

Editorial: What does it mean to be “historical”?

Thor Hennelund Nielsen

It is hard to mistake the air of satisfaction that looms over the concluding passages of Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Kant 1998): after the system of philosophy has been established, and reason put in its proper place, cleaning up and sorting out the history of the preceding millennia of philosophy will be an enjoyable and leisurely activity – an activity, however, that constitutes an addendum to philosophy, placed outside the margins of it, because history, as Kant remarks, is “unphilosophical”. Since it is not concerned with the knowledge of principles but rather of the empirically given, history can be accorded no place in the system of pure reason. How could Kant have known that for the subsequent generation of philosophers – the Idealists, who were all raised on the critical philosophy of Kant himself – the question of history would take center stage? Indeed, that philosophy would not only concern itself with history, interpreted as the procession of events leading up to the present, but would even *historize* the absolute itself by positing that it must subject itself to a historical process in order to become manifest. For Kant, history was an afterthought to the system; for the Idealists, the system was an afterthought to history. Accordingly, new questions gained prominence: not only “what is truly historic(al)?” but also, to put it plainly, “*what is it to be historical?*” Quite intriguingly, historical philosophy took over when the philosophy of systems no longer seemed viable.

Following the decline of German Idealism, these questions did not lose momentum nor remain a leisurely “*aber dabei*” to philosophy, in fact, they only seemed to multiply and disseminate into all sorts of academic disciplines. History developed into an explicit object of study with the consolidation of fields like empirical history, evolutionary biology etc. as scientific disciplines. With this followed another tendency to interpret the world, society and humankind by way of history, i.e. through explicitly scientific methods of

Thor Hennelund Nielsen, PhD Student
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8205-5544>
hennelund@sdu.dk
University of Southern Denmark
Campusvej 55, 5230 Odense M Denmark

historizing. For some philosophers, being historical even came to constitute the essence of being a human. This development, however, did not occur linearly but culminated in certain peaks, one being the “rise and fall” of phenomenology, another being hermeneutics, a third being deconstruction. Perhaps, with the erosion of the centuries-old distinction between natural and human history due to our entering into a new epoch, the so-called *Anthropocene*, we are just now entering a new peak? What does it reveal about us that we, quite extraordinarily, have named and defined our own epoch – one, that we are by all means still in the thick of?¹

The seminar, which gave rise to the present volume, was born out of a frustration. The question “what is historical?” has been at the tip of philosophers’ tongues for several centuries, yet seldom has the question “what does it even mean to be historical?” been subjected to exhaustive analysis. Instead, philosophers have in great detail examined the historicity of understanding, of the philosophical tradition, of *Dasein* etc. and let the explicit question of historicity fall by the wayside.

The present collection of papers each in their own way take up this question of historicity for renewed engagement. Peter Wolsing’s articles explicate the roots of the concept of historicity by examining Hegel and Gadamer’s understandings of key aspects of the notion and their limitations. Jesper Lundsfryd Rasmussen’s paper shines a spotlight on a neglected aspect of Schelling’s thought, and the research on historicity, namely the concept of *transcendental historicity*. Søren Harnow Klausen and Thor Hennelund Nielsen seek to tread new paths – the former by cementing a much-needed distinction between so-called “historical thinking” and “thinking of historicity” and drawing out the implications of historicity of understanding; the latter by attempting to unfold a theory of so-called “ontological” or “objective” historicity, i.e. a theory of historicity not founded in the human subject. In his contribution, Thomas Schwarz Wentzer reflects on the foreboding, epoch-constituting dictum “We are living in the Anthropocene”, posited by Paul Crutzen, and what it entails for us humans living in an unusual historic time. Lastly, Rasmus Vangshardt contributes the only paper from literary studies in

¹ A fact which Jørgen Hass made the editor aware of in conversation.

this volume; in it, Vangshardt delineates the difference between “history” and “historicism”, including how we engage with and understand ourselves *through* history, through the example of the (non-)difference between Medieval and (more) Modern times. The papers are unified in their effort to rethink or draw out aspects of the notion of historicity that hitherto have been wanting.

Acknowledgements

The seminar that provided the impetus for the publication of this special issue on historicity in *Res Cogitans* was held at Campus Odense of The University of Southern Denmark on the 22nd of February 2019. The editor-in-chief of *Res Cogitans*, Søren Harnow Klausen, and the editor of this volume, Thor Hennelund Nielsen, would like to thank Jesper Lundsryd Rasmussen, Thomas Schwarz Wentzer, Søren Gosvig Olesen, Peter Wolsing and Anders Moe Rasmussen who presented their work at the seminar, including everyone that attended. Additionally, we are greatly indebted to everybody who contributed to this volume; both those who contributed a paper and to the reviewers who reviewed said papers. Lastly, the editor would personally like to thank Lars Pihl Bjerre with whom he has extensively discussed the importance – and neglect – of the question of historicity, and Søren Harnow Klausen who has been a tremendous help throughout the entire process.

References

Kant, Immanuel. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1998.