nor the transcendental subject is something simply immediately given. And if these are not given but instead arise in some sort of reciprocal movement or relation, this relation needs to be clarified. As Olesen points out, the question of such a relation of the empirical and the transcendental as a temporal structure is nothing other than the subject of Husserl's analysis of Galileo's "mathematization of nature" in the *Crisis*. Since there is no knowledge without this historically mediated relation, there is no knowledge without history.

Olesen thus, on the one hand, seems to embrace the Husserlian view according to which this relation is clarified through an account of historicity as the condition of the possibility of the inauguration of meaning revealed, in each case, through imaginative variation on the basis of the object's presentation of a transcendence in immanence and clarified by appeal to the process of the sedimentation and possible reactivation of meanings without the implication of "originary difference." And yet, as ~~we~~ noted above, Olesen at other points

seems to ascribe to the Derridean view according to which every inauguration of meaning is always already “contaminated” by a reiteration such that “meaning is nothing without its repeatability.” Indeed, in the statement of the “problem of history” quoted above, he seems to insist on both claims: “the *one and the same* presupposes the *many* and vice-versa; identity presupposes difference just as difference presupposes identity.”

It is not clear, however, that Olesen can so easily have it both ways. For, as he himself admits, Husserl’s “history” and Derrida’s reading of it as “proto-history” are radically different ways of taking up the phenomenological insight about the movement of knowledge, the former describing this movement in terms of a conception of intuition whose meaning always exceeds the individual instance of its presentation, and the latter explaining it in terms of a conception always incomplete and differing from itself. Olesen seems at once to admit this difference and to downplay its importance, using Husserl and Derrida as needed to arrive at a final position more closely aligned with Heidegger’s *Ereignis*. For this, I submit, he owes the reader at least a deeper critical discussion.

Olesen’s broader point is that if we accept this analysis of the (proto-)historical mediation of knowledge, then it is not consciousness or even the subject that is the ultimate transcendental condition for knowledge, but history as such, a claim ultimately based in the assertion “that the movement from entity [*ens*] to entity *qua* entity [*ens qua ens*] is irreducible” (118). The final question then becomes whether this movement, which “smoldered” even before modern philosophy and first appeared clearly in Heidegger’s presentation of history in *Being and Time*, can be called history at all. This question leads Olesen through Heidegger to an examination and rejection of Derrida’s attempt to replace “history” with “différance.” The temporalization or spacing that for Derrida goes by the name of *differing* is what Olesen wishes to call history. His rejection of the Derridean term in favor of “history” draws on what he admits is a longstanding critique of Derrida: “Even difference must have an essence and must therefore exist—inasmuch as we can recognize it in one case after another—from one difference to another difference” (123). Here again, Olesen seems to insist against Derrida on the priority of sameness over difference, despite his insistence, noted above, on their necessary equiprimordiality.

Against Derrida, then, Olesen maintains “history” in a transcendental sense as “the possibility of every coming-to-itself,” not in the sense of grandiose and all-encompassing narratives, but as a “‘miniature version’ of history that is definable in terms of the human being as *ek-stasis*. The human being *is* history precisely because the human being *is ekstasis*” (128). In such an account

of history, consciousness and the subject have no privileged status, for they can become essential only *through* the momentary movement in which being becomes essential.

This claim is problematic, on my reading. If we are not antecedently convinced by Olesen's frequent appeals to *Ereignis*, this move from Husserl to Derrida and then to Heidegger has a whiff of circularity: the Derridean claim about the necessity of reiterability is used to move beyond the Husserlian focus on essential meaning, in relation to an individual consciousness in favor of history as the transcendental condition for knowledge, in the context of *différance*, that is, beyond the subject. And now, with the subject and essential meaning cleared from the table, the priority of *différance* is rejected in favor of an essential sameness, since "even difference must have an essence," and history—for Olesen the *precondition* for the subject and consciousness—is indexed once again to "the human being." Is this not a move from sameness to difference and back to sameness? From subject to subjectless history and back? The entire weight of Olesen's argument seems to rest on the claim that the final position explicated in terms of Heideggerian *Ereignis* differs from the starting point in Husserlian essential meaning and consciousness in that here essence is not a "thing" but a "movement" of "essencing," indexed not to consciousness or a subject but to "human being as ekstasis."

But to those less inclined to the terminological indulgences of the later Heidegger, the appeal to the difference between essencing and essence in the context of history and knowledge may seem to amount to relatively little. For this "movement" of knowledge (of knowing) is surely still *somehow* related to a knower, and Olesen has already noted that the subject in the transcendental tradition need amount to no more than the entity with the formally defined capacity for knowing, so long as we heed the warning of Kant's paralogism and avoid ascribing a content to it. If even this minimal subject still amounts to the problematic presupposition of "a something" (75), it is hard to see how the case is any different for "the human being as ekstasis," if the human being is still to be a concept that maintains some relation to knowledge in the sense in which it is a term that can apply to everyday objects and facts. And if the response here is that "knowledge" too must be reinterpreted in "non-something" terms as "knowledge *qua* knowing" along the lines of "essence *qua* essencing" and "human being *qua* ekstasis," it begins to be difficult to see what any of this could have to do with history, insofar as we understand it to somehow be related to objects and facts in past experience. The appeal to *Ereignis* is a useful and important way of framing the problem of history, but when adopted wholesale it seems to lose grip on the problem: it becomes a radically free variable that fails to adequately "gear into" our sedimented human situation in overempha-

sizing movement as against the relative fixities of our historical situation. As Merleau-Ponty puts it,

We must recognize a sort of sedimentation of our life: when an attitude toward the world has been confirmed often enough, it becomes privileged for us. If freedom does not tolerate being confronted by any motive, then my habitual being in the world is equally fragile at each moment. . . . The rationalist alternative—either the free act is possible or not, either the event originates in me or is imposed from outside—does not fit with our relations with the world *and with our past*. Our freedom does not destroy our situation, but *gears into it*: so long as we are alive, our situation is open, which implies both that it calls forth privileged modes of resolution and that it, by itself, lacks the power to procure any of them.³

An overemphasis on *Ereignis*, it seems to me, “overcorrects” for the problem of the subject, in failing to recognize our habitual attitude as knowers of everyday facts and relatively stable meanings in a largely sedimented life-world. Even if the reliance on the subject is misguided, it is not clear that it can be so easily abandoned or replaced by a “movement.”

I see the beginnings of response to this concern in Olesen’s subsequent discussion of the project of transcendental logic, which is concerned with “the possibility of knowledge without reference to any specific objective quality and yet not without reference to the objective quality that inheres in all knowledge” (131). Transcendental logic must account for 1) the condition and coherence of formal and material logic; and 2) the condition for the coherence of rational truth and factual truth. This double task is motivated in Kant and Husserl by the desire to protect transcendental logic from reduction to the factual (e.g., psychologism). Olesen’s foray into transcendental logic, necessity, and tautology seems to be designed to show that the presupposition of something as something is necessary for all knowledge but cannot itself be made an object of knowledge, for it is not a thing or “something” that could be proven. The extension of knowledge is only possible because of the presupposed possibility of reducing it to the same. These chapters (Part III, chaps. 3–5) will be of interest to not only philosophers of history but also anyone interested in the deeper logical underpinnings of the contributions of transcendental philosophy to broader questions in epistemology and the theory of meaning.

3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 466–67.

In the last two chapters of the book Olesen turns to science and technology in order to argue for “history’s embeddedness as a transcendental prerequisite for science’s facticity” (182). These chapters constitute, in effect, his attempt to explain the rationale behind the book as a whole: to the extent that science is understood as factual, its embeddedness in history remains forgotten. This forgetfulness is characteristic not only of specifically scientific endeavors but also of increasingly prevalent technical and technological conceptions of science and philosophy, which remain oblivious to history.

After an account of the relationship between science and history, framed largely by discussions of Husserl and the oft-neglected contributions of early twentieth-century French epistemology, Olesen moves from the sedimentation and idealization of meaning to a focus on truth and being, and thereby from the concerns of transcendental logic, deconstruction, hermeneutics, and phenomenology to those of the later Heidegger after the *Kehre*, where the focus is no longer the Being of beings but what reveals itself thereby, “the truth of Being.” This final move takes the form of yet another discussion of the theme of the “becoming essential of being as Heidegger’s ‘essencing’” (171), this time in the more specific context of the later Heidegger’s discussions in “The Question Concerning Technology.”

Technology conceals a danger that “does not lie in its products, but in the fact that reason, which once gave birth to technology, is no longer aware of itself as reason, no longer aware of its own movement, of its production” (180). In this danger also lies the solution, insofar as we can recognize this movement of reason and thus (presumably) make it again aware of itself. We regularly misunderstand technology in understanding its process of the “production of truth” as “a factual and verifiable thing” (180). This, Olesen tells us, is what has ultimately motivated his book: “Now that reason itself has become technological, it is high time for us to sharpen our sense of history” (180).

4 Final Remarks

Olesen’s impassioned defense of “the good old term transcendental” and his willingness to connect it not only to history narrowly conceived but also to the complexities of epistemology and transcendental logic is a welcome addition to the literature, which often seems to have forgotten about the problem of history. But his eventual focus on questions of truth and being leads him to privilege these aspects of transcendental thought while downplaying another: the traditional transcendental claim that questions of meaning are antecedent to—conditions of the possibility of—questions of truth. This is an important

element of the Kantian conception of transcendental logic, which Kant insists “concerns itself with the laws of understanding and of reason solely in so far as they relate *a priori* to objects.”⁴ It is also central to the later Husserl’s turn to history, where the theory of constitution in the context of the lifeworld is extended below the level of categorially determined objects of experience to also apply to original meaningfulness and significances in perceptual experience at a pre-conceptual or pre-categorical level.⁵ While meaning is certainly present in Olesen’s discussions of Kant and Husserl and in his careful treatment of transcendental logic, it seems to function primarily as a setup for examinations of temporality and the “truth of Being.” Temporality is of course of central importance for an account of history, but so too, I would insist, is meaning. But this is likely ultimately a question of Husserlian vs. Heideggerian preferences, which leads me to a final critical comment.

Olesen’s use of Heidegger seems to be different in kind than his treatment of other central figures in the text such as Descartes, Kant, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, or Agamben. Whereas interpretations of the latter figures are employed critically throughout the book, and to great effect, Olesen at times turns to Heidegger as though his answers to the problem of history are both obvious and beyond critique. Again and again, careful and nuanced discussions covering figures from Descartes and Kant to the whole history of continental philosophy seem to become, at the end of a chapter or section, little more than stepping stones to Heidegger and, more specifically, to the conception of *Ereignis*. Although there are undoubtedly important insights into history in Heidegger’s thought, in my view this tendency detracts from an otherwise balanced and well-argued book and seems out of place in a book framed as an original contribution to the philosophy of history. It is of course

4 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998) A 57/ B 82.

5 Husserl conceives as an expansion of Kant’s Transcendental Aesthetic beyond time and space as the exclusive *a priori* forms of intuition (Cf. Donn Welton, *The Other Husserl: The Horizons of Transcendental Phenomenology*, [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000], 298f.). There does not seem to be room for an investigation of the transcendental status of meaning in this more radical sense in Olesen’s account, which examines meaning primarily at the level of essences (or *essencing*) and concepts and argues for history only as a precondition for temporality and spatiality. This is of course no fault of the book, but it represents a relatively unexplored path for the examination of “transcendental history,” one of increasing relevance in the context of contemporary interest in topics such as affect, “non-conceptual content,” and kinesthesia, which seem to open the path to investigations of meaning and history at a pre- or non-conceptual level.

one of the important hallmarks of continental scholarship that the line between exegesis, interpretation, and original philosophizing is recognized as problematic and often blurred, but there is nonetheless merit in distinguishing for the reader's sake between one's original views and the sources that helped to develop them. It is an unfortunate and parallel risk in this sort of scholarship that reverence for great past thinkers can lead to uncritical triumphing of their ideas where more original philosophizing is due. I am not sure Olesen's reading of Heidegger—quite otherwise than his treatment of other figures—entirely avoids this risk. Olesen's readings of the early and the later Heidegger are insightful, but too often they seem unnecessarily to get in the way of his own voice, which clearly has something important and more original to say.

These comments are offered in the spirit of constructive criticism from one equally committed to the central importance of history for transcendental philosophy and equally convinced of the continued relevance of this lineage of thought; and they are, even in points of summary, also of course an act of interpretation. Olesen's bold and important book raises issues about which there will no doubt be disagreement among continental philosophers and all of those interested in fate of the transcendental tradition, and this speaks to its merit. It is an original and welcome restatement of the central and too-often-overlooked theme of transcendental history.

Jacob Rump
Kennesaw State University