

What is Historicity?

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ABSTRACT: The article argues for a distinction between standard “historical thinking”, which aims at interpreting theories, views and concepts by considering them in their historical or cultural context, and a more sophisticated “thinking of historicity”, which attempts to uncover the historical nature of human understanding in general. The latter kind of thinking is exemplified, in different ways, by Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer, who all strongly opposed the trend to “historicize” ideas and knowledge. It is pointed out that the notion of historicity resembles the notion of path-dependence, which has gained prominence in contemporary philosophy of science. It is further argued that precisely because historicity turns out to be a generic and fundamental phenomenon, a part of the human condition, it does not by itself allow one to discriminate between more or less authentic or genuinely historical styles or genres of thinking or research.

1. Introduction

There is much talk about “historical thinking” and “historicity”, especially in the broadly continental tradition in philosophy. The term “historicity” has also achieved prominence in other fields of the humanities (see for instance Hartog 2015; Kluge et al. in press). Though I readily admit that words are nobody’s property, and can be employed for different purposes and with different meanings, I will argue that there is a particular notion of historicity, which is of central significance to modern philosophy, and denotes a phenomenon more fundamental than, and different from, what is usually referred to as “historical”. Hence, I will make a distinction between historical thinking more generally – which is very widespread, and comes in many different versions – and philosophical thinking concerned with *historicity* more specifically, which has been relatively rare.¹

¹ What I call “historicity” has sometimes been termed “historicality”, especially as a translation of Heidegger’s term *Geschichtlichkeit* (in Heidegger 1962). Yet I prefer the

As for the former, broader notion of historical thinking, it could be said, indeed *must* be said, that Hegel, Marx and Foucault's philosophies are all historical. It must probably also be said about Herder's philosophy, as well as about Droysen's work on the aims of historiography (Assis 2014) and a significant part of the thinking of the Frankfurt school. Nietzsche's genealogical thinking surely also qualifies,² as does the more recent work of intellectual historians like Robert Darnton or Hayden White.

What *is* historical thinking? It is a thinking that is concerned with how philosophical epochs, movements or conditions have influenced particular modes of thought. It is a thinking that highlights the importance of the historical context. Historical thinkers differ widely when it comes to the more specific understanding and application of this general point of view. Some – notably Hegel – understand a specific historical context as determined by a larger unitary framework with a distinctive meaning that is accessible to philosophical scrutiny. Others see history as more fragmentary and elusive. But all proponents of historical thinking share the basic idea of *historical conditioning*, be it by more or less particular events or constellations or grander narrative structures. Precisely what this conditioning means is also subject to different views, but it seems in any case to entail a restriction or limitation of the claims to validity of the modes of thought in question.

It is common to place 20th-century thinkers like Heidegger and Gadamer in a lineage starting perhaps stretching through hermeneutical thinkers like Dilthey, 19th-century historiography and the “historical school” in jurisprudence, back to Hegel and Herder. Yet by doing so, one overlooks the difference between thinking of historicity and “mere” historical thinking. One overlooks the degree to which Heidegger, Gadamer (and possibly others) were

simpler term. Even the more special “historicality” is also used to designate simple historical conditioning (see e.g. Wandersee 1992), so it would not help to avoid ambiguity, anyhow.

² It may be argued that there are other strands in Nietzsche's thinking which seem to place him in the vicinity of a more genuine “thinking of historicity”. It is not unusual for historical thinking and thinking of historicity to coexist in the work of individual thinkers, though they are usually a source of internal tension.

influenced by Husserlian phenomenology and its strong aversion to both Hegelian dialectics and historicism. And one overlooks especially how the modern notion of historicity was developed in direct confrontation with the earlier historical thinking.

In the following, I will try to elaborate the notion of historicity, drawing particularly on Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer. I will then discuss its implications. If historicity is a fundamental and pervasive (that is, exceptionless) condition of human existence and understanding, what are the ramifications for philosophy and other kinds of human knowledge-seeking? I will argue that historicity does not carry as strongly normative implications as is usually assumed. Precisely because historicity is fundamental and ubiquitous, it does not enable – indeed does not allow – us to discriminate between styles or genres of thinking that are better or worse because they are more or less historical. I do, however, acknowledge that historicity might carry some moderately normative implications and impose some, albeit looser, constraints on which forms and modes of thinking are available or appropriate.

Although I would like to draw an unusually sharp – and, hopefully, clear – distinction between historical thinking in general and thinking of historicity, I will not deny that there is a significant overlap. Probably hints and traces, or even more substantial elements of a genuine thinking of historicity can be found in thinkers I would generally categorize as “mere” historical thinkers. And although I will eventually reject the suggestion, it is surely not implausible to assume that thinking of historicity must naturally lead one to adopt a more typically “historical” approach.

Since my aim is to characterize and contrast two fairly broad strands of thinking, I will have to smooth over many of the finer differences between individual thinkers and positions. Though I will point to certain differences between even the proponents of the more exclusive thinking of historicity, the reader should not expect any highly detailed textual analysis.

Much scholarship in so-called continental philosophy is wedded to the idea that concepts and theories should be interpreted in light of the overall aim and guiding thoughts of the philosopher in question. Such a view might lead some to question my approach. They might say that the notion of historicity

plays a specific role in, for example, Heidegger's attempt to answer the question of being, that is, in his "fundamental ontology", and that this should be taken more strongly into account. I am surely observant of the hermeneutical maxim that we must understand the parts with reference to the whole; and I suppose that my interpretations of specific concepts are in fact in line with the overall framework to which they belong, even if I make little explicit reference to this framework. That said, the hermeneutical maxim should not prevent one from interpreting and employing single concepts or analyses for specific purposes. Not doing so risks diminishing their significance and reducing them to mere objects of historical interest (sic). Arguably, neither Husserl's transcendental phenomenology nor Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology was ultimately successful. Their legacy consists rather in the many original and partially fitting concepts and analyses they produced while pursuing their grander projects.³

2. *Confronting historicism*

The notion of historicity was developed as part of a critical reaction to the historical thinking typical of much 19th-century philosophy and work in the humanities more generally. This reaction can be seen as part of a still larger critical movement directed at the trend towards "naturalization" or "scientification" of philosophy, a movement characteristic of both early phenomenology and analytic philosophy. Husserl saw scientific naturalism, psychologism and the historically inspired *Weltanschauungsphilosophie* as manifestations of the same, implicitly self-undermining and unphilosophic, attitude. He rejected the speculative approach of Hegel, but was no less critical of the later historicist thinking, which he considered a form of epistemological scepticism. The distinction between phenomenology on the one hand and naturalism, psychologism and historicism on the other is drawn with particular clarity and emphasis in Husserl's 1911-article "Philosophy as Rigorous Science" ("Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft").

³ For an elaboration and further defence of this approach with special reference to the work of Kierkegaard, see Klausen 2018, 5f.

... im Sinne einer Schwächung des philosophischen Wissenschaftstriebes, übte die Hegelsche Philosophie Nachwirkungen durch ihre Lehre von der relativen Berechtigung jeder Philosophie für Ihre Zeit ... Durch den Umschlag der metaphysischen Geschichtsphilosophie Hegels in einen skeptischen Historismus ist nun wesentlich bestimmt das Aufkommen der neuen "*Weltanschauungsphilosophie*" (1911, 293)

Husserl defines historical thinking as a form of relativizing (of the "authority" or "legitimacy", *Berechtigung*) of philosophical views – be it, as in Hegel, on the background of absolute conception of history, which is not itself relativized, or, as in the later "historicism", as a relativizing to specific historical contexts that effectively undermines the aspiration to absolute validity characteristic of philosophy.

Heidegger adopts Husserl's criticism of historicism and *Weltanschauungsphilosophie* and develops it in several places. A very important, though somewhat neglected text is his 1920 Freiburg Early Summer lecture with the (rather misleading) title *Phänomenologie des Anschauung und des Ausdrucks* (GA 59; Heidegger 1993). It contains both an extensive diagnosis of the state of philosophy at the time and elaborate discussions of different understandings of history and their significance to philosophy. Heidegger sees it as typical of the contemporary "awakening of a historical consciousness" that it tends to view present existence (*das gegenwärtige Dasein*) as a mere "phase", "level" or "place of transition" (*Durchgangsstelle*), and norms and values as *products* of a historical development. Historical explanations focusing on the *genesis* of the elements under analysis are used to decide fundamental questions (used for *sachliche Entscheidungen*) (Heidegger 1993, 13). Like Husserl, Heidegger sees this tendency as fundamentally similar to the trend towards naturalistic (e.g. biological or psychological) explanations. And like Husserl, Heidegger is strongly critical of the adoption of a mode of thinking similar to Hegelian dialectics:

Mann sucht nach einer Logik der Bewegung, des Werdens, nach einer historischen Dynamik ... Er wird zu Entscheidung darüber kommen müssen, ob die begrifflichen Mittel ... ausreichen und geeignet sind zu einer solchen Problemauswicklung, und ob im Rahmen ... der Dialektik überhaupt wesentlich mehr zu erreichen ist (Heidegger 1993, 23).

Heidegger explains the reason for his aversion against Hegelian dialectics in more detail in an appendix to his 1923 Freiburg lecture *Ontologie. Hermeneutik der Faktizität*:

Alle Dialektik lebt eigentlich in dem, was sie bringt, vom Tisch der anderen. Die Dialektik ist also doppelseitig unradikal, d.h. grundsätzlich unphilosophisch. Sie muss von der Hand in den Mund leben und entwickelt darin eine imponierende Fertigkeit.

... Dagegen geht die Phänomenologie letztlich in ihrer Kampfstellung an. Wo man beides vereinen will, nimmt man die Phänomenologie äußerlich ... Phänomenologie kann nur phänomenologisch zugeeignet werden, d.h. nicht so, dass man Sätze nachredet, sondern durch *Ausweisung*. (Heidegger 1998, 43ff.).

As a species of historical thinking, Hegelian (and other) dialectics is parasitic on ideas and conceptions that have already been formed in a historical process. This makes it “unradical”, because it works with these conceptions without fundamentally questioning their source or validity. Nor does dialectics bring forth any original insights or novel concepts based on real demonstration, that is, on an analysis of what is given in an originary intuition. The contrast between dialectics as philosophizing “from above”, concerned with the implications of historically formed conceptions, systems and ideas, and phenomenology as philosophizing “from below” (*von unten*; cf. Husserl 1911, 322), with the aim of tracing back such constructed units of meaning to their roots in pre-intellectual human experience, is emphasized very strongly here.

Heidegger also confronts historicism in the final sections of the extant part of *Being and Time*. He raises a worry that had been voiced also by Nietzsche – notably in *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Geschichte* – and earlier by Kierkegaard, who in *Either-Or 2* (Kierkegaard 1992) pointed to the existential insignificance of a world-historical understanding: That a certain kind of historical consciousness deprives the historical events – and the present day – of their *reality*. It embodies a theoretical, objectifying attitude that is incapable of presenting history as meaningful, as something that *matters* to present-day individuals (and also incapable of presenting it as something that *meant* something to people at the time).

Historicism is seen by Heidegger as a source of *insignificance* and *indifference*. Hence it is not just, as Husserl stressed, a source of relativization and self-delegitimation. This is a less central worry for Heidegger, though he clearly

does want to distance himself from relativism. The problem is not relativization as such, considered as a form of dependence or conditioning. Heidegger does himself consider human understanding to be dependent and conditioned. The problem is that relativism is *objectivism*; that it presupposes a neutral standpoint from which to identify the conditioning factors. When viewed from such a standpoint, the conditioning factors are neutralized and lose their real constitutive force; they may explain events, but cannot really render them understandable.

Heidegger's opposition, indeed aversion, to historicism becomes very clear in the following passage:

Am Ende ist das Aufkommen eines Problems des 'Historismus' das deutlichste Anzeichen dafür, dass die Historie das Dasein seiner eigentlichen Geschichtlichkeit zu entfremden trachtet. Diese bedarf nicht notwendig der Historie. Unhistorische Zeitalter sind als solche nicht auch schon ungeschichtlich (1986, 396).

The tendency to historical thinking – to see objects and events in a wider historical context; to view ideas and decisions as dependent on historical conditions – is an expression of inauthenticity. It is a way of suppressing one's own fundamental historicity, keeping it at arm's length, so to speak. There is generally nothing wrong with such an attitude. Because *Dasein* is essentially "factual", "thrown" and "fallen" – always, to some degree and in some way, "absorbed in" its dealings in the world (1986, 173f.), it has an inevitable disposition to such self-alienating thinking. Yet Heidegger objects to such thinking being treated as an adequate, fundamental *philosophical* point of view. Even philosophy is necessary "objectifying" and so also an expression of a somewhat inauthentic attitude. But it should strive for describing "structures and possibilities of being" in light of *temporality* (GA 24 (Heidegger 1975), 460). And this is precisely what historicism, and historical thinking more generally, does not do. Instead, it describes factors and conditioning relationships as being "present-at-hand" (as *Vorhandensein*), and so deprive them of their intrinsically temporal nature and overlook their essential relation to *Dasein's* primary concerns.

The above quote from *Being and Time* is also significant in that it makes clear that there is no necessary connection between historicity (*being* historical)

and understanding oneself, or one's age or culture, in historical terms – that is, between historicity and historical thinking.

Heidegger's criticism of historicism was taken up by Gadamer, who in *Truth and Method* points to what he considers the fundamental "aporias" of historicism (1986, 222ff.) – the tension between its insistence that claims and views should be assessed relative to their historical context, and the methodological rigour and self-confidence with which it strives to uncover their historical meaning. By practicing historical thinking in this manner, it forgets its own historicity:

Die Naivität des sogenannten Historismus besteht darin, daß es ... im Vertrauen auf die Methodik seines Verfahrens seine eigene Geschichlichkeit vergißt" (1986, 305).

There are different forms and degrees of historical naivety, however. Thus, Gadamer points out that simple philosophical criticism of historicism as relativistic and thus self-refuting does not apply to sophisticated views like Dilthey's (1986, 240). This is because Dilthey had already renounced the traditional ideal of detached, objective knowledge and accepted the "unity of life and knowledge" as a basic fact (*loc cit*). But Gadamer also notes that Dilthey himself remained occupied with answering the relativism-objection and sought to progress from mere relativities to some kind of all-encompassing totality (1986, 241), and that he also defended, or at least sought, a standpoint of external, detached reflexion from which to assess the cultural phenomena, which he otherwise saw as basic, unassailable expressions of life (1986, 242). Hence the problem with a view like Dilthey's is not so much some formal inconsistency, but rather a performative inconsistency, or, still more precisely (because the point is hardly about inconsistency at all), a failure to think far and hard enough along the lines laid down by the insight into the historical constitution of human existence, to really adopt the historical point of view and bring it to bear on one's own intellectual and methodological dealings. Gadamer distinguishes historicism from what he calls *genuinely* historical thinking:

Ein wirklich historisches Denken muss die eigene Geschichtlichkeit mitdenken (1986, 305).

It remains a somewhat open question what exactly it means to „take into account“ or „think along“ one's own historicity, something I will get back to in

section 4. But at least Gadamer makes it clear – taking over a central theme from Heidegger’s *Being and Time* – that it must prevent one from *objectifying* history, or the dependency of human understanding on history. History is “at our back”, or, more precisely, history is part of our own constitution; it’s *in* our understanding, rather than an object presented or available to it. According to Gadamer, we *belong* to history:

In Wahrheit gehört die Geschichte nicht uns, sondern wir gehören ihr (281).

Again, the precise ramifications of this relationship not immediately clear. But it seems likely to assume that because history does not belong to us, we will never be able to domesticate it intellectually. It is a fundamentally important factor, which we can and should acknowledge as such, but the exact workings of which cannot be described with scientific certainty or precision. Hence Gadamer’s general reservation towards relying on methods for obtaining truths about matters of culture and history follows directly from his understanding of historicity.

There are, however, also passages in *Truth and Methods* (like the last quotation above) that seem to set Gadamer somewhat apart from not only Husserl, but also Heidegger. He has a tendency to speak of history in singular, describing it as a kind of impersonal force or factor, in a way that betrays the more substantial influence of Hegel on his thinking (and which, one might critically notice, seems to come close to objectifying or hypostasising history). The Heidegger of *Being and Time* would probably not object to the notion that human beings belong to history. But he would be sharper in his insistence that history itself only is in the actual and specific interpretation (*Auslegung*) carried out by human beings. This shows that even without the relatively narrow field of thinking of historicity, there is room for differences and nuances.

3. Understanding historicity

So, historicity is not the same as historical thinking. But how, then, is historicity to be understood? What notion of historicity emerges out of the confrontation with historicism, and the phenomenological inquiries of Husserl and Heidegger?

The first thing to notice is that historicity is a fundamental attribute of human understanding, in all its forms, guises and manifestations. It does *not* imply – at least not directly – that human understanding is bound to any specific historical perspective or framework. Its most clearly defining characteristic is negative: it implies that a “pure”, completely a-temporal and completely adequate understanding is impossible. This does not mean, however, that historicity renders understanding fundamentally *inadequate*. In particular, it does not rule out that people can arrive at objective truths about all kinds of matters or possess an understanding that is both fitting and appropriate; and it does not mean that theories or opinions are necessarily biased or skewed.

The impossibility of a “pure” understanding comes from the fact that understanding must *unfold*; that it has to be *articulated* some way of another. Understanding is therefore necessarily *sequential*.

In both Husserl and Heidegger, the notion of historicity is connected to a recognition of the indispensability of means or media for expression and transmission. While this does point toward the role of language, and also of intersubjectivity, the observation is still more general. Historicity does not entail linguistic idealism; it pertains also to allegedly pre-linguistic and pre-social matters, like the workings of first-person subjectivity, as this is understood by classical phenomenology.

Hence perhaps the most original and fundamental expression of the idea of historicity is Husserl’s analysis of the perception of material objects (though it contains no explicit reference to history) in *Ideas I*.⁴ The perception of a physical thing, Husserl claims, always involves a “certain inadequacy” (1976, §44); it is necessarily given in mere “modes of appearances”, presented as it is through “adumbrations” (*Abschattungen*). Yet it is precisely the necessity to apprehend a physical thing in this sequential, open-ended but “systematic and rigidly regular” manner (*loc cit*), that makes it appear *as* a physical object; and it is the specific ways in which the modes of appearances are connected, the

⁴ It might be thought that later writings of Husserl, for example the *Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften*, would serve better as paradigmatic expressions of his understanding of historicity. But while they deal more explicitly with *historical* matters, they tend to presuppose, rather than lay out, the basic idea of historicity.

specific experiential steps which we are forced to take in order to perceive it as such, which make us apprehend it as an object of a specific type (e.g. of a specific form). This does not, on the one hand, have anything to do with “history”, as a narrative scheme or a set of historical events or factors. It does not imply any kind of historical relativisation. Husserl simply describes how we basically acquire knowledge of physical objects, through perception. On the other hand, this does entail a kind of “historicity” in a more fundamental sense: It shows how even something as apparently simple and fundamental – and pre-cultural and pre-social – as sense-perception of middle-sized physical objects *is* “historical”, inasmuch as it has the form of a *sequential, temporal unfolding* in which the significance of what is given at any specific time is dependent on the earlier sequences,⁵ and which, while generally free and unconstrained – I may look in this or that direction, turn the object as I like, even penetrate the surface of the object, decompose it, or cease to look at it at all – is nevertheless conditioned by those earlier sequences, and set on a specific trajectory. For as far as I do want to perceive the object as such, and have embarked on this project, I have to follow a certain sequential ordering. Again, there is no strict determinism, as different routes of perception are open to me at any point; but I have to follow some such route, and each step narrows down the perceptual option space.

Historicity in this sense thus resembles what has come to be known in contemporary philosophy of science as *path-dependence* (Peacock 2009). The general idea of path dependence is that the trajectory of a “system” – be it an organization, an individual or collective activity, or a scientific discipline or research program – depends on past events and so is time-dependent (Elsner et al. 2015). Applied to the development of science, it is often taken to entail the irreversibility of certain actions and decisions, though it remains debated how far this is actually the case, that is, how strongly (e.g. necessarily) irreversible those decisions are (see Dejardins 2015). More specifically, path-

⁵ When Husserl, in his later writings, begins to speak himself – albeit occasionally – about “historicity” (e.g. Husserl 1985, §10, p. 44) or the “essential meaning-history” (*wesensmäßige Sinnengeschichte*) of judgments (e.g. Husserl 1974, §85, p. 215), it is historicity in precisely this sense he is referring to, albeit now generalized to also apply to the formation of more abstract knowledge. See also Olesen 2012.

dependence describes how methodological and conceptual choices condition the subsequent research process, ruling out certain moves and observations that could otherwise have been both possible and legitimate. This does not in itself imply that we are necessarily compelled to think in a certain way. The reversibility is not absolute; we can reflect on, modify or cancel the decisions made, or abort the whole enterprise. Yet these moves will themselves be reactions to the initial move. And in conjunction with the natural, indeed unassailable assumption that *if* we want to understand at all, we have to embark on some specific process of inquiry (be it consciously or unconsciously), path dependence does imply that we will have to consider certain aspects rather than others, conceptualize and express matters in certain ways, which are only a small subset of the infinitely many ways that should ideally be available. And it is not just about inevitable selectivity (though it is surely *also* about this). It is also about a *temporally conditioned* selectivity, because the option space is determined by its position in a sequence of temporally ordered events. In all these respects, the idea of path-dependency is quite similar to Husserl's analysis of perception.

In *Being of time*, Heidegger develops his notion of historicity in connection with the often neglected, but central *Existenzial* (that is, necessary ontological characteristic of *Dasein*) "*Rede*", usually translated "talk". *Rede* does not denote *language* or linguistic activities in any ordinary or narrow sense. Heidegger has not yet performed his "linguistic turn" in *Being and Time*; his analysis of the fundamental characteristics of *Dasein* is intended to apply to all possible forms of human activity and cognition, including pre-linguistic ones. *Rede* rather denotes the fact that a human being necessarily – always and ever – *articulates* its understanding (Heidegger 1986, §34). This *might* take the form of genuinely linguistic expression. But it is exemplified also, and more fundamentally, by a human being's acting in more or less habitual ways, interacting with its environment (in principle, this could consist solely in *thinking* about its environment). Whatever it does will, if minimally successful, leave *some* kind of trace that can function as *some* kind of clue that may be taken up and responded to by another human being, or by itself at a later time. This "taking up" need not be an act of conceptual understanding, but can consist simply in the clue being followed or the practice being imitated. And it is important to notice that

human beings respond almost incessantly to the signs and practices they produce themselves. One may, for example, try out a shortcut on one's way home and then, if it turned out well, react almost automatically to this "affordance" when encountering it again, thus unintentionally establishing a new habit.

This universal process of constituting signs and forming habits simply *by being in the world* and articulating the understanding implicit in this being is the essence of historicity. While it is obviously also the foundation for something like a shared culture, a historical tradition or a narrative (see Heidegger 1986, §76), it is as such a more general and fundamental phenomenon. In the *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Heidegger makes clear both that historicity is a characteristic of human *existence* (and not a relationship between humans or their intellectual achievements and some trans-personal power and dimension), and that it is a completely general and inescapable condition – simply because what we *are* is crucially determined by what we *have been*:

In jedem Sinne und in jedem Falle ist alles das, was wir gewesen sind, eine wesentliche Bestimmung unserer Existenz (Heidegger 1975, 375)

It may be objected that by elevating historicity to a general and necessary feature of human understanding, one ignores the possible existence of a more direct, practice- and articulation-independent kind of apprehension, like pure intuition or experience or pre-reflective awareness. I have myself defended the existence and philosophical significance of such a kind of apprehension (Author 1997a), and also criticized Derrida (1967)⁶ for assuming that every kind of quality or presentation is dependent on its place in a larger structure or temporal sequence (Author 1997b). Yet I do not think such a kind of apprehension, though undoubtedly real and important, is sufficient for genuine *understanding*. In order to understand something, more than just a static vision or singular experience

⁶ The early Derrida, especially his work on Husserl, could also be said to exemplify a genuine thinking of historicity. While I do think my earlier criticism of Derrida is still warranted, as Derrida fails to see the significance of pre-reflective consciousness or take serious the possibility of non-relationally constituted phenomenal qualities, I now see that he does make an important point in highlighting the indispensability of articulation, and so of a medium of expression, for any kind of genuine thinking.

is needed. Understanding requires structure, articulation and connection. And with this comes historicity.

A still more general objection, which is pertinent to the following discussion, is that I am wrongly assuming that historicity is an epistemological doctrine, or overemphasizing its possible epistemological consequences.⁷ To this I will reply, first, that I hope to have made clear that historicity in Heidegger is first and foremost an *ontological* concept, as it refers to a fundamental characteristic of *Dasein*, that is of, of any human (or comparable) being. The same holds for Gadamer's use of the concept, which he borrows more or less wholesale from Heidegger. Even Husserl, who uses the term "ontology" more sparingly and cautiously, conceived of historicity as a phenomenon so fundamental to every kind of meaningful activity that it could also be said to designate an ontological structure (and see Husserl 1963, 181 for an explicit characterization of his transcendental phenomenology as "universal ontology").

Secondly, I also hope to have made clear that Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer all focus on the consequences of historicity for human *understanding* in general, rather than for knowledge in particular. It is a common characteristic of their overall approach that they attempt to widen the perspective from the narrow epistemological concern that had dominated Western philosophy through much of the modern period, inquiring into the semantic preconditions for knowledge – and the analysis of knowledge – instead. Yet it is also obvious that their doing so had, and was intended to have, epistemological implications, and implications for science and scholarship. Even if the exact implications are seldom spelled out (and it is debatable to what extent there are such implications; see Section 4), all three are keen to draw conclusions pertaining quite strongly to the scope, limits and significance of various types of cognitive or scientific enterprises.

Hence if it is argued that I am making it too easy for myself by focusing on the epistemological implications of the thinking of historicity, I will reply that these seem to be the potentially most direct and "practical" consequences that might be derived from transcendental phenomenology, fundamental ontology or

⁷ As pointed out by a very perceptive reviewer

philosophical hermeneutics. If one were to keep even more closely to the alleged core project or self-understanding of the thinkers in question, one would almost inevitably be at loss as accounting for its implications (and so, ultimately, its significance). While Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer were primarily concerned with describing what is there, anyhow, I do not think they thought that these descriptions should have no bearings whatsoever on human practice (for example by motivating certain approaches rather than others, or highlighting limitations of certain lines of inquiry). Yet I shall also readily admit that the fundamental and highly generic character of the thinking of historicity does seem to make it compatible with an extremely wide range of cognitive styles and enterprises, and that there are good reasons why it should not be understood as too strongly or directly normative. This is the point I will now try to develop, before nuancing it further.

4. Historicity – so what?

What are the ramifications of historicity in this fundamental and generic sense? What does it mean for human understanding and knowledge, and what consequences does it have for philosophy and humanistic scholarship in particular?

The short answer to this question is that it does not seem to have any very radical consequences, at least not for actual practices or the status of specific intellectual achievements. Precisely because historicity is a universal and fundamental phenomenon, and does not describe any kind of more specific relativization or limitation, it cannot justify any substantial reassessment of methods, theories and claims. It “leaves everything as it is”. All understanding is historical in the sense outlined above. All products of human intellectual activity, including scientific theories, interpretations and concepts, are historical as well.

While I think this is basically correct, and one important lesson from this study is that the consequences of historicity should not be exaggerated (nor should historicity be used to justify certain idiosyncratic views about philosophical practice, or better and worse philosophies), it may still be somewhat too simple. However, it should also be noted that historicity seems

to be completely compatible with the notion that propositions and theories can be true in the standard correspondence sense. (There may be other problems with the idea of correspondence, but that is not relevant here). For correspondence is not affected by the genesis, or place in a temporal sequence, of the semantic unit (e.g. proposition) that assumedly is the bearer of truth. *Which* proposition is uttered (and so which concepts are employed in a representational act) may depend on the utterance's place in a temporal sequence; but when the proposition is grasped or uttered, its truth depends solely on whether it corresponds to actual states of affairs or not. Such a view resembles Max Weber's famously complex view of objectivity in the social sciences: Questions asked by scholars reflect specific interests and delineate the object under study in one of infinitely many ways. But once they are asked, they have definite, objective answers:

Daraus folgt nun aber selbstverständlich *nicht*, daß auch die kulturwissenschaftliche *Forschung* nur *Ergebnisse* haben könne, die »subjektiv« in *dem* Sinne seien, daß sie für den einen *gelten* und für den andern nicht. Was wechselt, ist vielmehr der Grad, in dem sie den einen *interessieren* und den andern nicht. Mit anderen Worten: *was* Gegenstand der Untersuchung wird, und wie weit diese Untersuchung sich in die Unendlichkeit der Kausalzusammenhänge erstreckt, das bestimmen die den Forscher und seine Zeit beherrschenden Wertideen; – im *Wie?*, in der Methode der Forschung, ist der leitende »Gesichtspunkt« zwar – wie wir noch sehen werden – für die Bildung der begrifflichen Hilfsmittel, die er verwendet, bestimmend, in der Art ihrer Verwendung aber ist der Forscher selbstverständlich hier wie überall an die Normen unseres Denkens gebunden. Denn wissenschaftliche Wahrheit ist nur, was für alle gelten *will*, die Wahrheit *wollen*. (Weber 1983, 173f.).

Weber may seem to be still leaning towards a kind of “mundane” historical thinking (or historicism), inasmuch as refers to the “dominant value-ideas” of the researcher's own time as likely conditioning factors. He does not seem to recognize the more general phenomenon of historicity, which does not necessarily involve culturally transmitted ideas, but reflects the more fundamental fact that humans are temporal and necessarily self-interpreting and self-articulating beings. Yet his distinction between the choice of object and perspective and the issue of truth is relevant nonetheless. For historicity can be said to imply that we are always – and already – relating selectively to reality, in both our practical and intellectual dealings. Our selective propensities may not

always depend on dominant ideas of the time; but they are historical nonetheless, in that they have been formed by earlier acts that were themselves selective, and dependent on still earlier acts.

While this arguably does not undermine the notion of objective truth, nor rules out that some views and theories may be epistemically superior to others, and even can be known by us to be so, it does sound like it must have *some* serious ramifications for our attempts to know and understand reality. For one thing, it sounds like a sort of *memento* – a reminder that we ought not take any theory or interpretation, however convincing it might appear, for more than it is (that is, more than one among many possible representations). Thinkers of historicity thus tend to a kind of – albeit qualified – historical scepticism. This is perhaps most vivid in the case of Gadamer (and other representatives of philosophical hermeneutics, like Odo Marquard (e.g. Marquard 2007) and Helmuth Plessner (see e.g. Benk 1987)). For Gadamer, the appropriate response to the allegedly fundamental insight that we “belong to history” seems to be a kind of – fairly strong – intellectual *humility*. Without precisely defining them (an attempt to do so would arguably itself be an example of intellectual overconfidence), he suggests that there are historically grounded constraints on the range, depth and purity of the understanding and knowledge that human beings are able to attain (and should *try* to obtain in the first place). His whole way of talking about history and tradition implies that these should be objects of respect, if not awe – in contrast to the dissection and controlling attitude of scientific historicism. This is so, even though Gadamer in his later debate with Habermas goes to considerable lengths in trying to distance himself from a blindly tradition-respecting conservatism and agreeing that the empirical sciences are “more than just an arbitrary language game” (Gadamer 1967, 245).⁸

⁸ The same goes for Gadamer’s replies to Betti and Hirsch, who, from the standpoint of more traditional, scientifically minded hermeneutics, have accused him of subjectivism. His assurance that philosophical hermeneutics is concerned with the very conditions for (every possible) understanding, and so does not pertain to methodological questions, does not prevent him presenting if not a methodological ideal, then a view of the nature with indirect methodological implications. This can be seen even from Gadamer’s actual response to Betti, that is in effect much less conciliatory as the diplomatic framing and popular resumes suggest (Gadamer 1965, 393), but also in countless observations related to specific instances of interpretation

By contrast, the early Heidegger of *Being and Time* seems to have been more optimistic with regards to the prospect of producing ground-breaking and genuinely revealing philosophical analyses in spite – or rather by means – of the recognition of historicity as an essential part of the human condition. (Some would say that this was what he came to later see as the fundamental flaw in his early existential philosophy, and the reason for his subsequent “turn” (*Kehre*) towards a less systematic approach to philosophy; this view seems supported by the fact that Heidegger broke off the work on *Being and Time* in the middle of his analyses of historicity and temporality). Yet already in *Being and Time*, Heidegger does himself suggest that there may be an intimate connection between historicity and historical thinking:

Wenn das Sein des Daseins grundsätzlich geschichtlich ist, dann bleibt offenbar jede faktische Wissenschaft diesem Geschehen verhaftet. Die Historie hat aber noch in einer eigenen und vorzüglichen Weise die Geschichtlichkeit des Daseins zur Voraussetzung (1986, 392)

Heidegger here claims that factual science is “in the grip of” historicity, seemingly indicating that it is *constrained* by its historical preconditions, much like Gadamer suggests. However, it becomes clear that this connection has consequences primarily for the science of *history*. Heidegger argues that history (as a science) must be orientated towards the existential possibilities of actual *Dasein* and therefore not strive for universality, but rather devote itself to objects and perspectives stemming from the existential (*existenziell*, that is, “ontically” and concretely existential) choice of *Dasein*’s historicity (Heidegger 1986, 395). Characteristically, however, historicity is here described as the primary subject; the choice is *Dasein*’s only in a secondary sense – it is the choice *of its historicity*, and so obviously strongly conditioned by it – an *alternativeless* choice.

These reflections on the relationship between historicity and historical conditioning and constraining raise two questions, one about the possibly negative and one about the possibly more positive implications of historicity. First, the question naturally arises whether thinking of historicity is not just a

(see e.g. Gadamer 1967, 254, where his criticism of “naïve objectivism” is coupled with very robust judgments as to better and worse interpretative strategies).

kind of *second-order* historicism – a relativization of historical relativism, which detects the blind spot in standard first-order relativism, the apparently irrelative perspective of the relativizer (or “historizer”), and then applies relativism to the relativizer herself. This seems to be what Nietzsche suggested with his famous triumphantly defiant remark in *Beyond Good and Evil*, about his own apparently relativist view that even the worldview of the natural sciences is just one possible interpretation among many others:

Gesetzt, dass auch dies nur Interpretation ist – und ihr werdet eifrig genug sein, dies einzuwenden? – nun, um so besser (Nietzsche 1977, 586 (Aphorism 22))

Nietzsche’s own example also shows, however, that the normative implications of such second-order historicism are also far from clear. It can be taken to entail a necessary intellectual humility, as Gadamer would have it, seeing it as limiting claims to validity and requiring a cautious, less self-assured attitude. But it can just as well be seen as liberating, as allowing one to stick to one’s preferred approach and push forward with it, as Nietzsche himself appears to have thought. For the recognition of multiple perspectives, of the partial and aspectual nature of conceptually articulated understanding, does not compel one to see at as “undermining” any particular perspective. Viewing an idea as *invalid* or *false* presupposes some kind of neutral standard from which to judge it as such. Moreover, the point that historicity does not rule out objective truth still holds, even if it is understood as a kind of second-order relativism. The doctrine of historicity could, though it is not itself exempt from the effects of the very phenomenon it describes, nevertheless be true. Moreover, perspectives can be more or less apt, more or less comprehensive, more or less fruitful and the like. There is nothing in the doctrine of historicity that implies that all views and ideas are equally right or good, just because they are all manifestations of historicity (or path dependent; paths can surely be better or worse).

It is highly plausible that all human understanding is historical in the generic (“historicity”-) sense outlined above (it is hardly conceivable how it could be otherwise). It is much more of an open question if and to what extent human understanding is conditioned by specific factors, be it certain traditions, cultural ideas or habits, languages or economic factors. It is likely that it is almost always to some degree, and sometimes strongly, conditioned by at least some

of these factors. But this falls short of a historical determinism, since it does not rule out that humans sometimes succeed in thinking independently of such specific factors.

Now to the potentially positive (though not necessarily welcome) normative implications of historicity. It is often suggested that historicity not only sets limits on (or effectively renders futile) “ahistorical”, systematic or “scientific” philosophizing, for example in the style of analytical philosophy – which is allegedly “naïve” and superficial, because it ignores its own presuppositions and limitations. According to this view, historicity also engenders a need to history more seriously, thus again forging a link between historicity and historical thinking more generally. And so it is widely assumed that in order to avoid ahistorical naivety and achieve sufficient depth in one’s philosophical thinking, one has to make it philosophically informed, perhaps to think “with” or “through” history. This is for example how Brian Leiter understands the implications of Gadamer’s hermeneutics (Leiter 2004).

Historical awareness can, however, take many different forms and have many different objects. Not only does the requirement to make one’s thinking philosophically informed leave it open which aspects of history should inform it, and in what way. It does not even require the conscientious philosopher to be aware of history in a scientific fashion, as this is arguably just one among many possible ways of “relating to it” or “taking it into account” – and according to Heidegger, for example, it is a derivate mode of understanding, unable to capture the most significant aspects of history.

Hence according to some versions of the idea that historicity engenders a need for historical awareness, it requires one to be specifically responsive to a in some sense more “essential” history (and ignore the mere “factual” circumstances). Two types of criteria for such essentiality have been suggested: According to Heidegger, it is *Dasein’s* own authentic, future-directed self-understanding that determines which aspects of history should be given significance – not as the result of any rational deliberation, but simply as a part of *Dasein’s* interested and resolute being-in-the-world, which implies a *taking over* of certain possibilities of authentic existing, that have been “handed down” – without, Heidegger stresses, necessarily experiencing them *as* such (Heidegger

1986, §74). Heidegger even speaks of this existential re-activation of history as *Dasein*'s "choosing its heroes", thus stressing its strongly normative character:

Daß die Entschlossenheit ausdrücklich um die Herkunft der Möglichkeiten weiß, auf die sie sich entwirft, ist nicht notwendig. Wohl aber liegt in der Zeitlichkeit des Daseins ... die Möglichkeit, das existenzielle Seinkönnen, darauf es sich entwirft, ausdrücklich aus dem überlieferten Daseinsverständnis zu holen. Die auf sich zurückkommende, sich überliefernde Entschlossenheit wird dann zur Wiederholung einer überkommenen Existenzmöglichkeit. Die Wiederholung ist die ausdrückliche Überlieferung, das heißt der Rückgang in Möglichkeiten des dagewesenen Daseins. Die eigentliche Wiederholung einer gewesenen Existenzmöglichkeit – dass das Dasein sich seinen Helden wählt – gründet existenzial in der vorlaufenden Entschlossenheit (Heidegger 1986, §74, 385).

The "selection criterion" is, ultimately, which aspects and representations resonate most with one's authentic self – with whom one is, and not least with whom one is about to become. Heidegger also speaks about resoluteness as the "*loyalty* of existence to [*Dasein*'s] own self" (Heidegger 1986, §75). Historicity obliges one to in some way remain faithful to, and continue, one's historical path, which Heidegger also describes simply as *fate* (*ibid.* §74).⁹ (Compare again the similarities with the notion of path dependence!). It should be noted, however, that Heidegger does not take this idea of loyalty to one's self to have the same sort of conservative implications as has, for example, Gadamer's idea of "belonging to history". Rather we have here two very different kinds of conservative thinking, both rooted in the notion of historicity, but with different normative conclusions being drawn. Heidegger suggests that one might remain loyal to oneself and one's heritage even when (and perhaps *only* when) acting more or less revolutionarily; forging bold interpretations and taking resolute and consequential decisions. Gadamer on the other hand, represents the more urbanised and civilized conservatism of the post WW2-era, by suggests a reserved and respectful appropriation of one's cultural heritage as the most appropriate response to it.

The idea that historical relevance should be determined by existential concerns might seem almost outrageously "subjective". But the idea that certain

⁹ For a general criticism of the idea that one's culturally formed identity should be seen as a "destiny", or otherwise grounds certain loyalties and duties, see Sen 2006.

ideas stand out as particularly fertile and representative of their time, and that some persons and personal moods or conditions are more sensitive and responsive to them, is more than just a Heideggerian idiosyncrasy. The same can be said of the related idea that by exhibiting this sensitivity, one might manage to get “in tune with” or “tap into” history (see Klausen 2014 for a variety of examples from 19th and 20th Century philosophy and literature). Nor is the idea epistemologically crazy. It is structurally similar to the fundamental notion of mainstream epistemology that certain appearances or sources are particularly indicative of the truth of a certain subject matter, and that some persons may be especially competent simply in virtue of their dispositions to notice and act on such indications, without necessarily knowing *that* or *why* this is so.

A more popular and seemingly less provocative criterion, albeit one that might seem less consistent with the basic notion of historicity, is that certain ideas and notions from the history of philosophy deserves particular attention because of their later influence, which also shows them to have been in some way more deeply or genuinely representative of the state of philosophy of their time. Gadamer’s idea of *Wirkungsgeschichte* forges such a connection between tradition, transmission of ideas and the “objective” significance. Thus, the history of the philosophy of the middle and later 19th Century is typically understood as having been dominated, or most adequately represented by, Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche, though these were much less read or immediately influential than, say, Lotze, Moleschott or Bain. A particularly vivid example of this view, based on a concern for both existential significance and *Wirkungsgeschichte*, is Karl Löwith’s notion of “*authentic* history” (Löwith 1991).¹⁰

Using the “test of history” to filter out those elements of past history that ought to inform one’s thinking seems, in effect, much like a *self-amplification* of historicity: A road has been taken, and this very same road is then used also to reconstruct the process that got us there. Heidegger’s approach seems more

¹⁰ For a criticism of Löwith’s dismissal of otherwise seemingly significant philosophical movements as a biased distortion of “actual” history, see Köhnke 1993.

subtle, and also allows for the possibility of deviating from the path laid down by tradition. His own project in *Being and Time* (and the lectures that were supposed to form part of the overall work) was thought to consist in first tracing the historical genesis of our contemporary understanding, with the aim of subsequently “destroying” this dependency on traditional notions and so getting closer to the phenomena “themselves”, which he intended to re-describe in a terminology that was less objectifying and more sensitive to the temporal constitution of human understanding (see e.g. Heidegger 1975, 461ff.). Such an attempt does seem to make sense; it is not precluded by historicity, which does not compel one to stick to any one particular path or treat well-established views with particular respect. On the other hand, both the destruction and the subsequent reconstruction will, of course, *be affected* by historicity.

We should not in general rule out that there might be more or less appropriate ways of responding to historicity. It is not inconceivable that some may be more in tune with history, or have been set on a more fruitful path than others, and are therefore also more competent at singling out those aspects of history that are most worthy of attention, or most existentially significant. But nor is it highly plausible that such epistemic authority is easy to determine, or that claims to it should be taken at face value.¹¹ The modesty and pluralism which seems to be, at least in some sense and to some degree, entailed by historicity, should also engender a cautious and non-judgmental stance towards sweeping metaphilosophical claims and aspirations that pretend to spring from it.

¹¹ I would, however, stand by my former claim, and not consider it impossible to determine such authority. It would be in keeping with the Aristotelian strand in Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s thinking to assume that people that are known to have been socialized and educated in a certain way (and exposed to a certain range of paradigmatic cases) have a special epistemic authority. Such a view could also be supported by apparent insights from epistemological reliabilism and naturalistic theories of expertise (e.g. Goldman 2001) and learning. But knowing who the real experts are may be considerably more difficult than showing that such experts might exist.

5. Conclusion

Historicity, as understood by Heidegger and Gadamer – and to some extent already by Husserl – is a very fundamental and generic phenomenon. In contrast to “ordinary” historical thinking, acknowledging it does not entail that thoughts and ideas should be seen in any particular historical context. Rather it implies that all contexts are equally historical.

It may seem to some that I have been trivializing the notion of historicity. But while I do object to the view that historicity somehow privileges studies informed by certain items of historical knowledge, I am more open to the suggestion that it does call for some – perhaps even considerable – degree of humility with respect to views and ideas that otherwise seem very convincing. Insight into historicity, as a universal and fundamental phenomenon, should make one less certain about “our” so-called “best theories” – not about whether they are really good, or even the best, according to some specific set of criteria, but about whether they are singularly superior and represent their subject matter uniquely and exhaustibly. It should also make one take seriously a wider range of hypotheses, sometimes also “rewinding” the reasoning that led us where we are (in their very different ways, this was what Husserl and Heidegger attempted; and with a reconstructive, and not just destructive or suspicious intention). This is a significant normative conclusion, albeit not one that suffices for dismissing any specific philosophical genre or approach. Philosophers well versed in the history of their discipline may rightly criticize present-day metaphysicians of ignoring problems or ideas that surfaced much earlier, and see them as condemned to repeat history, including its mistakes. But present-day metaphysicians may, with no less justice, criticize those of their colleagues who insist of thinking “with” history for not availing themselves of more recently developed conceptual tools and distinctions, which are just as much the workings of historicity, and might just as well – or sometimes just as badly – capture important aspects of reality.

It should also be noted that the more standard historical thinking, which I have otherwise set to one side, might also be quite legitimate and genuinely illuminating. For one thing, it is not ruled out by historicity any more than is any other specific approach or point of view. And though I have, with

Heidegger and Gadamer, diagnosed a certain naivety in historical thinking, it is quite possible to consider historicity irrelevant to one's specific aim, and stick to a more "mundane", straightforwardly historizing approach. While I think the generic notion of historicity undoubtedly captures a real phenomenon, it could be argued that its significance is less than thinkers in the phenomenological and hermeneutical tradition have assumed. And if it is fundamentally significant, this need not imply that it must render specific historical explanations irrelevant or false. I have myself briefly resorted to "historical thinking" in this article, for example by linking Gadamer's moderate form of conservatism with post-WW2 culture, and by seeing phenomenology in the larger context of an opposition to speculative philosophy. When accompanied by the recognition that such contextualization is itself only a partial and path-dependent (e.g. dependent on specific categorizations and descriptions of historical periods), such *ad hoc* historical thinking seems unproblematic. Like other views and interpretations, its claim to epistemic significance can be defended by invoking a variety of criteria, besides its own historical influence, like empirical adequacy, predictive and pragmatic usefulness, or intellectual fertility.

Insight into the ubiquity of historicity is not without consequences, but it is not the kind of insight that could streamline or discipline philosophy into certain formats or genres. Nor can it be used to dismiss certain questions as futile or certain topics as being no longer open to serious study. The latter would require precisely the ahistorical perspective from which to judge, and certain knowledge of the unique "course of history", which historicity seems to rule out. Perhaps surprisingly, the kind of philosophy that may be most difficult to square with historicity is the one whose practitioners are most keen to invoke it. For those who think that historicity strongly privileges their own preferred way of philosophizing (for example by constantly revisiting and quoting the top-two ancient Greek and the top-five German philosophers of the 18th to the 20th Century) still owe us a convincing argument for why this should be so – and still more an explanation of how this could be compatible with historicity.¹²

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