

## A brief history of historicity

### *Uma breve história da historicidade.*

#### **Abstract**

*I aim to clarify some characteristics of historicity as a technical term of historiography, as well as a philosophical concept. I would therefore like to present a brief account of the concept, focusing on the initial main moments of its conceptualization – specifically in the works of Hegel, Dilthey, Yorck von Wartenburg and Heidegger – while also proposing an analysis on its ontological applicability or metahistorical validity. Following the contributions of Heidegger regarding the understanding of historicity as an ontological structure of existence in general, I argue that this philosophical concept of historicity still has something to teach the historical-philosophical way of thinking. Finally, given this context, I briefly introduce the paradoxical nature of the idea of past as one important logical evidence of what is commonly called the historical or temporal condition of existence, which can be epitomized by the ontological term historicity.*

#### **Keywords**

historicity, temporality, eternity, ontology, metaphysics, phenomenology

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## Resumo

*Este artigo objetiva esclarecer algumas características da historicidade como termo técnico da historiografia, bem como conceito filosófico. Apresento, para tanto, um breve histórico do conceito, focado nos momentos iniciais de sua conceituação – especificamente nas obras de Hegel, Dilthey, Yorck von Wartenburg e Heidegger –, ao mesmo tempo em que proponho uma análise sobre sua aplicabilidade ontológica ou validade meta-histórica. A partir das contribuições de Heidegger sobre o entendimento da historicidade como a estrutura ontológica da existência em geral, defendo a hipótese de que o conceito filosófico de historicidade ainda tem algo a ensinar ao modo de se pensar histórico-filosófico. Tendo em vista essa hipótese, exponho a natureza paradoxal da ideia de passado como uma relevante evidência lógica do que é comumente chamado de condição histórica ou temporal da existência, a qual pode ser sintetizada pelo significado ontológico da historicidade.*

树欲静而风不止

[the wind never lets trees rest calmly]

## Unfolding the *historicity* — from Hegel to Heidegger

Historicity, the translation of the German noun *Geschichtlichkeit* (or *Historizität*), is by no means the simple substantive of the adjective historical, *geschichtlich* (or *historische*). The concept not only supports an expression of historical knowledge in general, but it also sustains an important branch of philosophical thought, namely, Philosophy of Existence, which assumes the sovereign historical or temporal character of existence evidenced by the modern idea of history categorically announced by nineteenth-century historians.<sup>1</sup> Through the historiographical works of Leopold von Ranke, Wilhelm

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1 See Ernst Troeltsch, “Das Neuzehnte Jahrhundert,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 4 (Tübingen: Verlag von J. C. Mohr and Paul Siebeck, 1913) and Calvin G. Rand, “Two meanings of Historicism in the Writings of Dilthey, Troeltsch and Meinecke,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 25, no. 4 (1964), 503-518.

von Humboldt, Johann Gustav Droysen, Jacob Burckhardt (among others), the historicist adage that states everything is or can be historical is widespread.<sup>2</sup> “According to historicism, the nature, essence, or identity of a thing lies in its history. The unprecedented intellectual revolution effected by historicism in the early decades of the nineteenth century endowed all of human existence with a temporal dimension, with irreversible ramifications for how we conceive of ourselves and our world even today.”<sup>3</sup> Time, thus, becomes historicism’s most basic philosophical category, “and it is unlikely that historians – whether they embrace historicism or not – will ever wish to contest the role of time in the writing of history.”<sup>4</sup>

These characteristics of historicism are shaped by one idea, which can be summarized in the ancient and well-known Heraclitus statement: *everything flows* [πάντα ῥεῖ], or rather, “everything flows and is never the same.”<sup>5</sup> There is a curious passage in Nietzsche’s *Die zweite unzeitgemäße Betrachtung* (1874) where the philosopher accuses historians of being radical Heraclitians, for they would believe in the absolute power of transience. And indeed, the idea of historicity – which arises precisely in the nineteenth century Germany – assumes the central role of time in the human sciences, objectifying, in one concept, a theoretical justification for the basic idea of historicism.<sup>6</sup> As Reinhart Koselleck asserted, historicity is a metahistorical concept that intends to solve the radical instability of the modern historical world.<sup>7</sup> Emil L. Fackenheim has argued that historicity might be called the foremost metaphysical discovery of historicism, for “the doctrine of historicity is not an empirical generalization but a metaphysical thesis.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, according to Leonhard

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2 Gunter Schotz, “Das Historismusproblem und die Geisteswissenschaften im 20. Jahrhundert,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 71 (1989), 463-486.

3 Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth and Reference in Historical Representation* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2012), 29.

4 Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth and Reference in Historical Representation*, 29.

5 Simplicius, “Aristotelis Physicorum libros commentaria,” in *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*, vols. IX and X, ed. Hermann Diels (Berlin: [s.n.], 1882-1895), 887 [1D].

6 See Peter Koslowski. *The Discovery of Historicity in German Idealism and Historism* (Berlin, Heidelberg, New York: Springer, 2005) and Joachim Ritter, “Über die Geschichtlichkeit wissenschaftlicher Erkenntnis,” *Blätter für deutsche Philosophie* 12 (1938).

7 See Reinhart Koselleck et al., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Bd. 2 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1975), 715-716.

8 Emil L. Fackenheim, *Methaphysics and Historicity* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1961), 13.

von Renthe-Fink, it is as a *technical term of history* as well as a *philosophical concept* – i.e., it is in a double way – that historicity arises in the intellectual horizon of the nineteenth century.

Historicity [Geschichtlichkeit] has different meanings according to the use of the word, that is, either as a technical term of historical knowledge or as a philosophical concept. In the technical sense of history [geschichtstechnischen], historicity means « the factuality of a historical event transmitted – posed as a matter of documentary criticism » – (synonymous: historical), the opposite of legend and myth. The meaning of historicity, « of something that has passed even though its past remains effective », that is, « historical effectiveness, especially in the sense of marking an epoch », already leads to the content of the second meaning. As a philosophical concept, the term has a much broader meaning. As such, it means « the historical mode of being of the human spirit », a fundamental characteristic of all that is human in contrast to the natural being; that is to say, as a philosophical concept historicity reflects the radical temporality of human existence [Daseins].<sup>9</sup>

G.W. F. Hegel is the first to elaborate the historicity as a philosophical or metaphysical concept. The philosopher, as one may observe, wedges the term, and prints the first signs of its theoretical density, more precisely in the *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* (1805-1831), in the section on history of Greek philosophy, in which one can ascertain the first mention of the concept. Hegel speaks about a “homeliness” or a “local character” [*Heimatlichkeit*] of the ancient Greeks that provides a “good historicity [Geschichtlichkeit]” as the origin of the very political, moral, legal, and philosophical free thinking.<sup>10</sup> Because it was “the very way in which the ancient Greeks inhabited their cosmologies, their mythologies, their stories of gods and men, which gave to the them ‘this character of free and beautiful historicity’.”<sup>11</sup> Von Renthe-Fink’s thesis on why this term first appears in Hegel certifies that the use of the German language operated by the philosopher raises the notion of historicity

9 Leonhard von Renthe-Fink. “Geschichtlichkeit,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Bd. 3, ed. Joachim Ritter et al. (Basel: Schwabe, 1974), 404-405.

10 See G. W. F. Hegel. *Werke in 20 Bänden mit Registerband*, Bd. 18 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 175.

11 Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000), 482.

as “a typically Hegelian verbiage. Hegel, throughout his life, had a certain predilection for linguistic abstractions such as *-heit* and *-keit* [-ness and -ity].”<sup>12</sup>

It is significant that the term *Geschichtlichkeit* – as a Hegelian abstraction – is formed by the adjective “*geschichtlich*” and the suffix “*-keit*,” which suggests character, possibility or potency, capability, willingness, disposition. In this sense, we can deduct from it that the construction of the noun historicity refers to the potency or the possibility of being historical. In addition, in English the suffix “-ness” concerns the state of being of the original adjective to which it is attached, and the “-ity” expresses, equally, a condition. This etymological explanation can elucidate the most basic principle that historicity has as a concept: the abstractness and the ideal character of a disposition.

In spite of Hegelian originality, the term has a solitary use in the total system of its philosophy. It was only in the epistolary debate between Wilhelm Dilthey and the Count Paul Yorck von Wartenburg that historicity has achieved the significance of an existential concept according to its current use. In the letters of Dilthey and Yorck it is declared “a common interest in understanding historicity.”<sup>13</sup> “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?”<sup>14</sup> Historicity thus emerges from the questioning of the conditions of possibility of history. And it was in the philosophical dialogue between Dilthey and the Count Yorck, developed between 1877 and 1897 – although only published in 1923 – that the concept was crystallized as such, especially after the preface of Georg Misch, who, in 1924, emphasized the importance of the concept of historicity for Dilthey’s philosophy.<sup>15</sup> In relation to the vitality of Diltheyan philosophy, historicity then appears as one of the foundations of existence of equal importance with nature – φύσις [*phýsis*]. As Count Yorck states, “the nature of which is given to us psychophysically does not merely exist, but, on the contrary, lives, is the seminal point of historicity. (...)”

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12 Leonhard von Renthe-Fink. *Geschichtlichkeit. Ihr terminologischer und begrifflicher Ursprung bei Hegel, Dilthey und Yorck* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1964), 29.

13 Wilhelm Dilthey and Paul Yorck von Wartenburg, *Briefwechsel 1877-1897* (Halle: a.d.S., 1923), 185.

14 David Carr, Phenomenology of historical time, in *The Past’s Present. Essays on the Historicity of Philosophical Thinking*, ed. Márcia Sá C. Schuback and Hans Ruin (Södertörns högskola, 2005), 7. See also David Carr, “On historicity,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 37 (2016), 273-288.

15 See Georg Misch, *Lebensphilosophie und Phänomenologie. Eine Auseinandersetzung der Diltheyschen Richtung mit Heidegger und Husserl* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner Verlag, 1931).

Precisely because I am nature, I am also history.”<sup>16</sup> The idea at stake, according to Von Renthe-Fink, is that the fundamental constitution of mankind is based not only on a natural being, but on a “life,” which is determined cosmologically, biologically, and above all historically, i.e., temporally. Life is supposed to be understood from both aspects: the physical (or natural) and the spiritual (or psychic), that is, it is to be understood *psychophysiologically*.

After Dilthey and Yorck, Martin Heidegger established the most solid definition of historicity as a fundamental mode of being of the human spirit or existence, whereas he “fills the term with a new existential-philosophical content.”<sup>17</sup> In *Sein und Zeit* (1927), or more precisely in §77, Heidegger presents his affiliation to the thoughts of Dilthey and Yorck, aiming to affirm that the historicity of existence [*Dasein*], presence [*Dasein*] or being-there [*Dasein*]

*aims to show that this entity is not ‘temporal’ because ‘it stands in history’; but on the contrary, it exists and can exist historically only because it is temporal in the very basis of its being.*<sup>18</sup>

Heidegger summarizes his ontological-existential understanding of the origin of history in this way, because – being temporal – the being is historical and can elaborate histories. Otherwise, if it were timeless, by definition, the human being could not have a history to be narrated temporarily, and he/she could not have a history himself as a person or as one existence that could be understood as a being. “The existential interpretation of history as a science only intended to attest its ontological origin from the historicity of *Dasein*,”<sup>19</sup> for “the purpose of the analysis is to secure that *Dasein* is historical not as a result of no longer being there, but in virtue of its own historicity.”<sup>20</sup>

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16 Dilthey and Yorck von Wartenburg, *Briefwechsel 1877-1897*, 71.

17 Von Renthe-Fink. “Geschichtlichkeit,” 407. See also Werner Beierwaltes, “Geschichtlichkeit als element der Philosophie: Rudolph Berlinger zum sechzigsten Geburtstag,” *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie: 30ste Jaarg 2* (1968), 257 and Gerhard Bauer, *Geschichtlichkeit: Wege und Irrwege eines Begriffs* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963), 119.

18 GA 2, 376. As (GA) I refer here to Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe, 102 Bänden* (Frankfurt am main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977-), followed by the number of the tome and page.

19 GA 2, 376.

20 Hans Ruin, *Enigmatic Origins. Tracing the Theme of Historicity through Heidegger’s Work* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994), 131.

Edmund Husserl spoke in the late 1930's of the historicity of transcendental phenomenology<sup>21</sup>, or as Derrida pointed out in the introduction of his French translation of *Die Frage nach dem Ursprung der Geometrie als intentionalhistorisches Problem* (1936), *l'historicité* of transcendental or ideal objects.<sup>22</sup> David Carr notes that we cannot say that Husserl was affected by Heideggerian historicity<sup>23</sup>. This Husserlian “transcendental historicity” is, however, nothing more than sense - the same basic idea proposed by Heidegger against the ancient ahistorical tendency of philosophy - in clear dialogue with historicism. Heidegger was the first who considered the historicity of philosophy from the ontological point of view as simple sense<sup>24</sup>. It is moreover only in Heidegger's doctrine of historicity that the historical aspect of philosophy as an ontological fact is indeed an object of thinking.<sup>25</sup> Historicity as elaborated by Heidegger would not be synonymous for “fugacity,” mere “mutability” or only “historical context”<sup>26</sup>. Quite the contrary, and despite referring to these categories, historicity reveals a situation and human disposition to understand oneself historically, that is, temporally, since there is a temporal condition from which existence cannot be exempted – even when it is not an object of knowledge.

Hence, from the announcement that historicity relates to a temporal phenomenon (temporality), what does historicity mean to Heidegger, after all?

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21 See Edmund Husserl, “Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie,” in *Husserliana*, Bd. VI (La Haye: M. Nijhoff, 1954).

22 See Edmund Husserl, *L'origine de la géométrie* (Paris: PUF, 1962).

23 David Carr, *Phenomenology and the Problem of History* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 66-67.

24 See Charles Bombach, *Heidegger, Dilthey and the crisis of historicism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), 123; Hans-Gerg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. I Band – Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr and Paul Siebeck, 1990), 262-263; Gerhard Bauer, *Geschichtlichkeit: Wege und Irrwege eines Begriffs*, 3.

25 See Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: la question de l'Être et l'Histoire. Cours de l'ENS-Ulm 1964-1965* (Paris: Galilée, 2013), 50. See also Hans Ruin, “Historicity and The Hermeneutic Predicament. From Yorck to Derrida,” in *The Oxford Handbook of The History of Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

26 Albert Dondeyne, “L'historicité dans la philosophie contemporaine,” *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 41 (1956), 5-25.

### The ontological meaning of *historicity* according to Martin Heidegger

To sum up, Hegel related historicity to the *Heimatlichkeit* [the local character] of ancient Greeks whereas Dilthey and Yorck connected historicity to the *Lebendigkeit* [vitality] of psychophysiological world. Heidegger, on the other hand, stated that historicity is a name for a power or disposition that one can discover in the *Zeitlichkeit* [temporality] of human existence.

Historicity fundamentally becomes, for Heidegger, the concept that summarizes the metaphysical mode of being of the human spirit which, in the hiatus between birth and death, has its possibilities of meaning, and which by definition are finite, limited, since birth and death are limits *per se*. This is what Heidegger calls temporality. Therefore, historicity is also an ontological conceptualization of the possibility of carrying within itself time (a power that we could name “memory”), since this is a fundamental structure of existence. After all, existence “only exists and can exist historically because it is temporal at the bottom of its being.” Being, time and history (understood, then, as a phenomenon) are – in Heidegger – one same situation.

There would be an identity between the powers of memory and historicity suggested by Heidegger himself,<sup>27</sup> but not developed in his work. And it should be noted that in proto-Indo European, the (*s*)*mer-* radical, which will give shape to the word “memory,” already contains the semantic charge of the more ordinary notion of “remembering”, but also the less obvious “care” or “preoccupation” [*Sorge*].<sup>28</sup> The latter (care or preoccupation) is a qualification that Heidegger delimits as a factual evidence of existence phenomena connected to the concept of historicity,<sup>29</sup> since we are always “advancing” in time, that is, in that we are *pre-occupied*, worrying about our existence in the sense of anticipating the way we could care about ourselves and the world, but always at the very moment we are living.

Historicity is thus not a conceptual reduction of historical knowledge or historiography as a particular reflexive mode of thinking, even if the aspect of the discussed word could lead us to this conclusion. Historicity is, first of all, a concept that is related to primordial phenomena of the psychophysiological

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27 Hans Ruin, “Anamnestic subjectivity: new steps toward a hermeneutics of memory,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 48 (2015), 199.

28 Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bern: A. Francke A. G. Verlag, 1959), 969-970.

29 GA 2, 326; 419.



scope, that is, to a condition of existence: temporality or transience, finitude, and especially the fact or fate of death. These are three phenomena that refers to historicity, which means both the “possibility of being historical” and first and foremost “the powers of being time,” in one word, temporality.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Historicity is a metaphysical temporal condition***

There is a temporal condition which cannot be evaded on which Nietzsche discusses in his *Zweites unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* (1874). Nietzsche recognizes this condition precisely in affirming that human existence differs from others by the imperative to be temporal and, in this sense, indifferent to factors of intentionality. We remember or forget ourselves regardless of our will, and that is a psychophysiological condition of our existence, which places us uninterruptedly as facing the powers of time. We cannot learn to forget ourselves, and times past persecutes us as a ghost aiming to disturb the human spiritual life.<sup>31</sup>

*For, as we are the results of previous generations, we are also the results of their aberrations, passions, errors or crimes. One cannot break completely with that chain. If we condemn such aberrations and consider ourselves exempt from it, the fact that we proceed from them is not eliminated.*<sup>32</sup>

Temporal facts delimit the circumstances of the whole existence. This is what Heidegger mean in § 76 of *Sein und Zeit*.

Although Nietzsche did not elaborate his thinking from the conceptualization of historicity, it is precisely at the beginning of the second untimely meditation that he would have understood the phenomenon of historicity. There is a condition – fundamentally related to temporality – that makes the phenomenon that we call history and its intellectual elaboration, historiography, possible. In Heidegger, this condition is ontologically explained and epitomized as historicity.

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30 GA 82, 131-133.

31 Friedrich Nietzsche, “Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen: Zweites Stück - Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben,” in *Werke in drei Bänden* (München: Hanser, 1954), 210.

32 Nietzsche, “Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen: Zweites Stück - Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben,” 228-229.

Jean-François Lyotard states that historical phenomenology thought about existence from the basic differences between *historiography* – history set up as knowledge –, *history* – life as an event, process, conjuncture and social structure –, and *historicity* – a concept that names a gathering of phenomena that underpins existence and makes history possible.<sup>33</sup> This scheme, which divides the total historical phenomenon into different levels, formulated by phenomenological philosophy and historical-philosophical hermeneutics, has been established in a way that theoretically justifies the historicist understanding of history by equating the very notion of existing with temporality and historicity.

Nevertheless, “Heidegger was satisfied with the category of historicity [*Geschichtlichkeit*]. This category gave a positive interpretation to the main historicist experience, namely, relativism. But this did not help to substantiate in a transcendental way the multiplicity of real stories.”<sup>34</sup> That is, Heidegger’s investigation on *historicity* dwells on the ontological level, *i.e.*, the conditions of possibility of history, and not of historiography as knowledge. He did not concern himself with the epistemological implications regarding this matter. To demand from the concept an epistemological use or articulation, to identify it with historiography and its sociological or anthropological questions is an effort bound to fail.<sup>35</sup> Heidegger used to see himself only as a “thinker of history [*Geschichtsdenker*].”<sup>36</sup> Historicity could only thus meta-historically justify the research on the conditions of possibility of the phenomenon of history as the expression of transience or absolute impermanence. But why and how?

### **Ontological explanation of the temporal condition — the phenomenon of *repetition* and the central role of the past time in the time phenomenon itself**

Taking a step further from Heidegger’s work, it is necessary to determine more clearly the phenomenon to which historicity refers. In other words, what effectively conditions existence as temporal? How exactly is existence temporally conditioned? The answer to this question, according to Heidegger,

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33 See Jean-François Lyotard, *La Phénoménologie* (Paris: PUF, 1954).

34 Reinhart Koselleck, *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), 110.

35 GA 82, 8-9.

36 GA 54, 94-95.

is revealed by the observation of the repetitive or retrospective character proper to the phenomenon of time, to which historicity belongs. In this phenomenon we find a central argument that confronts our common notions of time and logically justifies the most basic ontological structure of temporality, which is directly related to historicity.

The temporal situation or condition as the ontological *destiny* of existence could only be understood under the guise of *repetition* [Wiederholung]. Heidegger's understanding of time through *Wiederholung* refers to the concept of *repetition* [Gjentagelsen] which has already been explored by Søren Kierkegaard. But what exactly is this "repetition"?

The analysis on repetition by Kierkegaard deals with the nature of past time. It assumes that "time as such will not help a person to forget the past, even if it mitigates the impression (...) the past is not completely forgotten, much less completely annihilated."<sup>37</sup> To repeat does not mean the resignation of the past, nor the mere maintenance of it in the present. Quite the contrary, it is the name given to the phenomenon of universal transience<sup>38</sup> that is exhibited through two facts: the power in carrying time that we possess (memory) and the character of this time, which is substantially always past time.

The time we acquire is, paradoxically, the same time that haunts or confronts us: it returns from itself in ourselves. From the strictly ontological point of view, this is repetition as a temporal principle, a phenomenon which shapes the temporal destiny of existence, since this phenomenon means that we confront incessantly and necessarily the time we carry by decision or that we have inherited by tradition – that is, the act of transmission.<sup>39</sup>

*It is not necessary for resoluteness to explicitly know about the origin of the possibilities in which it is projected. But the possibility of expressly seeking – from the traditional understanding of Dasein – the existential ability-to-be in which Dasein projects itself certainly resides in the temporality of Dasein. The resoluteness which returns to oneself and surrenders to oneself becomes, then, a repetition [Wiederholung] of a possibility-of-existence*

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37 Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter, Bd. V (København: Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret og G.E.C. Gads Forlag, 1997), 327.

38 GA 82, 253.

39 Wenche Marit Quist, "When your Past lies ahead of you – Kierkegaard and Heidegger on the Concept of Repetition," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* 1 (2002), 85.

*that is traditionally inherited. Repetition [Wiederholung] is the expressed tradition [ausdrückliche Überlieferung], that is, the return to the possibilities of an existence that has been 'there'.<sup>40</sup>*

From the ontological perspective, it should be said again, the time which we once have experienced returns or repeats itself in the precise form of memories or desires – regardless of the exact or deformed nature of this memory. This is the phenomenon of repetition to which historicity refers as the ontological and existential structure of the most elementary time: the past. That is, the past as the temporal atom of existence or the fundamental matter of temporality. For the past is logically explained as the time from which existence originates (we come from our past [the past]), but also as the final result of temporal experience (what is in process of being experienced [now or present] will fatally become past). This temporal structure which exposes the past paradoxically as the origin and end of temporality demonstrates, ontologically speaking, that temporal (or past) repetition is a logical fact of existence predicted by the very character of temporality studied by Heidegger. Although he did not conclude his research on the idea of time in these terms, the Heideggerian investigation helps us to deduce that what the ontological tradition called the future or becoming (expression of transience) would be nothing more than *a mode of being of the past*.<sup>41</sup> As Kierkegaard's Constantinus Constantius explains, "the past, from which the soul thought he had redeemed himself, stood there again with its demands, not as a remembrance, but more terrifying than ever for having conspired with the future."<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, the fundamental fact of being temporal is not a choice, something that one could escape, but a necessary ontological and existential condition settled by the phenomenon of time, more precisely by the nature of *the past time as the temporal limit of existence*.

This appreciation of the problem of time briefly exposed here is unorthodox and contrasts with the main traditional currents of thought on the issue, which puts the present – or the now – always as the self-evident principle of time. From Parmenides to Husserl the privilege of the present time has

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40 GA 2, 385.

41 This insight can be found in Henri Bergson's *Matière et mémoire* (1896). See also Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (Paris: PUF, 1968), 111.

42 Søren Kierkegaard's *Skrifter*, Bd. V, 332.

never been a real question.<sup>43</sup> But against an ancient architecture of time that poses the present as the core phenomenon of transience, especially since Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, phenomenology has renewed the way we can think about the existence. My argument is then that it would be this ontological viewpoint on the centrality of the past time in the constitution of the phenomenon of time itself that better explain why it is necessary to speak of a situational or temporal condition of existence – or why we cannot have a choice between *to be or not to be*. For time and its clearest manifestation, transience, leads the ontological existence from one past to another past.

In Heideggerian terms, those ontological thesis about the being of time reveals that ontological repetition as an unsurpassed destiny of the human spirit – the confrontation with time that we, ourselves, have repeatedly experienced – along with fate of finitude are the double expression of the temporal or broad historical condition to which existence is subjected. And the philosophical idea of historicity is the axiomatic result of this general metaphysical theorem.

**The past *repetition* is an expression of *temporality* as well as the present is the manifestation of *eternity***

Time always means temporality and eternity, for both phenomena can be found in time itself.

Repetition was examined by *Existenzphilosophie* as a generic phenomenon in relation to what is called temporality, which reconfigured the idea of time as one unitary phenomenon that is no longer spatially tripartite, something which Heidegger named the temporal stasis.<sup>44</sup> And in so doing, “[t]he philosophy of historicity tries to overcome historicism from within by finding in the historical the signs of eternity, as well as the absolute in the signs of the relative (...) withdrawing the eternal from the temporal, the absolute from the relative. This is the deepest intention of the philosophy of historicity.”<sup>45</sup> Eternity is not an obscure proposition of theological systems, but a form that can be found logically in the very nature of time, as Augustine among others demonstrated a long time ago.

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43 Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la Philosophie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972), 36-37.

44 GA 2, 328-329.

45 Paul Ricœur, “Remarques sur la communication du Professeur Karl Löwith,” in *Truth and Historicity. Vérité et Historicité. Entretiens en Heidelberg 12-16 septembre 1969*, ed. Hans-Georg Gadamer (Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), 26-27.

From the ontological perspective the form of eternity is what one could call “present time,” since the present is the time that passes without passing. We are, in this sense, doomed to be “eternally” in present time. The present is the temporal name for the presence, existence or intuitions about the world, and Augustine’s “eternal presence of the present [*semper praesentis aeternitatis*],”<sup>46</sup> Plato’s and Plotinus’ “[movable] image of eternity [αἰών]”<sup>47</sup> are nothing more than ancient different elaborations of the same general temporal phenomenon: present time. Eternity, then, is the nature of present time as the (im)movable image or apparition of the movable nature of the universe: transience or temporality.

Temporality, on the other hand, is one of the names of the phenomena of repetition of past time that repeats itself as a constant, continuously. Temporality is the expression of the transient nature of past time that always and only appears as a form of eternity in present time. Thus, temporality participates in eternity in the same way that eternity participates in temporality,<sup>48</sup> being thus two sides of the same phenomenon: time. This is a hypothesis that Karl Löwith has already suggested<sup>49</sup> as well as Heidegger.<sup>50</sup>

In this sense, historicity says that humanity is doomed to remember and to forget, the humankind is fated to be confronted by time; the temporal condition which is also understood as temporality (repetition) or eternity (presence).<sup>51</sup> And in regard to these questions, the pre-established conceptions about archaic eternity (circular) and modern temporality (linear) have no pertinency, as Hubert Cancik has already demonstrated the insufficiency of this kind of model of interpretation.<sup>52</sup> From the ontological point of view,

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46 Augustine, *Confessions. Tome II: Livre IX-XIII* (Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1926), XI.16; G. J. P. O’Daly, “Aeternitas,” in *Augustinus-Lexikon*, vol. 1 (Basel, Schwabe & Co, 1986), 160-161; Josef Weis, *Die Zeitontologie des Kirchenlehrers Augustinus nach seinen Bekenntnissen. Europäische Hochschulschriften – Reihe XX: Band 135* (Frankfurt am Main/ Bern/ New York: Peter Lang, 1984).

47 *Platonis Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), Ti. 37d; Plotinus, *Enneads (III)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 11.15.

48 Augusto de Carvalho, “Das potências da Memória. A afirmação da transitoriedade histórica e da eternidade das ideias,” *Kriterion* 61, no. 145 (2020): 107-129. See also Augusto de Carvalho, “The Meanings of Historicity—the End and the Beginning,” in *Geschichtstheorie am Werk* (2022).

49 Karl Löwith, *Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2007), 183.

50 GA 55, 345.

51 GA 82, 230.

52 See Hubert Cancik, “Die Rechtfertigung Gottes durch den ‘Fortschritt der Zeiten’. Zur Differenz jüdisch-christlicher und hellenisch-römischer Zeit- und Geschichtsvorstellungen,” in *Die Zeit. Dauer und Augenblick*, ed. Jan Assmann et al. (München: Piper, 1990).

time always obeys these two models simultaneously, circular and linear. Time is eternity and temporality, time returns and repeats itself continuously.<sup>53</sup>

That said, historicity, as one ontological and abstract concept related to temporality and eternity of time as an existential condition, is restricted to the metaphysical descriptive scope, that is, the condition of thought. By demanding the “real” manifestation of historicity, some critics do not seem to assume that the philosophical historicity is not immediately connected to historiography – as Lyotard helps us to understand –, but rather to transience as a simple natural and psychophysiological phenomenon, *i.e.*, as an existential condition.

### Criticisms — the *abstract emptiness and universal inapplicability* of historicity

It is through the Philosophy of Existence – especially Heidegger’s work – that historicity becomes a *buzzword* [Modewort] according to Von Rente-Fink. Nevertheless, some skeptical assessments about the concept have been raised since its last decisive elaboration by Heidegger. Those criticisms can be divided into two fronts. The first one affirms historicity as an empty and useless abstraction, even in terms of the study of historical phenomena. The second one briefly contests the universal applicability of the concept. There is a third case which starts from the premise that historicity is only the same as “historical context,” a clear reduction of the concept as a technical term of history which one can find in statements like “man is not wholly conditioned by his historicity, and this is not totally irrecusable.”<sup>54</sup> The imprecision regarding the differences between “historical determination” and “historical condition” is the source of Fernand Brunner’s mistake which only seems to be a misunderstanding about the ontological content of historicity.

At first, Walter Benjamin presents himself as one of the earliest critics of historicity. In the monumental *Passagen-Werk* – although it is unclear when exactly (sometime between 1928 and 1935) – Benjamin claims that “Heidegger, in an abstract way, vainly seeks to save history for phenomenology

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53 Jan Assmann et al., “Zeit,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Bd. 12, ed. Joachim Ritter (Basel: Schwabe & Co., 2004), 1188.

54 Fernand Brunner, “L’historicité comme alibi,” in *Truth and Historicity. Vérité et Historicité. Entretiens en Heidelberg 12-16 septembre 1969*, ed. Hans-Georg Gadamer (Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), 63.

through ‘historicity’.”<sup>55</sup> Benjamin’s objection to the abstract content of the concept is reiterated by Günther [Stern] Anders’ radical critique on Heidegger’s philosophy. Anders does not spare the notion of historicity, which he interprets as a central sign of Heidegger’s lack of substantiality in keeping with the opaque tonality of *Dasein*.<sup>56</sup> Günther Anders notes that it would be Georg Simmel, not Heidegger, who brings history to the place of *medium* between subject and object. Then, it is not by chance that the term is taken as a “conservative concept” by Anders, for as Von Renthe-Fink puts it, “the concept of historicity is thus rooted above all in certain bourgeois, nonproletarian, anti-revolutionary thinking.”<sup>57</sup> Contrary to Benjamin and Anders, Herbert Marcuse – in a context of evident enchantment by Heidegger’s work – affirmed that the bourgeois philosophy dissolves before the “concrete” knowledge<sup>58</sup> exposed in *Sein und Zeit*, a work that, according to Marcuse, philosophically discovers the phenomenon of historicity.<sup>59</sup> However, shortly after 1933 – a year that marks both Marcuse’s incorporation into the *Institut für Sozialforschung* and Heidegger’s public adherence to *National Socialist German Workers’ Party* –, Marcuse joins Benjamin and Anders in affirming historicity as the abstract and empty center of the Philosophy of Existence.<sup>60</sup> Accordingly, Jürgen Habermas reaffirms that “the more real history disappears behind ‘historicity’, the more inclined is Heidegger to employ an *ad hoc* diagnosis of the present in a self-centered and innocent way.”<sup>61</sup>

Restating what has already been said, Karl Löwith understands that “Heidegger disposes the historicity of authentic existence at the center of the

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55 GS 1, p. 577 [N 3, 1].

56 Günther Anders, “On the Pseudo-Concreteness of Heidegger’s Philosophy,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 48 (1948), 358-359.

57 Von Renthe-Fink. *Geschichtlichkeit. Ihr terminologischer und begrifflicher Ursprung bei Hegel, Dilthey und Yorck*, 143.

58 Herbert Marcuse, “Beiträge zu einer Phänomenologie des Historischen Materialismus,” in *Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), 358.

59 Marcuse, “Beiträge zu einer Phänomenologie des Historischen Materialismus,” 373.

60 Herbert Marcuse, “Philosophie des Scheiterns: Karl Jaspers Werk,” in *Karl Jaspers in der Diskussion*, ed. Hans Saner (Munich: Piper, 1973), 131.

61 Jürgen Habermas, “Heidegger-Werk und Weltanschauung,” in *Heidegger und der Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Victor Farias (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1989), 13.



phenomenon of history and thus obscures the aspect of real political history.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, in 1936, at a meeting with Heidegger himself in Rome, Löwith claims that the philosopher “agreed that his conception of ‘historicity’ was at the basis of his political commitment,”<sup>63</sup> a clear allusion to Heidegger’s engagement with the *National Socialist German Workers’ Party* in 1933, and an index of the risk one can prove when ontology is lead to a place reserved to epistemology and ethics.

Recently, by repeating the core of the criticism about the term’s abstractness, in an article devoted to historicity, Henning Trüper claims to demonstrate that the concept is incipient, devoid of content, density and functional explanation, whose poor semantics would be the expression of its principal mark: *flatness*, an alternative word for abstractness.<sup>64</sup> According to Trüper, “the flatness of historicity—in the form of a denial of the existential depths of hermeneutic analysis — became a chief problem.”<sup>65</sup>

*[T]he phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition rather flagrantly assumes that we must have a desire for, an interest in, the self-understanding at the heart of the definition. This desire is the primary blind spot of hermeneutics. It remains unexplained with regard both to its presence and its efficaciousness, and this philosophical perplexity is shrouded in existential portentousness. Nothing about desire follows from the fact that the subject is in time and tradition, that she will die, and knows as much.*<sup>66</sup>

In this more recent case, historicity is not analyzed from the perspective of the ontological-philosophical literature dedicated to the subject, which is rich in explanations and debates, but from the anthropological access on the topic.

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62 Karl Löwith, *Der Mensch inmitten der Geschichte: philosophische Bilanz des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1990), 224.

63 Löwith, *Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933*, 58.

64 Henning Trüper, “The Flatness of Historicity,” *History and Theory* 58 (2019): 24.

65 Trüper, “The Flatness of Historicity,” 37.

66 Trüper, “The Flatness of Historicity,” 35.

### The abstractness of *historicity* is a metaphysical approach to the common aspects of existence

As this study has hereby already tried to show, it is not a matter of “desire” for self-understanding as historical beings that distinguish the philosophy of historicity, but a question of *psychophysiological* conditions that makes human beings necessarily temporal beings. Time as a natural (physical, biological, cosmological), intellectual (vital, historical) and a metaphysical phenomenon imposes limits, and by them the human existence is conditioned. To live, die or simply *be* is not a choice – even if biotechnology could mitigate it. And most importantly, to have a memory and to be confronted by our “own time” is not only a matter of “desire”. The explanation of time as an existential condition lies upon these facts that are absolutely related to the philosophical concept of historicity as the abstractness which names this approach.

It is only through abstractness that one can think about the common aspects of reality such as the phenomena of time or the simple basic idea of existence. An abstraction naturally contains ambiguous possibilities of comprehension and applicability. However, it is in this ambivalent nature that one could find all kinds of forms of interpretation and the fundamental openness to accomplish the task of understanding the general aspects of existence. This is what Helmuth Plessner and Rudolf Carnap could not accept as a possible point of view, by demanding that metaphysical thinking should be reduced to its anthropological<sup>67</sup> or formal<sup>68</sup> aspects only. Plessner sees the Heideggerian way of thinking as an “aprioristic anthropology”. Carnap is more radical and did not see anything valuable in it, since for him the core of the Heideggerian abstractness is “meaningless”.

Besides the controversy inherent to the speculative or abstract form of historicity, which can be associated to its Hegelian origins and the very nature of an abstraction, or rather, despite this criticism of the focus on the applicability of the concept on the epistemological and sociological realm of historiography – or “real history” –, one could still find in the philosophy of historicity a valuable explanation about the conditions that enables us to think or live historically, that is, temporally. It is a simple theoretical contribution

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67 Helmuth Plessner, *Macht und menschliche Natur. Ein Versuch zur Anthropologie der geschichtlichen Weltansicht*, in *Gesammelte Schriften, band V* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003).

68 Rudolf Carnap, “Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache,” *Erkenntnis* 2-4 (1932), 219-241.

which has no connection with descriptive reality itself. As a concept, however, it permits us to think about the reality of being in relation to the transience and existential nature of time.

Historicity, then, understood as the time-like principle of history, is a concept linked to a general human existential phenomenon rather than to a cultural variation of experience, circumscribed to one particular mode of thought and interpretation of the world. The expression “plural historicity”<sup>69</sup>, then, is a pleonasm from the point of view of the metaphysics of historicity. This miscomprehension is recurrent in historical-anthropological investigations about time, which often erroneously only sees the cultural and social aspect of the problem as valid, forgetting that time is also related to ontology and metaphysics – not to mention physics and the *a-cultural* universal scientific theorems on time. Following Claude Lévi-Strauss<sup>70</sup> conclusion, who simplifies historicity as synonymous with historical, referring to modern-western historiography, important anthropologists have been led to the same mistake,<sup>71</sup> opposing historicity against nature. By doing this, one reaches a methodologically incorrect conclusion,<sup>72</sup> for history as a phenomenon as well as nature are equally two aspects of life. As David Carr has stated, “perhaps we should conclude that ‘peoples without history’ represent not the absence of historicity but another one of its forms.”<sup>73</sup>

### How could *historicity* be a metahistorical concept?

Almost invariably, criticisms against the philosophical idea of historicity do not deny its truth. What is intended, in general, “is to demonstrate the limitations of this method of thought (...) its limitations are related to the so-called

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69 Trüper, “The Flatness of Historicity,” 41.

70 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage* (Paris: Agora, 1962) and Georges Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec Claude Lévi-Strauss* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2010).

71 See E. V. de Castro, “Do mito grego ao mito ameríndio: uma entrevista sobre lévi-strauss com eduardo viveiros de castro,” *Sociologia & Antropologia* 2, (2011): 15; Joanna Overing, “O mito como história: um problema de tempo, realidade e outras questões,” *Mana* 1 (1995).

72 Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. I Band – Hermeneutik*, 253.

73 Carr, “On historicity,” 276.

universalist character of the doctrine.”<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, is not historicity, as temporality, eternity, or, more precisely, time, a phenomenon that affects humanity itself? There would be a culture, people, person, or even a thing which are not constrained by the powers of time?

There are many ways to elaborate the time-like experience of or to understand life, from both personal and cultural standpoints. History as historiography is only one of them, with its own trajectory and development, characterized by certain limits and circumscribed to specific objectives, carrying with it vices and virtues, which of course vary according to the *l'ordre du jour* in different “modes of historiography.” Still, one cannot avoid the fact that the matter or main conceptual object of history, i.e., time, regardless of how it is experienced, interpreted, elaborated or instrumentalized, is exhibited not for certain intellectual environments, but for all, once it is a fundamental component of what we could call the human condition – I am referring particularly to memory as a psychophysiological element of human existence and death as an imperative fate.

From the original Amerindian people to the Mongolian steppes of Central Asia, from the ancient Bantus and Yoruba people to present-day Europeans, time appears as a phenomenon that is always knowable and available to compose human experience in a way that is culturally rich and diverse.<sup>75</sup> This fact is attested by historical, anthropological, linguistic, and philosophical research, in which some notion of time (by means of temporality or eternity) is ascertained and some way of thinking temporality in its most fundamental sense of transience is recognized. Even under the sign of repetition (ontological or cultural),<sup>76</sup> the general idea of time is disposed as a metahistorical existential imperative, and consequently not as a matter of “desire.” It is no coincidence that modern science identifies time as one universal and natural

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74 A. Waisman, “Contribution à la discussion de la conférence de M. le Professeur Brunner sur le thème ‘L’historicité comme alibi’,” in *Truth and Historicity. Vérité et Historicité. Entretiens en Heidelberg 12-16 septembre 1969*, ed. Hans-Georg Gadamer (Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), 66-67.

75 See Paul Ricoeur, *Les Cultures et le Temps* (Payot/ Unesco: Paris, 1975); Rudolf Wendorff, *Zeit und Kultur. Geschichte des Zeitbewusstseins in Europa* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1980); Douwe Tiemersma and Henk Oosterling, *Time and temporality in intercultural perspective*. (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V. Editions, 1996); Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge and Öhnan Tunca, *Représentations du temps dans les religions* (Liège: Librairie DROZ S.A., 2003); Norbert Elias, *Über die Zeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1984).

76 On the “cultural repetition”, see Mircea Eliade, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969).

(or physical) element, from Isaac Newton to Albert Einstein – for whom time is relative, but still a universal phenomenon.<sup>77</sup>

In fact, historicity is not a simple concept of the Heideggerian “system” that refers only to its conceptual structure. And it is not unwise to reiterate that today, indifferent to all criticism on its applicability, historicity is among the metahistorical concepts that best underlie and justify the metaphysical reasons why the phenomenon of time is unavoidable and why “everything is or can be historical.”

Reinhart Koselleck’s well known metahistorical concepts, which Martin Heidegger (1927) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960) philosophically had unfolded, intends to explain the historical hermeneutic condition.<sup>78</sup> The “space of experience [*Erfahrungsraum*]” and the “horizon of expectations [*Erwartungshorizont*],” which would configure “historical time,” are two metahistorical concepts that are precisely in the field of epistemological elaboration about the plurality of historical phenomenon as a fundamental time-like experience – the multilayered nature of time. Therefore, if Koselleck’s concepts are sufficient for the appropriate justification of epistemological elaboration of historical time, from the ontological point of view, however, one must return to the fundamental theories of Philosophy of Existence, which also elaborates historicity as a metahistorical concept that explains the time-like conditions which enable historical phenomenon. In other words, the ontological character of historicity is one strong evidence of the existential or temporal condition to which history in general or Koselleck’s plural “historical time” is related.<sup>79</sup>

Current historiography would thereby be a particular and culturally founded mode of elaboration of experience which is also epistemologically well established. The phenomenon of history, however, must not be confused with the art of writing history, that is, historiography and its variations. Historicity, accordingly, needs a clearer definition.

On the one hand, historicity is the concept whose substance does not differentiate, but unifies the humanity from its common phenomena: transience,

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77 See George Jaroszkiewicz, *Images of Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Étienne Klein and Michel Spiro, *Le Temps et sa flèche* (Paris: Champs Flammarion, 1996).

78 In regard to the appropriate development of his *historical time* metatheory, see Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), 355.

79 I agree with Carr, “On historicity,” 275.

finitude, death, facts that condition, *i.e.*, limits existence. On the other hand, but simultaneously, historicity conceptually expresses through these generic temporal phenomena precisely that which allows the manifestation of differences and plurality, since historicity, because it disposes of the limits of existence at the same time as it determines its possibilities, for the limits of historicity are by definition their possibilities. Historicity would not be an empty abstraction that deny the historiological factor of transience and it does not deal with historiographical (epistemological) problems according to the Western and modern historical science only. In fact, as I have tried to demonstrate, historicity is a concept related to phenomena that immediately refers to the conditions of history and to the situation in which any and all existence seems to be placed – temporality and eternity, that is, time. And what, in short, does historicity mean as a temporal condition? According to the brief history of historicity here presented, historicity is the human power to carry time within itself, more precisely past time, that which was transmitted or inherited by the force of tradition (transmission) according to the structure of temporality announced by the questioning of being: repetition (of the past time) as unsurpassed temporal condition and human destiny. For as J. L. Borges once said: “Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river that snatches me, but I am the river; It is a tiger that destroys me, but I am the tiger; It is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire.”<sup>80</sup> One could add that time is always past time, and I am the past as well as I am historicity.

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80 J. L. Borges, “Nueva refutación del tiempo,” in *Otras inquisiciones* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1960), 187.

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