The Meanings of Historicity—the End and the Beginning

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Historicity is a theoretical problem, not an answer

An elementary founding principle of modern thinking, which philosophy called historicity, combines three structural aspects of human consciousness about the features of reality: that we are not omnipresent—therefore, we are neither omniscient nor omnipotent, as our spiritual powers are restricted and finite. Considering human existence has always been subject to the yoke of finitude, we are permanently enmeshed in intervals fixed by death, the end, and, above all, by birth, the beginning.

This may appear somewhat obvious. It refers, however, to axioms that cover up old philosophical problems, most of them inaugurated by the question of the multiplicity or unity of existence, declared a fundamental dilemma by Parmenides of Elea at the dawn of Western philosophical tradition. In modern thinking, the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault are proof that these questions persevere. Although they are recognized as advocates of the contingent aspects of reality, both thinkers acknowledge an ambivalence proper to the historical character of existence and are often ambiguous as to its value. This happens by sometimes advocating for the relevance of historicity by understanding its particularities—the multiplicity of ways to approach reality—and by sometimes contesting its universality—the unity of reality as one thing to be understood.¹

Historicity, then, in addition to being a philosophical idea encompassing one paradoxical characteristic of existence—as multiple and unique at the same time—has become a deliberate intellectual program in modernity, whose goal was and still is the secularization of ontological tradition, expunging its supposedly unrealistic statements by virtue of a systematic historicization of our knowledge about concrete existence. It is not by chance that the term historicity appeared in the nineteenth century, in Lectures on the History of Philosophy (1805–1831)² amongst the concepts G. W. F. Hegel coined while questioning the theological factors of reality—thereby fixing historiography as the privileged secular method of elaborating on human experience. That fixture, however, did not undo the logical discrepancies inherent in the concept. On the contrary, as can be verified in Nietzsche and Foucault’s abovementioned works, for instance, it keeps theoretical obstacles and dilemmas in readiness, insofar as historical thinking plays a central role in modernity.
Historicity refers to a metaphysical question

The ascent of historicity to the level of metaphysical precept is a pivotal result of the modern historicization of everything, as explained by Emil Fackenheim in his lecture *Metaphysics and Historicity* (1961). It establishes the current idea of existence that ties all human experience and non-human existence to the historiological coefficient and makes everything historical, whereas the identity of any and every phenomenon rests upon and is explained by its history. Such a *vía historicæ*, in its modern sense, therefore, primarily serves to acknowledge the historicity of everything that exists, which, in turn, forces humanity to recognize its own historicity.³

Bearing this in mind, what is valid for modern historical thinking about existence in general, as Paul Ricoeur argued from a theoretical perspective in his trilogy *Time and Narrative* (1983–1985), is that everything has an end that conditions its possible meanings, all of which are concealed from the beginning and revealed in the grave and final moment. The historical condition of existence, however, represents more than that. Roughly speaking, it is true that only through death or an ending can a concrete form be determined for existence, when contingency finally stop its work. According to the well-known formula in Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927), the Being is *for-death*. It means that existence acquires a finite concrete form, a framework, through death alone, understood as the simple end of everything, but also in a broad sense as the insurmountable aspect of reality—death as the common destiny of all that exists. Franz Rosenzweig said as much at the opening of *The Star of Redemption* (1921), a work that begins with, “Out of death, out of fear of death, all universal knowledge arises.”⁴ And since death as the ending is the permanent limit to existence—human and non-human—the categorical interruption of all possibilities, one cannot elaborate on any effective knowledge of its nature. Hence, if the goal is to understand the meaning and significance of historicity, as Vicente Ferreira da Silva notes in one of his *Philosophical Essays* (1948), then death is the obstacle to be overcome. Contrary to the corollary of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) to remain silent in the face of the ineffable, it is, as Ferreira da Silva argues, precisely the impossibility of seeing, of knowing death, that allows it to thus become the beginning of all knowledge. Death, the end, would paradoxically turn out to be the beginning.⁵
Historicity as a metaphysical claim

Concerning the metaphysical feature of history there is therefore a question to be answered: how is a phenomenon such as history possible if our starting point is the radical materialist assumption that everything is finite, temporal in the sense of having concrete limits without exception? If it is true that we can know things as distant in time as fifty centuries or generations, there must be something that is not necessarily finite, temporal or limited, that connects us finite humans to such an ancient object; in a sense, something transhistorical that philosophy has called ideas—an expression of the fundamental power to know things past that exceed the most basic human limit, death.

This is not a purely idealistic proposition, since it is through physical matter that ideas endure. At the same time, nevertheless, it refers to a question that a naturalistic gaze cannot respond to without a metaphysical assumption about the reality of ideas as a kind of independent phenomenon, a thing that can overcome material substance and defy materialistic logic.

Hence, death as a propaedeutic for the act of knowing history refers to a particular existential phenomenon of gnoseology, one that has long been analysed in the philosophical tradition: the nature of ideas. And despite the need for a material carrier, a linguistic reference, to transform it into an object, the basic nature of knowledge is its meaningfulness, which is essentially made up of ideas, or in more contemporary jargon: information. This reflects an archaic science known in Western philosophy as organized by Plato, that is, there are psychological factors that compose reality in the same way as the telluric, naturalistic, immediate, and concrete aspects of experience. I am not referring to the entire complex canonical doctrine of Platonic ideas and their Pythagorean norms—to the old orphic mysteries of human metempsychosis—but to Plato’s simple conclusion about the existence of ideas as an essential metaphysical attribute of reality, provided one understands that ideas are not necessarily subject to the physical laws of unavoidable material corruption, i. e., death. There are existential elements that transcend death and survive the ineluctable corruption of matter and are referred to as ideas—analogous to psyche, anima, or modern concepts of consciousness and the mind. Plato observes in some dialogues, as in Phaedo and Meno, that, above all, ideas can endure and continue to exist regardless of the death of those who (re)elaborate them, instituting new beginnings in the process. That ideas have a life of their own; they mature and age, they transform themselves and, evidently, sometimes disappear. When they fade, however, it is never simply because of the
physical and material death of the person or material carrier that supported them. After all, it is not unwise to say that one can know ideas that precede an individual existence, that go beyond concrete and immediate experience and transcend the finite limits of the interval between human birth and death. One certainly knows the ideas of Hegel and even Plato—some of which have been alive for more than two millennia. Humans are thus bearers of ideas, which are infinite by their very nature, since they are not subject to the finite aspect of time.

This conclusion about the infinitude of ideas sheds light on Heraclitus’s (B.45) obscure statement: that the limits of the human mind are impossible to locate. Consciousness, a new approach to old concepts as soul or spirit, is unlimited, that is, infinite, without a determined form, since the life of ideas, their equivalent, has no exact or definitive end compared to physical and material bodies. In a letter to Kawabata Yasunari from April 1946, Mishima Yukio points out that this primal nature of the ideal factor of existence results in eternity, since “ideas are in constant and eternal transformation, without knowing when to stop.” In the same vein and finally recognizing the ideal part of existence as the essence of the infinite meaning of historicity, Jacob Burckhardt, in one of his lectures—posthumously published under the title Contributions to Universal History (1905)—notes that every historical event “has a spiritual aspect [ideal], through which it participates in eternity. For the spirit [the idea] is subject to mutations, but not to transience.”

The final point of organic or material existence, death, the self-evident and expected end of human existence, does not prevent ideas from surviving. Neither does it restrict the infinite existential continuity of intellectual data, as it is transmitted from intellect to intellect, from soul to soul, from spirit to spirit, from idea to idea. That conviction, identifiable in diverse environments, thought and represented by Aristotle, Plotinus, Ibn Sīnā (the Avicenna), Moses ben Maimon (the Maimonides), Nāgārjuna, Dōgen, Henry More, William Blake, Fernando Pessoa, and Mário Ferreira dos Santos, despite different onto- and theological particularities, seeks only to demonstrate that ideas engage through eternity, not because they are absolute or indestructible—on the contrary, they are fragile and contingent—but because they have the potential to be eternal, immortal, not subject to physical mortality. Ideas have the power to continue existing despite the demands of death: basically, to end matter. This is common wisdom, not exclusive to Platonism or some sort of philosophy, that belongs, from an anthropological and historical point of view to the broad complex of ancestry, common among multiple cultural perspectives, particularly those of ancient Asiatic philosophies.
It should be clear by now that finitude is, on the one hand, a natural and physical
trait of life. At the same time, infinitude is also a metaphysical property of historical
existence—human and non-human—that transcends its immediate and apparent
organic limits. And if there is an end, there is also a beginning, a metaphysical
*arcanum*, the unlimited virtue of ideas. Considering finitude and infinity, both
fundamental qualities of what is called the historicity of existence insofar as there
is no beginning without end—or end without beginning—no general cause for
reality is established, but the beginning acquires an ideal precedence. This fact
brings us to the least visible predicate of historicity: the infinite life of ideas as an
essential part of their nature, which means ideas do not require a concrete form in
order to find their end, only an unstoppable beginning.

At first glance, the historical character of a certain phenomenon or event is
synonymous with its context, the finitude conditioned mainly by the established end
of a certain process, understood as an event. Still, historicity is also the expression
of the possibility of knowing phenomena of which we are not immediate
participants, but which are likely to be known for their infinite nature, originating not
in death, the end, but in the beginning, the index of the (dis)continuity and
perseverance of ideas. It is axiomatic that only through life, from the beginning, is
there death, the end. It is not so clear, however, that only through the end is there a
beginning—a seemingly incoherent existential knot, subtly untied in Ōe Kenzaburō’s
introduction to *M / T and the History of the Wonders of the Forest* (1986):

“To think about the existence of a person, it is necessary to draw up a plan
that is not only concerned with starting from birth, but goes back much
further; neither is it interrupted by the day of death, but extends beyond.

A person’s life in the world must not be reduced to his birth and death. One
is born in the great shadow of the personal circle that encompasses
personality, and after death, there is still something that remains and
survives.”

* This essay is an expanded version of the Portuguese original, “Finitude e infinitude da
historicidade da existência,” *Estado da Arte* (27.03.2021), URL:
Augusto de Carvalho works on the threshold of philosophy and history from an intercultural perspective, particularly from the Brazilian (Latin American) and Japanese (Asiatic) points of view. His main interest lies in the metaphysical and ontological foundations of the historical world and historical thinking, the philosophy of time and the philosophy of translation.

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1 My argument starts with a general reading of Nietzsche and Foucault’s works. Nevertheless, a defense of historicity as a human existential foundation can be found in *On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic* (1887) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), while there is a hesitant ambiguity about its value in the *Second Untimely Meditation. On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life* (1874) and *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966).


4 Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung.* Frankfurt am Main: Kauffmann Verlag, 1921, 7.

5 For an argument along these lines, see Augusto de Carvalho, “Das potências da Memória. A afirmação da transitoriedade histórica e da eternidade das ideias,” *Kriterion* 61, no. 145 (2020): 107–129.

