

Time Materialized – Broaching the Question of Objective Historicity

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ABSTRACT: The paper unfolds a preliminary theory of so-called *objective* or *ontological historicity*, that is to say, a theory of historicity which is not founded in the human subject. The article does this by deriving a notion of historicity from classical ontology by drawing upon figures such as Aristotle, Cusanus, Leibniz and Kant. One of the leading examples analysed throughout the paper is the museal object, which seems to embody a certain aporia between an immediate presence and the presence of a bygone era and time. It is argued that the historical objects *qua* historical objects exhibit a certain monadic quality, but that the relation between the different aspects of the object remain an irreconcilable one.

*Introduction*¹

Throughout the history of philosophy, the discussion of the question of historicity has relied upon a paradigm, which sharply distinguishes between human and natural history as two distinct domains.² In virtue of its freedom and reason, only humankind, so the argument goes, can be said to possess an “open” or indeterminate relationship to its history, and this ability to freely engage with its own history, i.e. a certain agency, is necessary for something to constitute a historical being. The happening of events only in part constitutes history; it is through the narratives, with which we engage with these events, that genuine development occurs. For this reason, nature cannot properly be characterized as historical since it does not develop but rather “occurs” in accordance with the law of causality. Therefore, history is limited to a distinctly

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² Cf. Rossi (1987).

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human mode of being and the manufactured artefacts stemming from this.³ This is, in short, the pattern of thought that philosophy of historicity in modern time has ascribed to, though the thought of a universal history has waned in favour of a greater focus on the historicity of human existence as is the case in the hermeneutical and phenomenological traditions.

However, the history of philosophy harbours another tradition that, in an indirect fashion, has grappled with the question of historicity. It has its roots in the philosophy of Aristotle, Cusanus, Leibniz and Kant and appears under the guise of classical ontology. This tradition, however, has lived somewhat of a reclusive existence in relation to the question of historicity due to the fact that it never explicitly sought to answer what historicity is; for good reasons since the question first explicitly emerged around the time of the enlightenment. New trends in thinking have, however, revitalized these theories. The distinction between human versus natural history has increasingly proven problematic. Thinkers such as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009: 201) have pointed out that the very notion of the Anthropocene seems to undermine the distinction since mankind's historical mode of being is, in a fateful way, brought to bear on nature itself and therefore cannot be neatly separated from it.

Therefore, it seems a legitimate question whether there is such a phenomenon as “objective” or “ontological” historicity, i.e. a phenomenon of historicity which does not have its locus in human existence. The purpose of this article is to conduct a preliminary study into the question of historicity as an ontological one in order to gain both a clearer conceptual understanding of what the notion entails as well as an understanding of the phenomenon of historicity. The ambition is, simply put, to analyse *in what sense something can be said to be historical*. For this purpose, I will utilize classical ontology – as long as possible, for it too has its limits with regard to the question of historicity that it, for good reasons, could not explicitly seek to answer – as a counterpart to the “subjective” notion of historicity.

³ An extremely widespread assumption, but cf. for example (Heidegger 2006 §74, Dilthey 1999: 81).

The Conception of the Historical in Classical Ontology

The first ontological determination of history stems from Aristotle, more precisely, from the *Poetics* in a comparison between the fields of history and poetry as empirical disciplines. In this short but telling passage, Aristotle remarks that history differs from poetry in: “(...) that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars” (*Poet.* 1451b). These definitions contain two ontological specifications of the historical: 1) that, which is historical, is a *something*, an event, an object or, to use a term from classical ontology, a *res*, a thing. 2) This *thing* is *particular*, which in Aristotelian ontology entails that it cannot be the object of cognition, since only *universals*, the forms, can be cognized by reason. This is the reason why many philosophers have rejected the possibility of constructing a “philosophical science of history”, because, according to Kant: “Die historische Erkenntnis ist *cognition ex datis*, die rationale aber *cognition ex principiis*” (Kant 1998: A836). As a category, the historical contains *the individually given*, not universals or general principles, and, as the scholastic dictum goes, the “*individuum est ineffabile*” (Ginzburg 1999: 90).

The historical as such therefore stems from the contingent, ontological reality. This determination is supported by the etymological origins of the word “history”, itself a deviation of the Greek word “*historia*”, which: “(...) betegner den viden, man har opnået ved selvsyn, eller som man har erkyndiget sig om gennem øjenvitner, altså har fået fortalt” (Hass 2003: 223).⁴ The historical cannot, precisely because it is particular and contingent, be the object of cognition but solely the object of experience. The historical is the experientially ascertainable and factual and therefore falls inside the realm of the empirical. In Leibniz’ terminology, historic facts are *vérités de fait* rather than *vérités de raison*.

But the historical and the empirical are not equivalent in so far as the former cannot be identified with the immediately present phenomena, according to Aristotle’s definition. The historical is, on the other hand, the

⁴ Roughly translated: “(...) designates the knowledge, that one has acquired by experience, or that one has obtained through eye witnesses, i.e. has been told.”

already-past, bygone or absent phenomena – that which has been but is no more. Therefore, *in nuce*, “the historical” refers to the particular and contingent *res* that has been but is no more while still being given as a *datum*.⁵

The Aporia of Historicity

What is this historical thing, which is both *given* while somehow still pertaining to the past? And what is given through it? The notion of the *datum*, the given, is by no means a simple concept and cannot be exhaustively unfolded in this context. Prior to the critical philosophy of Kant, the term had a certain air of that which has already been bestowed, that which is *already there* regardless of any human involvement or tampering – the same meaning at play in the English idiom “that’s a given”, i.e. something which is naturally and self-evidently the case. After the turn to critical philosophy, however, the given rather comes to mean that which *presents itself* and *makes its presence known*, especially evident in the phenomenological notion of the *phenomena* (cf e.g. Heidegger 2006: §7), but furthermore comes to designate *the particular way in which* the given is given (cf. Marion 2002), *how* and to *whom* it presents itself. This is a discussion of great import. What we are here discussing, however, is the ontological question – it concerns the historical objects *as* objects, as a certain *res* – that is not to say that the phenomenological givenness of the historical object is irrelevant, but it is secondary to the primordial sense of the given, which I am here concerned with.

The historical is, according to the determinations of the historical above, ontologically given; it is a *thing* of a certain kind, but a thing which simultaneously fundamentally relates to the past. Is this, however, not a contradiction in terms? Conventional logic would state that the thing either *is* or *is not*: if it is of the past *then it no longer is*, if it still is *then it is no longer of the past*. Both properties cannot obtain at the same time. The historical object, however, invites us to think both aspects of the object at the same time: that it *is* while *simultaneously* being of the past. This paradox or *aporia* lies at the heart of the matter regarding the question of objective historicity.

⁵ A view that is quite reminiscent of the every-day conception of the historical that Heidegger unfolds in *Sein und Zeit* (2006: §72).

The Museal Object

The phenomenon of ontological historicity is perhaps easiest to illustrate through an example, and one that is quite often evoked by philosophers is the *museal object*: *in what sense are the objects of museums historical?* In itself, as an object, the object of the museum simply *is* and is neither more nor less than its immediate appearance. On reflection, however, this cannot be the case; if it were, there would be no difference between the museal object and any ordinary object besides the arbitrary choice to make the former an object of history and the latter not. Hegel formulates the problem of the museal object as follows:

Sie sind nun das, was sie für uns sind, - vom Baume gebrochene schöne Früchte, ein freundliches Schicksal reichte sie uns dar, wie ein Mädchen jene Früchte präsentiert; es gibt nicht das wirkliche Leben ihres Daseins, nicht den Baum, der sie trug, nicht die Erde und die Elemente, die ihre Substanz, noch das Klima, das ihre Bestimmtheit ausmachte, oder den Wechsel der Jahreszeiten, die den Prozess ihres Werden beherrschten. – So gibt das Schicksal uns mit den Werken jener Kunst nicht ihre Welt, nicht den Frühling und Sommer des sittlichen Lebens, worin sie blühten und reiften, sondern allein die eingehüllte Erinnerung dieser Wirklichkeit (Hegel 1988: 490-491).

On the one hand, the museal object is nothing more than what it immediately is, something present, on the other hand, something additional clings to it, the "eingehüllte Erinnerung" of a reality that no longer is but still haunts the object. Hegel's notion is steeped in the aforementioned subjective notion of historicity; the objects of historic import are what they are "für uns", for us – but Hegel simultaneously evokes the notion of "Wirklichkeit" and it is this latter part of the equation, which is of interest in this context.

With the mention of "Wirklichkeit" or reality, we find ourselves in the realm of classical ontology. According to Hegel, the historical *res* is bound to an already bygone *realitas* and is therefore split between two different modes of being, being not only given as an immediate and present object, but also as a "messenger" or a trace of a bygone era. Yet the historicity of the museal object cannot – as per Aristotelian ontology (Aris. *Metaph.* 1032a) – be reduced to either being produced or producing, being conditioned or conditioning, since the historicity of the object does not rely upon the fact that one can, by an external reflection, follow the links in the causal relations that constitute the

object. The essence of the museal object is that this absence or reminiscence of something past is given *through* the presence of the object.

To put it differently: in the museal object there is an absence that is constitutive of its essence, and this absence is positively cognized. It constitutes an original context that the object seems torn out of, which reveals that a “was” clings to this “is”. The question that Hegel invites us to reflect upon in the above-mentioned quotation, is whether this givenness of an absence is thinkable without an external spectator which induces this reflection into the matter. To presume this, however, would be to turn things upside down: the object of the museum is not historical because it takes part in a museal context; it takes part in a museal context because it is historical.⁶ The fact that the object is relevant and meaningful as a token of a bygone era presupposes that we do not construct its entire being, but that we reconstruct an intrinsic past of the object. With a Proustian phrase, one could say that the historical object is like a container, which is more than its contents (Proust 2013: 229).

I have chosen the museal object because it is paradigmatic to the question of historicity, though this, by no means, means that it is *sui generis*. In the phenomena of *ruins*, one finds a similar structure; in works of art as well. Even phenomena such as withered leaves seem to display this dynamic in so far as they carry an implicit reference to a reality, which has been, but is no more. Biological phenomena seem especially to display this dynamic, not just in relation to the already bygone but also to what is to come: the seed is, in itself, a sign or symbol of what is to come, without this being reducible to a question of teleology or causality.

According to Aristotle, a substance is the quintessence of an object’s positive qualities, its “what-ness” or, according to the categories, the different ways in which the object can be. The historical *res*, however, is, according to the analysis, not defined by its current properties, but by what it already has been. To put it differently, a certain negativity pertains to the historical object; a rift,

⁶ It might be objected that modern museums are littered with all sorts of reconstructions of historic phenomena and that these receive their historic relevance namely through a museal context. These simulacra, however, have a “parasitic” existence, so to speak; as simulations, they carry an implicit reference to the “real” phenomena that they emulate; I suggest that it is through this emulation that they receive their historical character, not by taking place in a museal context.

an abyss (in German: “Abgrund”) or a remnant that in part constitutes the givenness of the object. What defines the historical object is both an element of “bygoneness” or absence as well as a “presentness” and presence. This negativity, however, does not fade into obscurity but is positively cognized as an essential property of the object.

Objective Historicity?

In *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger reflects on the historicity of the museal object, but arrives at the conclusion that the ontological problem of historicity is founded in an existential, i.e. human problematic (Heidegger 2006: §74):

Primär geschichtlich – behaupten wir – ist das Dasein. *Sekundär* geschichtlich aber das innerweltliche begegnende, nicht nur das zuhandene Zeug im weitesten Sinne, sondern auch die Umweltnatur als ’geschichtlicher Boden’ (ibid: §73).

Heidegger then goes on to say:

Zeug und Werk, Bücher zum Beispiel haben ihre ‚Schicksale’, Bauwerke und Institutionen haben ihre Geschichte. Aber auch die Natur ist geschichtlich. Zwar gerade *nicht*, sofern wir von ‚Naturgeschichte’ sprechen; wohl dagegen als Landschaft, Ansiedlungs-, Ausbeutungsgebiet, als Schlachtfeld und Kultstätte (ibid: §75).

Only in a derivative fashion can objects be said to be historical because what defines historicity is exactly “In-der-Welt-sein”. This entails that only Dasein and what Dasein engages with, i.e. cultural artefacts and nature “spoiled” by human involvement, can be characterized as historical.

Is this historicity, i.e. the interplay between what is bygone and what is present in the historical objects, an expression of an immanent ontological structure, or is it a consequence of an external reflection, which imbues the objects with a historical character? Or, in case one admits that the objects are historical in themselves, does the historical character stem from the fact that they have been in contact with humans, or, to put it differently, that they are an expression of “spiritualized matter”?

None of the answers seem entirely satisfactory. On the one hand, the absence that characterizes the historical object seems to be conditioned by, as Hegel says, the ground, the elements and the life that the objects were once a part of and as such can only be said to be historical, in so far as they took part of a now bygone era and culture. On the other hand, the relevance of the museal

object is not founded in the fact that one “extorts” a history from it that is fundamentally foreign to the object, but that the object, in itself, seems to elicit or provoke a reflection on an inherent absence or negativity.

Perhaps the problem needs to be approached in a different manner. Perhaps we need to address *how* this “mechanism” of historicity “takes place”, provided it can be characterized as such. According to the analysis, one of the most striking characteristics is that the *serialism*, that is commonly highlighted as an essential property of historicity, seems to be sublated or rather moved to a different sphere. Roughly put, the efforts of historicism to put forth a general history of the world relies on the presupposition that the historic chain of events is ruled by a causality, which can be reconstructed by an analysis of “wie es eigentlich gewesen”, as Ranke says. In other words, that there is a seriality in the history of the world that every historical phenomenon partakes in. Exactly this historical continuum seems sublated in objective historical phenomena, *in casu* the museal object, because the seriality is concentrated in a single point that seems to contain a certain co-existence between the absent and the present.

One could, however, object that this interpretation seems to dilute our notion of historicity. Traditionally, philosophers have distinguished between the appearance of an object and its essence, or, as Hegel puts it, that “Sein ist Schein”⁷ (Hegel 1999: 9). Therefore, it might seem that the *differentia specifica* between the notion of objects from classical ontology and the notion of historicity developed in this context might vanish. Admittedly, both the ontological as well as the historical objects seem to display a structure, wherein something “ideal” manifests itself in something concrete. On an “ontic” level, however, there is a *world* of difference; what characterizes the historical object is *actualized being*. In other words, the historicity of the historical object consists in a *modality* of being, wherein the potentiality of an object’s different ways of being has already been established in a specific process. This process seems, in a certain way, to be embedded in and essential to the object: *the objects are what they have been*. An excess or surplus product therefore clings to the historical object which makes it more than its immediate appearance. This excess,

⁷ It must be mentioned, however, that Hegel’s conception of this principle is more dialectical than aporetic but getting into the nitty gritty of the Hegelian dialectic would bring this paper too far off-topic.

however, is constituted by the object's already actualized being without the object being solely reducible to this.

The distinction between temporality and historicity is still unclear, however. Objects can have a past – or a certain *fate*, as both Hegel and Heidegger put it – without having a history, but wherein is the difference between a temporal and historical process? If ontological historicity is constituted by an interplay between presentism and historicity, the historical object has a certain *a-topical* character, in so far as it is “at home” in different contexts, so to speak. One of the most striking features of the museal object is that the already-actualized past is an intrinsic property of the object, but simultaneously, this original context sets the object apart from the future that has yet to be actualized, to which the object “doesn't belong”; where the object will be “just” the “eingehüllte Erinnerung” of a long-lost past.

I suggest the following: the yet-to-be actualized future is an intrinsic property of the historical object, constituted by the object's ties to an original context, just as the already actualized past is a feature of the present object. In other words, the being of the historical object entails a perspectival aspect that the temporal event does not. The temporal event is “constrained” and determined by its place in the causal chain of events. Temporal seriality, in other words, seems to constitute the temporal event, while the historical object seems to be characterized by a certain *a-topical* property.

I do not wish to exaggerate or push this argument excessively; at least, this *a-topical* feature needs to be properly interpreted. Several philosophers have stressed the so-called *Geschehenscharakter* of history, the certain way in which it *occurs*. Events *have* unfolded, things *have* turned out a certain way and cannot be changed. *Irreversibility*, in other words, seems an essential feature of historicity. It is on the basis of this irreversibility that a work of art, for example, can seem hopelessly out-dated, another work can be timely, while a third can appear to be ahead of its time. Is this not evidence that the historical object is completely embedded in a certain context and therefore not *a-topical*? This is, however, too literal an interpretation. The historical object is *a-topical* because the intrinsic context *does not expire*; it “haunts” the object even when the context

itself no longer is. We might be ignorant of what the context is, but this is an empirical rather than ontological question.

The thesis of the a-topical nature of historicity is less idiosyncratic than it might appear at first glance. Reinhart Koselleck, for example, has shown that the connection between the historical and the bygone as such is – barring Aristotle and others – a relatively new tendency, which emerged at the time when history was first consolidated as a discipline at the universities. Koselleck cites Novalis, who lived before this consolidation,⁸ for the view that an overview of extensive chains of historic events would enable one to notice: “(...) *die geheime Verkettung des Ehemaligen und Künftigen, und lernt die Geschichte aus Hoffnung und Erinnerung zusammensetzen*” (Koselleck 2010: 352-353). Koselleck goes on to say:

’Geschichte’ hatte damals noch nicht, wie später im Zeigen ihrer wissenschaftlichen Aufbereitung, vorzüglich die Vergangenheit gemeint, sondern sie zielte auf jene geheime Verknüpfung von Ehemaligem und Künftigem, deren Zusammenhang nur zu erkennen ist, wenn man gelernt hat, die Geschichte aus den beiden Seinsweisen der Erinnerung und der Hoffnung zusammenzufügen (ibid: 353).

Walter Benjamin emphasizes a similar point, when he, in the theses on the philosophy of history, writes:

Aber kein Tatbestand ist als Ursache eben darum bereits ein historischer (...) Der Historiker, der davon ausgeht, hört auf, sich die Abfolge von Begebenheiten durch die Finger laufen zu lassen wie einen Rosenkranz. (...) Er begründet so einen Begriff der Gegenwart als der ’Jetztzeit’, in welcher Splitter der messianischen eingesprenzt sind (Benjamin 1974: Anhang A).

Furthermore, both philosophers emphasize a certain notion of time and history, which contrasts the “empty”, homogenous time with the so-called “proper” or “fulfilled” time (ibid: XIV & Koselleck 2010: 356, even though the latter uses a somewhat different terminology).

Kairos and Chronos

The notion of proper, fulfilled time derives from Christian thought, to be more precise, the letters of Saint Paul, while the notion of empty time derives from the natural and historical sciences. Though I do not wish to engage in biblical

⁸ Although, admittedly, not long before.

exegesis, both Koselleck's and Benjamin's use of the concept of fulfilled time (in ancient Greek: *kairos*) has a somewhat different ring to it than Paul's. Paul primarily utilizes the concept while describing, for example, the coming of Christ or the point in a human being's life when the possibility of a radical shift in its existence is present (cf. Gal. 4,4 & Eph. 5,4). This particular conception of time is also referred to as the "critical" or "opportune" moment, which is contrasted by the concept of *chronos*, i.e. what we normally associate with time: the passing of time, the shifting of the seasons etc. By utilizing the term *kairos* instead of *chronos*, Paul is essentially invoking a notion of *qualitatively differentiated* time. The coming of Christ is not only the fulfilment of the law, i.e. the covenant between the Jews and God, which, from that point in time, must be considered a thing of the past, but is simultaneously the harbinger of what is to come, i.e. salvation from sin and temporal existence. Kairos is therefore constituted by salvation from the past as well as the messianic message of what is to come, concentrated in the current moment in time.

This conception of time is a stark contrast to what Benjamin and Koselleck refer to as the "homogenous time", which, on the surface, seems to share certain similarities with the concept of *kairos*. Koyré explicates this relation when he distinguishes between the antique notion of time and the modern world's, between "the world of more-or-less" and "the universe of precision" (Koyré 1998: 131). Even though the church fathers distinguished between *kairos* and *chronos*, the latter was influenced by the experience of time that characterized the ancient life world, namely the experience that life was attuned to and determined by the passing of days, seasons and years – as the author of the *Ecclesiastes* puts it:

There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build (...)
(3,1-8).

The lifeworld of ancient times had an intrinsic “rhythm”, and every moment in life a part in this rhythm. In the transition from the world of more-and-less to the universe of precision, i.e. from approximately the start of the scientific revolution to Galilei, the concept of time grows ever more independent of the immediate lifeworld because of the need for reliable methods of measuring time. Time becomes “mathematized” and through this process a different notion of time emerges, wherein every point or moment in time becomes homogenous, abstract, and fit into a causal process like pearls on a string. The scientific revolution, therefore, paves the way for a formalized and quantitative notion of time.

The opposition is, therefore, between homogenous time and time construed as *kairos*, where Benjamin’s and Koselleck’s animosity is directed at the former rather than time understood as *chronos*. To reduce the historical to a single moment in the empty, homogenous time would *de facto* equate to reducing the historical to a temporal atom, whose only significance would be its interplay with other temporal atoms. It is precisely for this reason that a notion of time as homogenous and quantitative fails to grasp the significance of objective historicity. If the analysis of the museal object stands to reason, then the historical object cannot be reduced to a mere temporal atom. On the contrary, the object more closely resembles a *monad* than an atom, to utilize Leibniz’ terminology. The historical object contains and expresses *a certain world from a specific perspective*.

Given that historicity is a subcategory of and derives from temporality, as Heidegger explicitly states, there must be a certain overlap between temporality and historicity. If we, for the moment being, assume a very minimal and non-exhaustive definition of temporality, that takes seriality to be a crucial part of it, then historicity must also contain an element of seriality. The seriality has not disappeared but has rather been sublated as an immanent or intrinsic structure in the historical object. In this sense, historicity more closely resembles the notion of time as *kairos*, wherein past, present and future is concentrated in a single moment in time, while temporality, on the other hand, is marked by the unfolding of qualitatively homogenous time. In his work on Saint Paul, Agamben cites the *Corpus Hippocraticum* for the following definition of *kairos*

and *chronos*, which elegantly summarizes the characterization: “*chronos* is that in which there is *kairos*, and *kairos* is that in which there is little *chronos*” (Agamben 2005: 68).

In the Hippocratic theory, the concept of *kairos* has its own technical meaning, which confirms the above. Here the concept appears under the guise of the medical *crisis*, which is the term for the (critical) moment in the disease process, wherein the doctor has exhausted all potential cures or medical procedures, and the outcome of the disease process and the fate of the patient are uncertain: the patient will either succumb or go into remission. The crisis refers to the moment which all time or no time at all hinges upon. That is the reason why the crisis contains “little *chronos*”, for everything is concentrated in the same moment – the “critical” or “fateful” moment that comprises time, in so far as everything has led up to it and all that is to come hinges upon it.

Complicatio & Explicatio

To sum up: if we abstract the properties of the historicity of the museal object to a more general thesis, the following traits seem to be central. That, which can be determined as historical, possesses “self-sufficiency” or is “self-contained” in the sense that its historicity is not founded in being merely a link in a chain of events. The a-topical nature stems from the already actualized being embedded in the historical object; an implicit reference to a bygone context. What is bygone, what is present, and what is to come is, somehow, present at hand in the historical object.

Above, I mentioned that the historical objects – museal object, works of art etc. – as singularities exhibit a monadic quality. I do not wish to propagate as far-reaching a thesis as Leibniz’ that historical objects as monads contain and express the entire universe, but rather the more minimal thesis that they are “containers”⁹ of actualized being. This actualized being refers not only to the chain of events on which the object depends. If that were the case, the object wouldn’t be able to exhibit a paradigmatic quality; it wouldn’t be representative of a certain time and life world. Yet that is exactly what the museal object is:

⁹ This is, of course, a spatial metaphor and therefore not entirely fitting; one cannot, so to speak, open the lid of the historical object and out pops the historical context. The history of the object is instead given through its presence, as previously stated.

representative. In itself, a stone axe from the Stone Age, for example, can be a rather banal object, being “merely” a shaped stone but as an expression of a certain epoch it carries an altogether different significance. It expresses the limits and possibilities of an era, the lifeworld of the people who crafted and utilized the axe etc. The historical object is *time materialized*: the quintessence of a world expressed from a certain perspective. The historical, therefore, has a dual mode of being, being neither reducible to the purely bygone nor the present, the purely perspectival or general, but at the same time being either-or and more-than both. By what ontological “mechanism” can both traits co-exist in the historical objects?

Though I can only hint at it in this context, Nicolaus Cusanus operates with an insightful distinction in his ontology. According to Cusanus, the fundamental ontological property of all being is the so-called *similitudo*, roughly translated, a *similarity*. Similarities are relations and therefore require at least two comparable elements. For a platonic philosopher, this is pre-eminently valid of the relation between *principium* and *principiata*, between essences or ideas and phenomena. What is particularly interesting in this context, is the logical principle that Cusanus develops to explain the *similitudo*. Given that the same *principium* is the foundation of several manifestations, then the specific *principiata* must, in a certain sense, be contained within the *principium* and vice versa; the *principiata* must be differentiations of that which is immanently contained in the *principium*. In the terminology of Cusanus, this logical distinction is called the *complicatio*, the “enfolded”, and the *explicatio*, the “unfolded”, which, for a Christian neo-platonic philosopher, must characterize the relation between God and world to an eminent degree.

It is this logical principle that I wish to focus on in this context. In the above, I have alluded to this, which can now be stated more unequivocally: *historical being is actualized being and time in a contracted form*, which implies that what once unfolded in real time exists in the historical object as an enfolded structure. Maintaining this principle, the distinction between historicity and temporality does not collapse; for the *differentia specifica* is that historicity implies enfolded time, while temporality entails unfolded time. The historicity of objects is

founded in the actualized being, embedded in the objects, which “breaks forth” from their appearance.

Classical ontology emphasizes the particularity and givenness of the historical to which must be added the property of universality *qua* enfolded world. What this amounts to, is that *the historical is constituted by the interplay between the perspectival and universal*. Both aspects co-exist in the historical in virtue of a *complicatio* and *explicatio*, for what it entails to be enfolded in this sense, is, that what formerly constituted an external whole is contracted in such a way that it becomes singular. Like the fulfilled time, which contracted future, past and present in the same event, the enfolded structure in the historical object seems to contract a number of aspects in the same singularity, which transcends before and after and is more than the sum of its parts; this aspect, however, *is only given negatively*, as reminiscences and remnants that cling to the object. It is this ambiguity that constitutes the aporia of the historical object.

Conclusion

The historical object is in turn both simple and complex, as both Leibniz and Cusanus would posit – simple, because the object is “nothing more” than its appearance or immediate being; complex, because the reminiscences, the “eingehüllte Erinnerung”, of a lost reality emerges from this immediate being. In a passage in the play *Die natürliche Tochter*, Goethe makes his character Eugenie say the very striking, famous lines:

Der Schein, was ist er, dem das Wesen fehlt?

Das Wesen, wär' es, wenn es nicht erschiene?

(cited from Øhrgaard 1999: 134)

Bracketing the context of the quotation, what Goethe here seems to imply is that, while essences and the appearances of these manifest themselves through each other, the aspects never fully reconcile. The relation is one of unrest and non-coincidence rather than harmonious co-existence. This seems a fitting metaphor for the historical object whose aspects remain autonomous as the presence of an absence and the absence of a presence – different expressions of a complex monadic nature. Perhaps this aporia, however, owes to the primary examples investigated in this context, i.e. the museal object and

the work of art; as expressions of “sedimented” human subjectivity, their nature is such that they are not reducible to a mere lifeless object. Perhaps, then, it is fitting, considering the topic of the investigation at hand, that the paper should end on an aporetic note – the question of objective historicity remains an open question, but one that recent events have made relevant anew.

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