

4 On being historical

The conference on “Thinking, Recording and Writing History in the Ancient World”¹ brought together specialists from many areas of ancient studies. I was asked to contribute a theoretical perspective based on my work in the philosophy of history. As a non-specialist often embarrassed, frankly, by the lack of concreteness and the lofty generality often (correctly) associated with my (non-) discipline, I found this task daunting before the conference; it is even more so afterward. I was overwhelmed by the richness of detail and the depth of reflection evident in the contributions of the other participants in this conference. Can the philosophy of history really contribute anything of value to this discussion?

Before I sink too deep into self-deprecation—this Socratic modesty is often thought disingenuous—I will assert that a general philosophical perspective can be of great value, provided it is not too lofty. By this I mean that it can be useful to gather together the various strands of historical inquiry and venture some general observations about what they all share and how they differ. It can also be helpful to bring to the surface what they all, at some level, take for granted, perhaps without realizing it. But the philosophical reflection has to draw from their work, not vice versa. Whether historians have anything to gain from the sort of reflection I propose, only they can say. For my part I can only say that my own thinking about history was deeply affected and enriched by what I learned from this conference.

“Philosophy of history,” as a coherent set of questions and concerns, emerged in the modern West at about the same time that “history” itself became a distinct and respectable academic discipline, that is, in the early 19th century. It has also been conceptually dependent on the knowledge provided by the new discipline of history, and this is reflected in the two kinds of questions the philosophy of history has asked:

First, given the past as we now reliably know it, thanks to the professional historians, does the course of history as a whole make sense?—that is, does it make moral sense? Is it a jumble of events without moral meaning, or

worse, as it often seems (and as Gibbon thought), is it just a sequence of follies and atrocities? Hegel famously wrote:

But as we contemplate history as the slaughter-bench, on which the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states, and the virtues of individuals were sacrificed, the question necessarily comes to mind: What was the ultimate goal for which these monstrous sacrifices were made?

(Hegel 1988, 24)

This search for moral sense can rightly be called metaphysical, and perhaps even theological, as pursued by Hegel and others.

A second line of inquiry is not metaphysical but epistemological. Given the past as we know it, again thanks to the historical profession, *how* do we know it, how reliable is our knowledge, and how far does it extend? What is the evidence on which such knowledge is based, and what inferences must be performed to arrive at it? While the metaphysical/moral/theological approach to history has been denounced as “speculative” and empty, the epistemology of history, begun by the neo-Kantians in the 19th century and continued by the analytic philosophers of the 20th century, has achieved some measure of respectability.

But there is a deeper question not addressed by these two philosophical approaches, one whose answer underlies what they ask. Both approaches assume not only that knowledge of the past is given to us by historians, but also that the past matters to us enough to make us interested in knowing about it. But why does the past matter to us at all? Either explicitly or implicitly, many of the contributions to this conference raise this question. It is the main question behind the approach to history that I outlined in my presentation, where I focused on the concept of *Geschichtlichkeit*. This broadly theoretical or philosophical question, which derives from the historical school, from Dilthey and from the phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions of the 20th century, differs from both the metaphysics of history and the epistemology of historical knowledge. Its question is not *What is history?* or *How do we know history?* but rather *What is it to be historical?* Dilthey wrote that

we are historical beings first, before we are observers of history, and only because we are the former do we become the latter. . . The historical world is always there, and the individual not only observes it from the outside but is intertwined with it

(Dilthey 2002, 297)

Dilthey and his successors think that the past matters to us because we are somehow deeply historical beings, and they want to know what it means to be a “historical being,” and in what sense we are intertwined with

history. They want to know how history is encountered, how it enters our lives, and in what forms of consciousness and experience it does so. Thus they are asking questions not so much about historical knowledge as about both historical experience and historical being. And they want to know why this should lead us to become observers of history. Rather than assuming our interest in the past, they are asking why we should be interested in the past at all. In the original version of my paper I took up these questions and sketched very general answers to at least some of them, following a broadly phenomenological path. In this published version, I want to ask how my findings might square with some of the things I learned at this conference.

Christian Oberländer remarked at the end of his paper (though no longer of his published chapter that has a somewhat different focus), “All in all, we find that in ancient Japan—as in other ancient societies—there was no particular interest in history as such.” On the surface this comment might seem to undermine the basic premise of the whole conference, which is that “thinking, recording and writing history” did take place in the many cultures of the ancient world discussed by the participants. But the crucial part of Oberländer’s statement, I think, is found in the words “as such.” To be interested in “history as such” is to believe that the past matters for its own sake, and that is why it is worthy of knowing. This is a default assumption, I would suggest, of the modern era in which the discipline of history exists.

The emergence of this discipline in the 19th century is one expression of the fact that the past did in fact come to matter as such and to be considered worth knowing. But one of the great lessons of this conference for me was the recognition that it has not always been so. If there was indeed thinking, recording, and writing of history in many societies discussed at the conference, it was because the past mattered, not “as such,” but for some reason beyond itself. In other words, it is not enough to say that the past simply “matters”; one must ask *how* it matters. This is the question implied by Oberländer’s remark.

This is a question that was addressed either directly or indirectly by many conference participants. We discovered that in ancient societies the past was appealed to for many reasons: to establish or reestablish *legitimacy* for a particular ruler or class or family of rulers (Schneider on Egypt, Oberländer on Japan); to trace the *origin* of a people, practice, or institution (Brettler on ancient Israel); to find *stability* in the face of rapid or incomprehensible change (Grethlein on ancient Greece); as part of *ritual* observances (Papioannou on Byzantium, Durrant on China); and to provide *models* of meritorious conduct (Neelis on Buddhism, Mehl on Rome). Thus the past is even seen to have purely instrumental value (as Diel puts it in her chapter on the Aztecs), especially in the service of political power. In its ritualistic, religious, or commemorative sense, it serves needs that perhaps lie beyond the political, helping to anchor society in the world in the face of constant threats of dissolution.

Part of the modern “historical consciousness” that leads us to take an interest in the past for its own sake has to do with the *difference* of the past. It matters *because* it is different from the present; its otherness is what appeals to us. By contrast, according to Mehl, “The Romans were interested in the past, not because they regarded it as being different from the present but, to the contrary, because they considered both qualitatively equal.” And this view would be shared by all those who look to the past for stability and for protection against contingency. If past and present manifest continuity rather than change, then we have more reason to hope for the same in the future.

The idea that the past is significantly different from the present, and that the future is different from the present as well, seems to be found in the Jewish concern with origins. While Marc Brettler’s chapter on the historical character of the Hebrew Bible identifies many purposes behind the ancient texts—the search for legitimacy, political propaganda, and religious advocacy—it stresses above all their etioloical character: the search for origins and explanations of the present in an account of a distant and not-so-distant past, in divine and human actions. The search for causes is notably lacking in many of the other traditions and is in some ways incompatible with a view of the past in terms of constant and unchanging patterns. Thus (in a paper that was ultimately not offered for publication) Marc Zender commented that Mayan texts concern questions of *who, what, where, when*, but never *why*? The emphasis on difference—change—rather than sameness goes hand in hand with the stress on etiology. Brettler, in addition, makes much use of the term “narrative” in describing the biblical texts, a term also used especially of Greek or Chinese accounts but conspicuously lacking, it must be noted, in those of many other traditions, and the concept of narrative is conceptually linked to change that occurs over time. The importance in Christian thought of unique, historical events, narrated after the fact, in addition to the need for continuity with Old Testament prophesy (Eve-Marie Becker), seems to be continued in the Byzantine “obsession” (Papaioannou) with its Greco-Roman as well as Christian and Judaic past. If we add to this the Islamic historical writings described at the conference by Chase Robinson and in the published chapter by Andrew Marsham, we seem to find support for the widely accepted view that the Western concern with history “as such” has its origin in Judaic scriptural writings and in the Christian and Islamic traditions that appropriated them and integrated them into their own thought.

Of course, this contrast between history “as such” and the instrumental view of the past should not blind us to the fact that the past has been used for political, ideological, and social purposes in all traditions, including our own, and continues to be so used up to the present day. Still, the emergence of the interest in the past for its own sake, in the historical consciousness of 19th-century Europe, reveals its closeness to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, for which the differentness of the past mattered, or rather, in which the past mattered *because* it was different. This closeness is of course

interestingly doubled: the modern concern with the past *resembles* that of its ancient roots; but it is also focused, at least at first and in large part, *on* those ancient roots as precisely the past that matters for it.

With these reflections in mind, I now turn to the main lines of the account of “historicity,” or of “being historical,” that I presented in my original paper. As I stated earlier, this conception was itself derived from the historical consciousness of the 19th and 20th centuries, and my presentation of it is meant to articulate such consciousness as a background for considering how the past “matters.” This account is meant to be, in the broadest sense, phenomenological, that is, a largely first-person description of experience.

As phenomenologists like Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty have maintained, human subjectivity instantiates a special sort of relationship to time. Just as I am not merely in space as an object is in a container, so I am not just in time in the sense of occurring at a particular moment, or sequence of moments. To be sure, I do exist in an ever-changing Now, and my experience is a sequence of Nows, but it is much more than that. Nor am I merely a temporally persisting substance that bears the changing effects of time as its properties or predicates, like a thing. Nor yet do I merely accumulate “traces” of what passes, like footprints on a path. These traditional metaphors for dealing with the self in time contain some truth, but they are inadequate.

Like the Here in relation to the space I perceive and inhabit, the Now is a vantage point from which I survey a kind of temporal field encompassing past and future. Memory and expectation make possible an ongoing experience through which past and future form the horizon or background from which the present stands out; together they give meaning to the present moment in which I experience or act. I hold onto a past as I project a future before me. These are essential features of human experience. It is not as if I exist in the present and just happen to have the capacity occasionally to envisage the future and remember the past. Rather, human experience just *is* a kind of temporal reach or stretch, as Heidegger (1996, 343) called it. Husserl (1991, 33) spoke of the horizons of retention and protention that constitute the continuity of experience, and are to be distinguished from acts of explicitly “thinking about” the future or “recollecting” the past. These latter elements of my experience may be absent; the continuity may not.

In space I am not just a passive perceiver but also an agent, moving and acting in the world around me. So too in time: the future I have before me is not merely anticipated or expected but also projected and affected by the actions in which I am engaged. Present and past are not merely passively given but are actively construed and interpreted as situations conducive to and calling for certain actions. Like space, then, time is a practical field in which I maneuver and whose contours I shape by my actions.

In this practical context, the unity of the subject in time is not a given or a presupposition, nor is it a product of my past experiences, but is itself a kind of project or achievement in which I construct my identity out of the

actions I perform. But I define myself not only in relation to my past and future, and my temporal coherence, but also in relation to others. And this is where we come to the other dimension of history, the social context. We move from our being in time to our being with others, from subjectivity to intersubjectivity.

The first-person character of our description so far might suggest that the discussion of my relations with others would start with how the *I* confronts the *Thou*. Traditional accounts, phenomenological and otherwise, of the social aspect of human existence have taken their start from the situation in which I experience the other face-to-face. They have asked questions about how the Other can be an object for me which is nevertheless a subject, how I can know the other's thoughts and experiences when all I perceive is the body, and more generally how I relate and have access to a subjectivity which is not my own. These are perfectly legitimate questions, and they are especially important if one wants to consider also the ethical dimension of intersubjectivity. These questions lie behind the classic formulation of the I-Thou relation in Martin Buber (1958), and even Levinas (1969), who is critical of many aspects of this whole approach, arguably still takes it as his point of departure. But it should be recognized that this approach concerns only one mode of being with and relating to others.

Husserl and Heidegger actually took a different approach to being with others and this approach was integrated into their concepts of historicity. Heidegger begins with the everyday, precognitive, practical world, and this world is social through and through. But here we encounter others first and foremost not as objects to be known but through common projects in which we are engaged. The others are experienced as co-workers and co-participants in the ongoing undertakings which give meaning and structure to our common surroundings (Heidegger 1996, 110).

Husserl's approach to intersubjectivity initially took its point of departure with the face-to-face or I-Thou situation as a phenomenological problem. But he discovers another approach to being with others in his late work when dealing with what he calls the crisis of European science (Husserl 1970). Husserl's treatment of consciousness had from the start taken scientific cognition as a primary focus, asking questions about how we move from the world of perception to the scientifically warranted judgments that make up our theoretical disciplines, including humanistic and psychological as well as natural sciences. For the most part, Husserl's approach to these questions seemed to make the assumption that the individual subject, in pursuit of scientific knowledge, could simply transcend the limitations of its concrete social situation and somehow move directly to the truth. What he finally appreciated in his late work on the crisis of the sciences is that theoretical inquiry is necessarily an intersubjective affair. He recognized that, in the pursuit of theoretical truth, the individual always inherits this pursuit as an existing and ongoing activity of the society in which she or he takes it up. The problems and questions of science do not come out of

the blue, but out of a tradition of ongoing inquiry. The individual not only inherits the questions but often builds on the answers already obtained by others as the basis for further work. Even when the primary motivation for inquiry is criticism of the existing solutions to problems, rather than acceptance of them, as is so often the case in science, these prior solutions furnish the context and background for ongoing inquiry. Thus a cognitive endeavor like science, even though it is pursued by individuals, owes its undertaking in each case, as well as its forward motion, to the social context in which it exists.

These considerations cast science in a new light for Husserl, though they are not isolated in the philosophy of science. In fact, they resemble some of the insights of pragmatists like Dewey before him, even as they foreshadow later post-empiricist developments in the analytic philosophy of science. What is important for our purposes, however, is that they facilitate a new approach to intersubjectivity that parallels and complements Heidegger's treatment of being with others. What is more, this approach turns out to extend beyond the realm of scientific inquiry, which can be seen as but one instance of a larger pattern.

How should we characterize one's relation to others in a shared scientific (including historical) inquiry? They are encountered as fellows, colleagues, and co-participants in a common project. What counts about them for me is not their inner life or their total existence, but merely their engagement in an activity that is oriented toward a goal I share. More is shared than just the goal, of course: there are explicit or tacit standards and rules about how inquiry is to be conducted; shared notions of what counts as a valid contribution to the inquiry, and much more. As we know from the case of science, the others are not confined to my immediate colleagues or lab partners, but include other members of the profession at large, especially other specialists in the same field. Clearly the standard terms for the intersubjective encounter do not apply here: the other as alter ego, *autrui*, appearing in a face-to-face confrontation, object of empathy or sympathy, returning my *regard* and putting me to shame or reducing me to an object, à la Sartre—all these terms seem inappropriate to the situation at hand.

To describe correctly and fully understand this relation to others, characterized by co-participation or common endeavor, we need to introduce an indispensable new term, namely that of the group to which I and the others belong. It is precisely as fellow members of a group that others are encountered in this way, and so we need to explore what "group" means in this context, to understand how it exists, how far it extends, and so on. What we have in mind here is not merely an objective collection of individuals, united by some common characteristic like size, shape, hair color, or complexion. The relevant sense of group for our purposes is united from the inside, not from the outside. The word most often used to convey this sense of group is *community*, *Gemeinschaft* (sometimes contrasted with

Gesellschaft, society). These terms derive from the common or the shared, but this must be understood in a special way.

If the community makes possible a certain kind of encounter with others, how do I encounter the community itself? It too is not primarily an object standing over against me as something to be perceived or known, as if I were an anthropologist or sociologist. I relate to it rather in terms of membership, adherence, or belonging. The sign of this relation is my use of the “we” to characterize the subject of certain experiences and actions. The possibility that the community can emerge as a “we”-subject affords a way of understanding not only the nature of the community but also the peculiar character of being with others that makes it up.

One thing to be noted is how such a community relates to the possibility of phenomenological understanding. Phenomenology is characterized, we noted, by the first-person character of its descriptions. By shifting our attention from the “I” to the “We,” it is not necessary to leave the first-person point of view behind; we merely take up the plural rather than the singular first person. This shift from the I to the We reveals an interesting connection between 20th-century phenomenology and Hegel’s phenomenology, a connection that has always been murky and little understood. In the *Phaenomenologie des Geistes*, the author introduces the key notion of his work, that of *Geist*, by calling it “an I that is We, a We that is I,” in other words a plural subject (Hegel 1977, 110). It is *Geist* that forms the true subject of the dialectical forms that Hegel describes in his phenomenology, and which later figures as the central concept in his philosophy of history. Hegel is often criticized for reifying *Geist*, giving it a life and a mind of its own independently of that of the individuals involved, and this criticism may in part be justified. But it is possible to have a more modest or restricted sense of the ontology of the We. It exists, we can say, just as long as its constituent individuals say and think “we.” In this sense it is entirely dependent on the individuals that make it up. Thus we can frame the very controversial notion of the collective subject in a way that avoids a dubious ontological reification and stays close to our experience of social existence. Here there is nothing more common in social life, and nothing more important, than the membership of the individual in communities of various kinds. This can be subjected to phenomenological description.

Such description involves reflecting on those occasions and experiences in which I identify myself with a group or community by enlisting, so to speak, in the “we.” It happens when the experience or action in which I am engaged is attributed not just to me but also to “us,” when I take myself to be a participant in a collective action or experience. But the action or experience must be enduring or ongoing, and with it the existence of the collective subject, the “we.” To say that we build a house is not equivalent to saying that I build a house, you build a house, she builds a house, etc. The common project is articulated into subtasks distributed among the

participants such that the agent cannot be any of the members singly but only the group as such.

To say that I enlist in or participate in such collective endeavors or experiences is to say that I identify myself with the group in question, and this sense of “identifying oneself” deserves our attention. As we said before, the identity of the subject is not a given but constitutes itself over time as a sort of project, and I identify myself in relation to others. This is often taken to mean that I gain my identity in opposition to others, but it is also true that one asserts one’s identity by joining with others. This brings us into the territory of “identity” as it is used in such phrases as “identity crisis” and “identity politics.” As an individual I identify myself with certain groups and thus construe my identity in terms of my belonging. Among these are family, profession, religion, nationality, culture, etc. “We are getting closer to a cure for Parkinson’s,” says the medical researcher, even though she may not be involved in this project directly. “We believe in the virgin birth,” says the Christian. “We landed on the moon in 1969,” says the earth-bound contemporary. And who are we, in this case? Here perhaps we speak on behalf of the human race as a whole.

This is the same sense of identity that has been a subject of some controversy between communitarians and liberals in political philosophy. The former (Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and others) proclaim the value for the individual and for social order of the individual’s rootedness in the community and warn us against the rootlessness of modern society; the latter (for example, Habermas (1979), and more recently Anthony Appiah (2006)) defend the values of individuality, “post-conventional identity,” and cosmopolitanism against what they see as the closedness and conservatism of the communitarian approach. These debates are certainly relevant to what I am trying to do here, but it is also important to see the differences. They are normative, for one thing: arguments about which forms of social and political organization best suit human needs. Both sides admit that community identification exists and plays an important role in human life, for good or ill. Also, as such notions as “post-conventional identity” and cosmopolitanism indicate, even the liberals envisage a form of collective identity and solidarity, as long as it is based on political principles rather than such traditional forms as ethnicity, language, or nationality.

Thus individuals identify themselves with groups that range from small and intimate to larger and more encompassing. But it must not be thought that these groups nest easily inside each other like a series of concentric circles. Groups criss-cross one another, and I identify myself sometimes more with one than another, depending on circumstances. Furthermore, participation in one may not always be compatible with participation in another. Family may conflict with profession, class with country, religion with civic duty, etc., to name only a few of the classic conflicts. These conflicts can be personal and psychological, “identity crises” in which the individual is torn between conflicting commitments and allegiances; and through

the individuals involved the conflicts can be social as well, pitting groups against each other in collective action and enmity. The intersubjective relations involved here take a new twist: I relate to my fellows as members of the same community, with whom I say “we.” And I relate to others not just as other individuals but as members of an opposing group: “them” versus “us.”

Much more could be said about various aspects and implications of the We-relation, but I want to turn now to its relevance to our topic, historicity. We have been looking for a connection between time and social existence that could be described from the first-person point of view as the experience of historical existence. I want to contend that it is in the experience of membership in communities that time is genuinely historical for us. As a member of a community, I become part of a We-subject with an experience of time that extends back before my birth and can continue even after my death. Since the We is experienced as genuinely subjective, it has the same sort of temporality as the I-subject. That is, it is not just an entity persisting in time, or a series of nows, but occupies a prospective-retrospective temporal field encompassing past and future. Just as we attribute agency and experience to the We-subject, so we can speak of its expectations and its memories. History is sometimes spoken of as “society’s memory,” the manner in which it retains its past such that the past plays an enduring role in the life of the present. To put it another way: we noted before that the present is for the I-subject the vantage point which gives access to a temporal field encompassing past and future; likewise, for the We-subject, the present functions as a similar vantage point. But the field that is opened up in this case is much broader. It is to this field that I gain access in virtue of my membership and participation in a community.

But there is more to it than this. Engaged in a community by using the term “we,” I enjoy a special relationship with my fellow members, as we have seen. But these fellow members are temporally differentiated in significant ways. Alfred Schutz spoke of the difference between contemporaries, predecessors, and successors, but this distinction is much too simple (Schutz 1967, 208). My contemporaries are further differentiated into elder and younger, distinctions that are more than just chronological. In family, ethnic, and professional contexts, elders are traditionally considered more knowledgeable and more experienced, and act as parents, guides, and mentors to the younger. Professional relations often mimic family relations, as in Germany, where the dissertation director is called the *Doktorvater*. Just as important as this benign relationship is the agonistic, indeed, Oedipal, struggle in which the young rebel against the domination of the old, break away, and establish their independence. So often, of course, this classic youthful rebellion, instead of securing the emancipation of the individual from the group, only reveals the individual’s deeper, inextricable dependence and adherence.

In any case, these intergenerational relations and tensions show that being a member of a community means belonging to a temporally continuous

entity whose temporality exceeds that of my own subjectivity. With regard to the past, its reach gradually expands in a kind of relay-form from elders to ancestors and predecessors who came “before my time,” that is, before my experience and before my birth. One way of thinking of this relation is to think of the circle or sequence of acquaintances. This is the popular idea of “degrees of separation,” which are also degrees of indirect connection. Regarded synchronically, this connection relates each of us to contemporaries with whom we have no other connection; but it is also characteristic of our relations with members of the communities to which we belong. Seen in a diachronic frame, this circle of acquaintance extends very rapidly into the past. Living in the 21st century, I knew a member of my family (my great-grandmother), born during the American Civil War, who herself knew her grandparents, born in the 18th century. I am thus related by one degree of separation/connection, by indirect acquaintance, if you will, to my 18th-century forebears.

With such examples, and with such familiar uses of the term “we,” I hope to convey the sense in which, as members of families and other communities, we have a direct and lived relationship to history. To be sure, this direct relationship includes much more than this. It extends even to our physical surroundings, where the very contours of the land, the patterns of roads and streets, and many of the buildings we inhabit and often even the furniture we use, are older than we are. But even this physical world is part of the human world of overlapping communities with which we identify ourselves. One could say much more about the role of the past in ethnic and national identities, political and religious allegiances, which are such a decisive force, for good and ill, in the contemporary world. But the general point is that it is in solidarity, membership, and participation with others in communities that the past is most alive and vivid for us. It is here that it functions as part of our identity as individuals and enters into our lives and everyday experience.

Obviously we are moving here in the realm of popular mentality and even mythology. But it is here that historicity is most vivid and efficacious in our sense of who we are. It operates with different intensity and in vastly different ways in different social and historical contexts. We Americans, of course, are blessed or cursed with a history that lends itself generously to popular mythology. Unlike many modern states we trace our identity to a fairly clear-cut “birth of a nation,” itself mythologized in the early stages of cinema, our most enduring contribution to popular culture. We owe this birth to “founding fathers”—a miraculous birth indeed, since it seems to have occurred without the help of founding mothers. Or alternatively, but still with the aura of a family drama, our origins are found in an act of youthful rebellion against the “mother country,” leading up to the adoption of a written constitution that begins with the words “we, the people.” Four score and seven years later, we were engaged in a great civil war testing whether our nation could endure. Abraham Lincoln’s famous speech at

Gettysburg in 1863, which I am paraphrasing here, uses the “patriotic we” in the grand tradition of political rhetoric and funeral oratory that can be traced back to Pericles and Gorgias, as Gary Wills (1992) has shown. The success of political leadership is the capacity to translate this rhetorical device into political reality. Wars and other crises, of course, lend themselves to the realization of the “we.” And when we have the sense of living through history, in traumatic and pivotal moments like the breach of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, or the attacks of September 11, 2001, we are communalized by the shock of the unexpected and the uncertainty of the future. The American presidential election of November 2008, and the inauguration of January 2009, had similar, communalizing effects. No doubt the communities most galvanized by these events were the Germans and the Americans, respectively. But they captured such worldwide attention that their communalizing effects were felt far beyond those countries. There is no doubt that a certain international, communal solidarity was involved.

These examples remind us again of the temporality of historical existence. They reveal that such existence is often as much a matter of the future as of the past, as Heidegger argued (Heidegger 1996, 297). But we usually identify historicity with the manner in which the past plays a role in the present. What my analysis shows, I think, is that it is primarily as members of communities of various sorts that we experience the reality of the past in our present lives. It is here that such terms as “tradition,” “inheritance,” or “legacy” come into play. In the agency of the “we” the past is not just passively given; we take it over or, as Heidegger put it, we “hand down” to ourselves the legacy of the past (Heidegger 1996, 351). Communal existence is active in many ways, but a constant feature of its activity is the manner in which it appropriates its past. That this is an activity is evident from the varying forms this takes. We select from the past what we wish to take over and neglect what we wish to forget. Indeed, remembering and forgetting are central activities by which communities constitute themselves. Remembering leads to commemoration and memorialization, in which we celebrate our heroes and achievements in monuments and popular songs on national holidays. The silence of forgetting can seek to evade responsibility for evils such as slavery or genocide; but it can in some cases have the beneficial effect of overcoming past resentments and grievances. Some communities remember too little; others remember too much.

Let us summarize the results of our phenomenology of historical existence. We exist historically by virtue of our participation in communities that predate and outlive our individual lives. Through the We-relation, historical reality enters directly into our lived experience and becomes part of our identity. Our membership gives us access to a past, a tradition, and a temporal span that is not so much something we know about as something that is part of us. This is the primary sense in which we are, in Dilthey’s sense, historical beings before we are observers of history; this is the sense in which we are “intertwined” with history (Dilthey 2002, 297). This

phenomenology of history does not address itself directly to the traditional questions of the philosophy of history, questions of what history is in itself and of how we know it, though it can cast some indirect light on these questions. But it does address the question of why we should be interested in the past at all.

As we said, this account is drawn from the tradition of historical thinking that began in the 19th century and continued throughout the 20th century—extending perhaps even to the 21st century. It expresses the well-known “historical consciousness” of that period, a period in which it can certainly be said that history “as such” mattered. I also claimed that this historical consciousness is itself rooted in the religious traditions of the West, so it certainly goes farther back than just the 19th century.

The question is whether this account can also throw light on other ways in which history mattered, ways that lie outside this tradition, some of which have come to light (at least for me) in the course of the conference preceding the publication of this volume. Is it broad enough to address the large question of how the past matters, and has done so, for human societies generally? In other words, is it provincial and limited, or can it apply generally across the broad spectrum of the human awareness of the past? Can non-Western views of the past be made to fit the pattern I have outlined here?

We are inclined, perhaps, to think of the temporal, social, and historical dimensions of human experience, as I have described them, to apply to all human societies and times. Certainly the philosophers on whom I have drawn, who articulated these conceptions, thought that they were describing universal human traits. There are reasons to be skeptical about this, however, and I am not going to attempt a real answer to this question. The issue is complicated, since just by virtue of being historians in the modern sense (or in my case being a philosopher of history), the participants in this conference belong to this putatively Western tradition, even if they are not literally “Western.” So I leave the question unanswered, as perhaps the most important philosophical issue that has emerged from this conference.

Note

- 1 This conference took place on December 12–14, 2008 at Brown University. Participants were asked to revise their papers afterward in light of their hearing and reading of the other contributions. Since most papers—including this one—underwent significant changes, the papers I comment on here do not correspond to the final versions that are found in the published volume, and I cannot refer to them in the standard way.