



**L'inconscio**

Rivista Italiana di Filosofia e Psicoanalisi

# **l'inconscio**

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# **politico**

ISSN 2499-8729

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UNIVERSITÀ  
DELLA CALABRIA

**L'inconscio. Rivista Italiana di Filosofia e Psicoanalisi**  
**N. 2 - L'inconscio politico**  
**Dicembre 2016**

Rivista pubblicata dal  
"Centro di Ricerca Filosofia e Psicoanalisi"  
dell'Università della Calabria  
Ponte Pietro Bucci, cubo 28B, II piano -  
87036 Arcavacata di Rende (Cosenza)

ISSN 2499-8729

# **L'inconscio. Rivista Italiana di Filosofia e Psicoanalisi**

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## Evil, unconscious, and meaning in history.

### Outline of a phenomenological critique of utopian-historiodical politics

Panos Theodorou

The outstanding element, however, out of which an interpretation of history could arise at all, is the basic experience of evil and suffering, and of man's quest for happiness. The interpretation of history is, in the last analysis, an attempt to understand the meaning of history as the meaning of suffering by historical action.

Karl Löwith (1949, p. 3)

Without errancy [*Irre*] there would be no connection from destiny to destiny [*von Geschick zu Geschick*], no history [*Geschichte*]. [...] Out of the epoché of Being comes the epochal essence of its destining in which authentic world-history lies. Each time that Being keeps to itself in its destiny, suddenly and unexpectedly, world happens. Every epoch of world-history is an epoch of errancy.

Martin Heidegger (2002, p. 254)

#### Phenomenology on politics, history, and the unconscious

Politics can be considered the art of managing the at-each-time factic reality and societal circumstances so as to effectively guarantee the realization of that which is considered good for a cohesive multitude of people in a given *topos* and epoch. That which is believed to be good, then, and the supposed form according to which events occur and evolve in history in relation to this good are the *sine qua non* a priori presuppositions of politics. More often than not, both are considered self-evident. Critical thinking, however, is meant to take other courses. Herein, the good itself and politics as such are the silent background against which our thinking about how events in history occur and evolve is going to be examined. The present general framework, however, is that of politics and the *unconscious*. This constitutes a real challenge for phenomenological philosophy and for any phenomenologist. This is all the more critical given that, basically, apart from Arendt's efforts, Phenomenology is awfully

late in its rendezvous with the political. Time is thus pressing, especially now that the skies of Europe are once again being filled with ominously undiagnosed specters. As concerns the unconscious, the first reaction would be that Phenomenology has absolutely nothing to say about it, let alone its connection with the political. As the philosophy of consciousness' intentionality, it could be argued, Phenomenology is only a philosophy of *self-aware* subjectivity and the correlates that appear to it. It seems to me, however, that Transcendental and Genetic-Generative Phenomenology can test itself and its elucidatory scope vis-à-vis politics and history by recourse to hermeneutic, emotive, and desiring processes that get "functionalized" *beneath* the conscious level of the human life.<sup>1</sup>

This, then, is going to be the point of view from which what follows is developed. Namely, a critical hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to the way in which human existential life unconsciously-imaginarily<sup>2</sup> constitutes the form through which we experience the occurrence and evolution of events in history, especially as a precondition for political thought and action. It will appear that meaning in history is the accomplishment of such an unconscious, formed within our praxio-existential coping with factic reality and the social multitude.

In the following, I will first try to sketch the basis on which the modern problem of meaning in history arises and the fundamental responses produced by modern philosophy (§2). Then, I will delineate two basic understandings of meaning in history as developed by the founders of Phenomenology, Husserl and Heidegger, which are surprisingly close to those of modern metaphysics (§3). Next, we will see how the topic of the unconscious surfaced in the context of the difficulties that critical epistemology faced in its effort to penetrate the unperceivable folds of reality, which press to be acknowledged as a precondition of experience, but also of action and ethics (§4). After this, a brief phenomenological account regarding action and praxis will be presented as a specific concretization of the philosophy of the unconscious

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<sup>1</sup> A more extensive explanation of the interconnections among Phenomenology, history, the extra-phenomenal, and the non-conscious can be found in Theodorou, 2015, ch. 10 (of which the present paper can be considered a continuation). For a phenomenological line of approach to emotive intentionality, see Theodorou, 2014 and forthcoming. Since the time of Binswanger and Boss, psychologists and phenomenologists have attempted to clarify the relation of Phenomenology to the psychoanalytic unconscious, but the issue remains open. For recent relevant work in Phenomenology, see, e.g., Henry, 1993, Smith, 2010, Lohmar and Brudzińska, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Within the levels and folds of the "subjective" intentional consciousness, transcendental genetic-generative phenomenologists can find many interpretive correspondents for the vague multitude of meanings connected to the concept of the psychoanalytic unconscious. Among them, we can count the non-phenomenally lived-through *reell* contents; the anonymously functioning constitutive meanings that function as laws of the intentional constitution of our experience of particulars in their horizons of co-appearance; sedimented experiences, memories, beliefs, and skills; the unknowingly stirred and instituted emotive bondages with other persons; our instinctual motivations and patterns of readiness for action, etc. However, perhaps the most fruitfully relevant phenomenological parallel to the psychoanalytic unconscious is the imaginary formation of meaning - or value - giving patterns projected over the beings and the events we confront in our personal and social lives.



and of the latter's involvement in our interpretation of events in history (§5). Next, I will move on to examining Merleau-Ponty's final, although ultimately failed, attempt to construct a phenomenological proof of the possibility of objective knowledge regarding historical meaning (§6). Moreover, I will consider how persistent maintenance of the optimistic or pessimistic reading of history simply concocts the political action that crucially exposes humanity to the danger of perpetrating what Arendt called «banal evil» (§7). What remains, then, is the question whether Phenomenology can offer a non-nihilistic understanding of existence, action, and events in history. I will argue that a rather cautious re-interpretation of Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940), informed by the Aristotelian analysis of praxis and Kantian-Arendtian "common sense," offers a sober, perspectivist, realistic understanding of the place of humans in the cosmos and of the historical course we happen to take in it (§8).

### **The fact-value dichotomy and the modern question of meaning in history**

Modern philosophy, from Descartes and Locke, through Kant and Hegel, and up to Husserl and Heidegger until the current situation, with its constellation of post-modernisms, appears to be a renewed response of thinking humans to the oldest of problems: It is philosophy's response to the various forms and levels of *evil* within the new context opened up by the Copernican revolution, which represented a passing from the "closed cosmos" to the "open universe." No matter if we are fully conscious of this or we find ourselves immersed in what has become, in recent times, an almost chaotic dialogue, it is true that modern philosophy has desperately tried to determine anew *what humans are supposed to do with evil in the universe of these newly discovered facts*. When the orderly cosmos of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and the Neo-Platonists, as well as that of the Christians, collapsed, humans found themselves within an open horizon of natural things without any in-built polarities or ends, with no inherent "manual" for the praxial confrontation of evil. Homogenous and isotropic as the open spatio-temporal universe of this modern world-view appeared, with its initially retreated and finally dead God, humans could not find in it any self-dictated place or supra-human indication as to where they stood in it or how to steer action away from evil and towards "the good". This is the milieu in which what we now commonly think of as the *fact-value* dichotomy imposed itself on our considerations.

We may accept that, within modern Europe, three major novel responses to the situation appeared: Leibnizean rational theological theodicy (and its later mediated revival), the British Protestant utilitarianism connected with Hume's skepticism and

sentimentalism, and the pietist Protestant reply of Kant's critical approach and duty ethics.<sup>3</sup>

With his third *Critique*, Kant made a still sober move to re-unite humans, and modern praxio-existential anxiety, with nature. Of course, as Nietzsche later remarked, this move harbored old Christian dogmas, albeit under the guise of critical thinking. To the eyes of Kant's immediate followers, his approach seemed to be rather reluctant and confused, especially considering what the real issue at stake was. Fichte and Schelling, with Hegel, devoted themselves to the effort of overcoming Kant's critical reluctance and confusion with regard to the scope and meaning of philosophical knowledge about the role of humans within a reclaimed cosmos. They tried to overcome the modern divide between nature and humanness in a way that should offer better-grounded trustworthiness: a kind of belief that could reasonably re-inspire homeliness, confidence, and optimism as to modern humanity's self-conception. Hegel's view of history, thus, reunites with Leibniz's rational theology, but in a way that overcomes it towards a metaphysics of the absolute spirit and its teleological self-integration within the historical cosmos. He presupposes and complements the efforts of his predecessors in a way that tries to restore a positive rationalistic quasi-secular version of the pre-modern, Neo-Platonic and Christian view of the cosmos and humanity's place in its becoming. Reason can prove that humanity partakes in a cosmic evolution determined by absolute spirit's journey towards itself via the reality of nature and humanity's growing consciousness, resulting in an era when all conflicts and evil will disappear to be replaced by a harmonious interconnection of everything with everything.

Marx's, and especially Engels' and Lenin's, understanding of dialectical materialism gave the spiritualist Hegelian understanding of history a fully naturalistic turn in connection to Darwin's biological evolutionary conception of the appearance of the human animal on Earth. According to them, it is scientifically provable that the historical process of the development of material means and relations of production follows a law-obeying course that is predestined to lead to an era where all evil, from exploitation, labor pain, shortages of material goods and satisfaction, through to sickness and possibly even death, will have disappeared. There will be a technologically produced overabundance of goods and technical means for happy

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<sup>3</sup> For methodological and substantial reasons, in what follows we will remain mostly within the scope of the Continent, with only brief reference to the Anglo-American situation. The main focus here is on the views of ideology, history, and politics developed in the broad idealist tradition and its materialist overthrow. The traced totalitarianisms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century appear to have resulted from ideologies conceived within this tradition. They were, moreover, suggested as ways of overcoming the Anglo-American spirit of capitalism, as well as its early continental predecessors and later mutations. The corresponding ideologies developed in the empiricist-capitalist tradition and its current neo-liberalist phase are only marginally treated here. This, however, does *not* at all mean that they can stand outside the firing range of the criticism that is going to be deployed throughout the following. See the close of §7.

people who enjoy pleasurable hobbies, from chasing every fleshy pleasure to neurosurgery and poetry.

Nietzsche was quick to accuse all these philosophical visions of being masquerades of the old Platonic and Christian mythical responses of the vulgar weak to the experience of pain inflicted on them by the noble powerful and the harshness of nature itself. They believed the lie that their resentfully aggregated inferior powers could annihilate all pre-existent evil, or at least the experience of it, and bring universal love and justice, if not to an inexistent other world, then certainly to this material one. Unsatisfied with being a mere diagnostician, Nietzsche unfortunately attempted to go further and offer his own “well-rounded” philosophical *solution*. He denounced Christianity and socialism as nihilistic reactions of the base and sick will to power, in which those afflicted blame the noble and healthy will to power for their condition. This noble will to power, he subsequently proclaimed, was the only principle that could bring order to the world and human affairs in a manner concordant with sheer natural justice. Since, for Nietzsche, God is dead, it became clear for him that order could come to the world (and injustice *qua* cosmic imbalance disappear) only if at least some humans were able of overcoming their known humanness and become ‘super humans,’ capable of going beyond good and evil. A brave new natural order of life could then reign under the sun. In moving beyond his diagnostician self, Nietzsche indulges the temptation to become the prophet of a new almighty deity, the unleashed noblest will to power and its unhesitating order-imposing lawfulness.<sup>4</sup>

Even though the connections are not always clear or widely admitted, the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed two large ideological calls for an analogous overcoming the limitations of the human species in order to move towards a new era, wherein all evils (injustice, imbalance, suppression, weakness, sickness, limitations, shortages, dissatisfaction, etc.) will have been subdued by an almighty will to power accordingly understood. The totalitarian character of the regimes these ideologies inspired and our experience of their historical deeds created the abashment and confusion that still accompanies political thinking that tries to envisage the fate of humanity within the secular post-ideological capitalist era and beyond.

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<sup>4</sup> The approach delineated here is different than the classical “secularization of Christian eschatology” account with which Löwith and Taubes have worked, mainly in that it pays greater attention to the emergence of modern natural science and the devaluation of the self-evident *chremata* (goods) of the former cosmos entailed by this event.

## Phenomenology's view of history is inscribed within broader Western metaphysics

Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenologies represent a transient limit phase of these developments, especially within the tradition of German idealism's elaborations regarding the meaning of history and humanity's role in it. It is as if Husserl and Heidegger were the prevalent voices of German philosophy in general in the first thirty-five years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

On the one hand, Husserl ended up favoring German philosophy's Leibnizean origin up to its Fichtean phase, tending towards an absolutism of the thinking monad and a powerful actively constituting, voluntary subject.<sup>5</sup> Husserl appears to start from accepting the accomplishments of science and the view of nature they grant us. However, in the late 1930s, he diagnosed science, as a pillar of Western civilization, and Western civilization itself as being in crisis. For Husserl, the grounds of science and the Western techno-scientific mentality were no longer understood. Science and the life that was based upon it were not meaningful any more. Thus, he asked what, in the process of the development of European-Western civilization, had become concealed and, hence, should be disclosed and elucidated in order for us to regain fully meaningful experience of the world and our lives in it. A genuine return to reason, Husserl suggested, could drag us out of the dark crisis he diagnosed and restore the secure path to rational progress that philosophy inaugurated in ancient Greece. His *Phenomenology* suggests that a regeneration of European humanity could and should be achieved, and that European philosophy's "functionaries" should *accomplish* it. In an act of heroism, reason itself, the constitutor of all reality, would realize that it had unknowingly built current naturalism upon the basis of a primordial lifeworld that had, meanwhile, been left to sink unnoticed behind reasons' theoretical achievements. The re-disclosure of this original meaning, fundamental to all genetically higher rational achievements could, then, renew humanity's self-understanding and guarantee its rational progress in the future (see also Kelkel, 1979). On the other hand, Heidegger can be seen as siding with an indeterminist version of the German "fatalist", absolute idealist trend, leading up to Nietzsche. He is attracted by a view of historical meaningfulness that assumes a supra-ontical source (Being itself), not of a conceptual or calculatively rationalist character, but of a primordial *Rede*-like structure to which our primordial, pre-theoretical and 'emotive' side can be at times attuned. This source is responsible both for the fact of worlding and for its apparent historical mobility through time. Heidegger appears to have inherited a view of nature which stems from those who remained unsatisfied with Kant's acceptance of Newton's achievement and theory, from thinkers like Goethe, Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel, and then tried to present another understanding of

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<sup>5</sup> See Carr's point regarding the difference between Husserl's voluntarism, as we might term it, and Hegel's fatalistically deterministic teleological views of history (2016, §6).

it. According to this approach, primordially, the world is not a mere material or mechanical system, but includes within itself a lively or “organic” meaning, a thoroughly praxial meaningfulness in relation to which the nature of science is a mere abstract theoretical objectification, founded and not founding. Being itself, having ‘chosen’ humans as its shepherds on Earth, epochally discloses itself in the forms of the world we have come to know historically, i.e., in the senses or truths through which it allows itself to be comprehended and intuited. Given the clues we can draw from a regressive de-structuring (*Destruktion*) of history, this process has certainly passed through an archaic rural way of life, marked by harmonic unity between humans and the “organically” meaningful world, and has proceeded via a continuously advancing theoretization and technicization, in which the meaningfulness of the world sinks into oblivion, and objectification gives way to the fall of humanity. Heidegger connected his views, especially during a heated historical period in Germany, with those of Nietzsche. At first, Heidegger looked to Nietzsche as a possible prophet of a new redemptive world era, but by the end of the 1930s he instead thought of him as the composer of the swan song of European metaphysics (see Zimmerman 2005, especially its concluding section). Heidegger, after all, seems to entertain the idea that the current era represents the *ἔσχατοι καιροί* (*eschatoi kairoi*: the end or final times) of technological industrialization. Agreeing, though, with the truth of Hölderlin’s «Patmos», he believes that «where the danger is, the saving power also grows».⁶ As he finally said in his *Spiegel* interview (1966), salvation will be at some unpredictable point possible by some “God.”

Given the human historical atrocities committed during the Second World War and since, attempts at solidly grounding humanity’s place and progressive or eschatological salvatory course in the historical cosmos have evidently not actually managed to persuade or inspire as many people as they did earlier. It appears that the issues of how fact and value (existentio-praxial meaning) are connected, along with the meaning of human action and history, remains to this day unsolved. Accordingly, political theory itself has fallen into a vertigo-producing swirl. All sorts of discourses have been tried and all kinds of “historical subjects” are suggested and tested as means for deciphering and handling the dynamics of the current situation, but, after the actual failure of so many worldviews in the past, the confusion around the issue of fundamental orientation undermines all efforts.

Thus, we urgently need to re-pose and reimagine the age old problem of *what, from our perspective, can be said with regard to humanity’s struggle with evil?* Naturally, this question needs further elaboration. From a phenomenological point of view, two specific sub-questions can be posed:

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⁶ As Heidegger wrote in 1950, «As something fateful, Being itself is inherently eschatological. [...] [Even though, w]e think of the eschatology of Being [...] from within the history of Being» (Heidegger, 1975, p. 18). See also Kelkel, 1979 and Pöggeler, 1996. Also Wren, 1972, especially p. 120.

1. What is the process by which humans respond to their experience of recalcitrant reality in a way that creates value meaning for their existence and praxis in the historical world?
2. How can Phenomenology possibly evaluate the different responses people have arrived at in the course of history with regard to its meaning, and, given their eventual lack of persuasiveness, what more could it say on its part?

### **Catching the thread of the unconscious**

There are at least two great conceptions of the unconscious. The first corresponds to the Kantian in-itself beneath the surface of outer and inner appearing phenomena. Fichte, Schelling and Hegel took up the task of exploring the unknown vastness of this form of unconscious. Matter and reason were projected within this darkness in an effort to render it intelligible and explain the phenomena of nature and history. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, however, mocked this philosophical effort to access the inaccessible, rationalize the irrational, and tame the untamable. The unknown is not absolute reason that reflectively comes to know itself through the mediation of matter, but pure will that turns towards what overcomes itself in unspeakable, exhaustive striving. Humans, as beings constituted by the two dimensions of the conscious and the unconscious, painfully experience their selves caught within this cosmic drama. In order to bear existence in this devastating becoming, Schopenhauer suggests that humans should lower, if not extinguish, their own will and withdraw from the scene of becoming. Nietzsche, once fascinated by this teaching, objects to it as pessimist and orientalist ascetic view of the meaning of human existence. Indeed, he remarks that the deeper essence of all beings is will, but not a mere will of this or that. This essence is the will to power or the will to will, and what we experience as the reality within which we consciously find ourselves as existing is not a substratum of given facts, but rather constituted of axiological interpretations formed by this very essence.

With their post-Kantian and post-idealist views, however, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche help us to decisively move beyond the first vast and confused concept of the “unconscious”. Their new, just drafted, second concept of the unconscious, we now consequently understand, cannot refer to the generally indefinite in-itself beneath all empirical phenomena. It rather refers, or should refer, to an already somehow self-differentiated portion or deeper level of the “in-itself”. Within human beings, there is not just a capacity to consciously sense and experience inner or outer realities or occurrences beneath which only an (unconscious) indefinite in-itself is conceivable. The human, and possibly animal, capacity for sensing and experiencing is not backed, as it were, by a merely indefinite dense fold behind the phenomena, but specifically

by a peculiar preformed level of reality that is capable of *living*. Echoing Aristotle, we could say that between *nous* (consciousness) and the indefinite in-itself, there is life itself. If consciousness, as the for-itself, is traceable in sensing and experiencing, as well as in mental associations, we must be careful that this is not a possibility rooted directly in the indefinite or natural-scientific matter, but in its presupposition that we call “life.” In what it is and in what it does, now, this life is not a level of organized reality that is fully transparent to our consciousness, to our self-awareness. To this extent, life itself comprises a sphere of unknowable organization and functions, an *unconscious* dimension within us, whose “motility” prepares and affects the way we see and value beings and the world around us, as well as the way we act amidst them.

Even for Nietzsche, however, this talk of the will is not sharply defined, so several different things are squeezed together under this concept; orexis, appetite, desire, affective feeling, emotive or sentimental feeling, being motivated, preferring, choosing, and striving are all confused within this thought. Be that as it may, this “unconscious” was the late German resurrection, in a modern philosophical context, of long hidden and forgotten dimensions of humanness, which had been suppressed and obscured by the neo-Platonic, Christian, and French rationalistic lines of thought that mediated.

Freud was quick to see here enormous potential for researching and explaining human behaviors that were considered problematic either for the eyes of the agent itself or for the eyes of the rest of society. Nevertheless, under the prevailing positivistic reductive attitude of his time, Freud tried to present this newly discovered land in natural scientific hydro - or electro - dynamic terms concerning a single substance, and the pressure-relief or lack-satisfaction states with which it is associated as leading to corresponding motions towards or away from what caused them. More specifically, he interpreted this second narrower unconscious as a substance, the essence of which is not some general appetite, desire, will, or will to power, but specifically the sexual *libido*. In a fashion parallel to that responsible for the agglomeration of many different levels and modes under the broad concept of the Schopenhauerian-Nietzschean unconscious, Freud, too, appears to have squeezed under his new libidinal unconscious many different “intentionalities” and corresponding ‘functions.’ To the extent that, at least from the phenomenological point of view,<sup>7</sup> this remark finds its target, non-naturalistic, non-positivistic, and non-reductionist Phenomenology is in the pleasant position of being able to collaboratively contribute to the psychoanalytic tradition initiated by Freud’s

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<sup>7</sup> For Scheler’s positive view and criticism of Freud’s libidinal unconscious, see Kolnai 2013. For the ambivalent, if not rejective, stance of Husserl towards the Freudian unconscious, as well as the possibility of a more positive exchange between Phenomenology and the Freudian unconscious, see, e.g., Henry 1993; Welsh 2002; and Smith 2010.

groundbreaking discoveries. These two conceptual and metaphysical frameworks can be put into a dialogue that can only be fruitful.<sup>8</sup>

A phenomenological revisit of the basic psychoanalytic concepts and affective-motivational patterns in psychoanalysis can only be based on an intentional-existential re-interpretation, which, of course, goes hand in hand with the necessity of Phenomenology's own self-overcoming. A person's state of being and patterns of behavior will not then be approached in terms of naturalistic unconscious drives for satisfaction or avoidance, or of the affectivity of mere pleasant and unpleasant feelings.<sup>9</sup> They will rather be seen as a "logic" of intentional meaning-aimings,<sup>10</sup> seeking fulfilment in the self-givenness of corresponding value-affairs in the general context of a personal life's search for its proper place and "salvatory" course in the cosmos. Understandably, this is not the occasion for bringing about this immense and open ended project, but the train of thought in what follows is informed by its general spirit and possibility. Thus, firstly, I will hint at how this second unconscious can accommodate a subtle inner differentiation, attained by appeal to a normalized phenomenological arsenal.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, I will engage in the development of a concrete, exemplary description of how this could be used in order to give an in-principle account of the dynamics of meaning-seeking and meaning-projecting in historical experience, upon which political theory and action depend.

### **History as the interpretive horizon of action confronting evil and aiming at good**

Ends can only be considered good if they are things that should be pursued. Neither the content of mere sensory experience nor the objects and states of affairs constituted in everyday language or scientific theory can be ends. Whence, then, are ends visualized and set as things that should be obtained and thus put human action in motion and produce history? As Aristotle claimed in *De Anima*, ὄρεξις (*orexis*), i.e., appetite or desire (generally speaking), drags us towards the good or the supposed

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<sup>8</sup> To be clear, with this, I do not bring owls to Athens. See above note 1.

<sup>9</sup> On Freud's self-entrapment in a "hydraulic" metaphysics of the unconscious psyche and in the representational "idea-object" epistemological views of modern thought, as well as on the inextricable inner tension between the two above described views of the unconscious, see also Henry 1993, ch. 9. For a specifically phenomenological overcoming of the naturalistic-psychologistic understanding of affectivity, see Theodorou 2014 and forthcoming.

<sup>10</sup> To some extent, the phenomenological possibility of viewing the unconscious corresponds to the Lacanian effort to "semanticize" the Freudian obsolete and confused metaphysics and functioning of the unconscious. In Phenomenology, however, not all meaning is linguistic in nature, since a part of meaningful cognition and motivation can be pre-predicative. See, e.g., Lohmar, 2012; Theodorou, 2015, chs 5-7.

<sup>11</sup> "Normalized" here means that the phenomenological approach should not be limited to the specific course or 'sect' of any of Phenomenology's main protagonists, but can rather draw fruitful ideas from them all.



good and away from evil or supposed evil. It is the emotions, however, that present us with values that are positive and high or highest (i.e. considered or supposed good); correspondingly, they also make us aware of negative and low or lowest values (considered or supposed evil).<sup>12</sup> Neither sensory feelings nor formal reason disclose or produce such value content. Reason, in particular, only conceptualizes and calculates *means* to given ends.<sup>13</sup> Ends are determined by the emotions and pursued via motivated human striving. In this striving, however, we, as finite creatures made of flesh and blood, and not as immortal rational-calculative souls, confront material reality. This emotive, evaluative estimation and guided interaction of carnal humans and material reality takes on, time and again, the character of being in painful friction with reality. Reality's facticity, i.e., its multi-level and multi-faceted, not-fully-Hegelian-rationalizable constitution, does not conform (let alone submit) itself to our finite ability to conceptualize, plan, and safe control of fully predictable circumstances. Due to various sensory-experiential and emotive-evaluative misperceptions, arising from our finiteness or urgent necessity and unforeseeable chance, our praxio-existential intentionality confronts a reality that is thusly apprehended as recalcitrant, hostile, and threatening. Our desires and striving in relation to reality is thus harshly tested against its factic *resistance*.

History is, each time, created as a result of the human efforts to attain its good ends and the correctness and success, or rather *errancy* and failure, of these efforts, caused by our *finiteness* and *the resistance* of the ontologically immense and praxially incalculable factic reality. All the latter factors are potential and actual sources of evil,<sup>14</sup> which humanity tries to re-understand and re-control by further action, and so on. Within this problematic continuous striving for good and experiencing of evil, cancelation and nihilism are continuously felt *ante portas*, and awe and anxiety penetrate and nest within the human soul. The ethos, i.e., the formed aretaic make-up, of each person and each group responds differently. These responses take the shape of an at first silent treatment of the meaning of evil and suffering in history, of

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<sup>12</sup> I draw here from Scheler's phenomenology of emotions and values (see especially Scheler, 1973, pp. 25-26). For its problems and shortcomings, see, e.g., Blosser, 2002, especially p. 409; Theodorou (forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup> One may suppose that there is also another reason, one capable of discovering values and positing them as ends. Practical reason could be presented as such, but, as Kant, puts it, this is theoretical reason put to practical use. Various capacities have also been ascribed this role: abduction, induction, reflective judgment in its subjective use (ruled by harmony) or reflective reason in its objective use (ruled by purpose). Although their functions could be sublime and refined, none of these or other possible cases intuit or discover any factual content, let alone any value content. In their theoretical use of dealing with facts, these capacities rather analyze, idealize, formalize, and calculate content that has already been traced either by the five senses (and the form of our intuitional capacity: space and time) or by our emotions or the "affects" (generally speaking).

<sup>14</sup> On the phenomenological sense of resistance and Scheler and Heidegger's disagreement on this, see Dahlstrom, 2002. For a phenomenological approach to the connections among striving, resistance, pain, and evil, see Scheler, 2009.

repetitive ‘experimentation’ regarding the content of good and the prospect of salvation (generally speaking).<sup>15</sup> Unconsciously, humans discover their selves with one or another meaning projected over the connections of past, present, and future events within the largest possible time horizon, i.e., the horizon of the life of the person and the human species. Historical becoming, thus, is the realization of human action upon the at-each-time resisting facticity, conducted from the point of view of some such interpretive meaning.

The system of ways in which humans interpret a factic evil situation and confront it, such as by accepting, avoiding, assimilating, being indifferent to, fighting or divinizing it, constitutes a system of values, which is the skeleton around which the flesh of civilizations is developed. The system of values that a civilization projects onto reality, i.e., the way it organizes the orientation of human actions towards what it conceives as ultimate meaning or purpose (good) for human life and praxis, in fact determines its pedigree and fate. The *historiodicial* meaning, in particular, is the secular successor of the *theodicial* meaning of existence and action in a reality experienced as containing evil, which replaced it after “God’s death.”

### **Perspectivism and the possibility of objective meaning in history**

The fact that there have been and still are various historical ‘logics’ that people have believed to be the necessary course that history is destined or obliged to follow seems to imply that there has been no single absolutely persuasive account. What we see is a series of successive attempts at recognizing the meaning of existence and action, pain and pleasure, suffering and joy, and, fundamentally, of evil and good. How should Phenomenology understand these attempts to bestow meaning upon our confrontation with recalcitrant resisting facticity? One possibility is to see them as attempts to develop a somehow verifiable or confirmable hypothetical value-ontological interpretation of this confrontation and its outcomes. Interestingly,

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<sup>15</sup> Characteristic is, for example, Augustine’s early Christian reaction: «Thus the world is like an oilpress: *under pressure*. If you are the sewer; if you are the dregs of the oil you are carried away through the sewer. If you are genuine oil you will remain in the vessel. *But to be under pressure is inevitable*. [...] Pressure takes place ever in the world, as for instance, through famine, war, want, inflation, indigence, mortality, rape, avarice; such are the pressures on the poor and the worries of the states: we have evidence of them. [...] We have found men who grumble under these pressures and who say: ‘how bad are these Christian times!’ [...] Thus speak the dregs of the oil which run away through the sewer; their color is black because they blaspheme: they lack splendour. The oil has splendour. For here another sort of man is under the same pressure and friction which polishes him, for is it not the very friction which refines him?» (Augustine: *Sermones*, ed. Denis, xxiv. 11; cited in Löwith, 1949, v). Nietzsche’s and Scheler’s analyses of *Ressentiment* and «bad consciousness/conscience» (*schlechtes Gewissen*) or, correspondingly, «organic mendacity» (*organische Verlogenheit*) are promising philosophical sources for our projected task here. On this, see also Theodorou (forthcoming).

Phenomenology's theory of sensory perception and categorical perception allows for the possibility of a kind of historical experience that presents us with not only "historical adumbrations", i.e., isolated events, but with variously *formed* historical wholes, integrating patterns of events and periods, according to this or that "logic" of history. However, the *possibility* of such and such an experience of historical development does not also mean that an actual experience of this kind is the only one appertaining to what is involved, predestined before all time and for all. Gestalt theory, co-invented by Husserl, refuses the atomistic "constancy hypothesis." The same elements in the experiential field allow for more than one gestalt integration and holistic experience of it. Here, too, the 'data' *underdetermines* the interpretation. The ethically (from *ἦθος* translated as inner formation and habit) and situationally adopted *perspective* appears to determine the involved hermeneutic possibilities and constituted outcomes. Of course, this plasticity of perspectival interpretations does not amount to total arbitrariness. Nor is perspectivism the same as relativism.<sup>16</sup> The interesting thing here, anyway, is the condition of this ethos and the perspective that it allows or dictates that we take towards a multi-level and multi-faceted factic reality. Right away, we will see that perspectivism is unavoidable even for Phenomenology's view on these matters.<sup>17</sup> In the subsequent section, we will see what can be said about this ethos.

Perspectivism in the philosophy of value and the ensuing philosophy of history is basically a Nietzschean idea. In 1938, Raymond Aron presented it as meaning that events and epochs in history make sense only if they are "put into perspective."<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty strongly resisted the idea, appealing to his earlier work on the *Structure of Behavior* (1942) and the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), in which he was, of course, further elaborating and applying to particular problems from the

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<sup>16</sup> I have in mind a Kuhnian-phenomenological perspectival (not relativistic) historicized critical transcendentalism, suitably vaccinated against the temptations of blind faith by a good deal of Aristotelian praxial finiteness. More on this will be said below in §8.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, this is the point at which Phenomenology and philosophy in general start to converge with psychology and psychoanalysis, and then follow a parallel inquiry into the necessarily arising issues of the *normative* and the *deviant* and, correspondingly, the *normal* and the *pathological*. However, the crucial issue of how these two pairs of concerns can meet and communicate cannot be treated here properly. In the next section, I will only hint as to what a phenomenologically informed psychoanalysis could offer us with reference to the mechanisms that intervene in our unconscious hermeneutic formation of the meaning we project over the evil, our acts, and their results.

<sup>18</sup> Raymond Aron (1961) is perhaps the first phenomenologist to have developed a critique against the Hegelian and the Marxian objectivist interpretations of the meaning of history, suggesting a perspectivist reading of the possibility of knowledge in history. His motto was «*mise en perspective*» ("putting into perspective"), meaning that the historian can only make sense of an event by placing it in a context made possible by adopting a certain perspective on value, interpretive choices (choosing, within infinite spatial and temporal horizons, the appropriate spatial and chronological intervals within which an event acquires its meaning), and the approach allowed by the current historical situation: «The inevitable intrusion of contingent facts, the multiplicity of possible interpretive schemas, and the 'dialectical' interpenetration of all social domains belie any attempt to discover a total order in history. The historian's task is at best a *mise en perspective*» (Whiteside, 1986, pp. 135-136).

psychology of perception Husserl's path-breaking phenomenological analyses from the *Logical Investigations* (1900/1901) and the *Ideas II* (1912) regarding the interpretive nature of the intentional constitution of perceptual and valued things.<sup>19</sup> If Phenomenology shows, says Merleau-Ponty, that perceptual intentional constitution is objective and intersubjectively testable, despite the adumbrative and partial sensory contact with reality, there is no reason to worry that the same cannot be achieved in our knowledge of the meaning of history.<sup>20</sup> After all, given that we are aware of the possibility of illusory perceptual constitution, we can always be in a process of checking and abolishing the impeding or distorting factors and seek the optimal conditions of (objective and true) perception. There is, then, no reason to be afraid that the same cannot be done and achieved in our intersubjective experience of historical events and the meaning of history.

However, at least three possible lines of critique are applicable here with regard to the possibility of knowledge in the latter interplay. Firstly, the experiential givens in our understanding of events in history and history's course are not of the sort we have in sensory perception. The "givens" in history are not sensory irritations that get organized in sensory forms. They are emotively felt and valued events. As such, they do not only differ in intensity, but also in terms of their negative or positive polarities, degrees of significance, points of view and interests, etc., all of which motivate us accordingly.<sup>21</sup> Secondly, in perception, and only in sensory perception strictly speaking, the object of our knowledge is always already accomplished in what it is; its open temporality is only "spatial", so to speak. This is due to the fact that the currently unavailable sides of an object could become available if I decide to spend the necessary time to travel around it. The temporal distance of the sought after givens in history, however, is *radical*. As such, no amount of spatial travel could fetch them for me. Our view of history is *irreducibly* incomplete. In a sense, we do not constitute history (as an object); history constitutes us (as its agents). Thirdly, it appears that, even in the case of sensory perception, one may come to *know* that, for instance, the two parallel lines in the Müller-Lyer paradox are of equal length, but one cannot also

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<sup>19</sup> A detailed analysis of what Husserl means by perceptual pre-predicative constitution of the simple sensory thing and emotive constitution of the value layer of the good(s) as beings founded upon the primordial givenness of the perceptual thing, especially against Scheler's and Heidegger's criticisms, is contained in Theodorou, 2015, ch. 4-7, and Theodorou, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> For a clear and informative presentation of this, in a sense mute, quarrel between Merleau-Ponty and Aron, see Whiteside, 1986.

<sup>21</sup> A serious mistake in all the philosophies of history that are committed to the scientificity of historical knowledge, in the sense of the possibility and necessity of seeking and finding an 'objective' or Archimedean point of view for the corresponding research object, as is said to be the case in the natural scientific research, is this: they forget that research into historical events conducted from such a supposed point of view automatically ceases to be narration of *human* history; it loses any human significance and is reduced to mere *natural* history (at best, one of the species "human"). Pretending that, in history, there are no sides is a silent imposition of another side: to wit, the one that deconstructs concrete human existentiality.

learn to see them as equal! In the case of the (emotive) experience of values and motivations for action, this is an even more insurmountable fact. One may learn by education or ideology to *think* and *judge* that, for example, a snake is not a real threat, but *cannot* also help *experiencing* it as dangerous (or as disgusting, etc.) and acting accordingly.<sup>22</sup>

If this is a simple, superficial example, the case is far more serious in emotive experience (and, accordingly, motivation for action) in front of unprecedented objects, persons, situations, events, etc., that are estimated to have or not have this or that decisive impact on the fate of someone and his or her closer or wider circle of beloved persons. What kind of authority, then, is licensed to or can persuade, let alone legislate the beliefs of, someone who feels that an event or a situation constitutes a fatal threat that it is actually a benefit? Actually, history itself takes shape by fortunate and mostly unfortunate estimations of this kind.<sup>23</sup> Any attempt to replace what is then felt with what should be theoretically-ideologically believed and held as valid with regard to what something really is, and what effects it can have in history, can lead only either to a coerced conversion of the original ethos or to serious repression and future pathologies. In the course of human history, we have seen both. That our experience of history and its meaning is irreducibly grounded in our emotive experience of valued beings, then, exposes historical knowledge to the corresponding impediments and limitations. The experience of a historical event and its possible meaning is absolutely exposed to the facticity of reality and is thus always polarized, partial, and fallible. No one can here acquire a God's eye view. (Pretention to the contrary reasonably raises the suspicion of some psychopathology.) Thus, no estimation or interpretation of historical meaning can be objective, definitive, and compulsorily universal.

Why not, then, consciously build at least the "best" majoritarian interpretation and contractually try to believe in it? For instance, isn't the present European "humanitarian" value system and progressive reading of history's meaning, after all, the ideal candidate for such an agreement? The fact is that "humanitarianism" is a catchword about which we have not yet sufficiently reflected. The various theoretico-philosophical "anti-humanitarianisms" testify to its deconstructibility. In any case, if its meaning were to offer an irrefutable safe harbor, the last four centuries would not have been marked by the "domestic" and "external" violence and crimes we want to control or avoid even nowadays. Even full unanimity on this system, however, could

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<sup>22</sup> We also have to take into account the broadly accepted "leap of faith" that is involved in the constitution of historical meaning. (See on this, below, the reference to Lukacs' own similar remark.) But such a leap must always cross a dark abyss between the first and final steps. In the mediating darkness, all possible hobgoblins and bogeymen hide, scaring people differently and making them react in radically diverging ways.

<sup>23</sup> For a suggested treatment of this problem, see below in §8, especially the reference to the "moment" and to Aristotle's "ultimates."

not release it from any suspicion with regard to its specific dependencies on the deeper intentional-psychological life that formed and projected it as a way to deal with evil.

### **Historiodycism renders the present trivial and makes humans corrupt or superfluous**

In the “speculative philosophical” approaches to history, we can discern two plus one broad orientations to the reading of humanity’s praxio-existential place and motility in the cosmos. The optimistic readings see in history a course of progress, starting from an initial animal or undeveloped state and culminating in a final state where humans are almost divinized and good reigns everywhere. The pessimistic readings see this process as a succession of downfalls that lead us from a glorious divine or heroic initial state to a final state where evil and destruction annihilate everything. Another reading, however, in a way combines these two perspectives. This is the eschatological-messianic meaning of history, which sees our current situation as fallen from an ideal paradisiac state and believes that, through the culmination of evil, we move towards a final phase of destruction, immediately after which, however, a savior will rise in order to bring redemption and somehow restore the whole reality in its pre-fallen originality.<sup>24</sup>

In this section, we will examine the first two of these approaches to meaning in history, including how they relate to the reality of evil and their effect on the concrete action of persons against the timescale of an actual finite life. (We will return to the third view in the following section.) Both of these interpretations, we will see, internally nurture a self-undermining process for humans who believe in them or upon whom it is enforced. Since we can assume that we know how the pessimist mentality annihilates the value of the acting person and its living moments, let us see how this may also be the case in the (unrealistically or utopian) optimistic reading of history.

At first sight it may appear normal and healthy that people usually tend to accept and subscribe to the progressive or optimist reading of the meaning of reality, life, history, etc. This may be seen as reflecting the sturdiness and resilience of humans in dealing with resistant reality and evil encounters in ways that balance or lighten anxiety and make possible sober striving towards some salvatory perspective. In fact, however, this normal defense mechanism can be easily overthrown by psychopathological disbelief in and *denial* of the overwhelming reality of evil and suffering, which

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<sup>24</sup> Certainly, not all eschatological views are theodical or, accordingly, historiodycical in the strict sense. Nonetheless, to the extent that their difference lies in whether the—in any case—existent plan or logic behind historical becoming and manifestations of evil therein is or is not knowable by the human intellect in its details, it does not affect the essentials of what is said here.

transforms unconsciously unbearable awe- and anxiety-inspiring becoming into a pleasurable spectacle.<sup>25</sup> There appears to be evil and suffering, but the cosmic logic behind history and the universe has knowledge and providence of everything in the context of an ultimately supra-human salvatory plan. In its extreme unrealistic version, this can be seen as a psychoanalytically questionable maneuver, which instead of offering peace to the gravely worried psyche prescribes only ominous consequences. Depending on the circumstances, this may apply to perpetrators or victims of the corresponding motivated action.<sup>26</sup> The possibility of facing up to what evil is, therefore, is excluded. This stance makes it impossible to prepare for or avoid it as much as possible, or, more importantly, to treat it in a prudent way. The alcoholic that denies his or her condition will never address the problem properly and, if things worsen, may become paranoid. When evil is denied or over-rationalized as a fleeting pseudo-appearance within a larger-scale process that is really good, and at the end of which the destruction of the evil and the institution of a kingdom of good are guaranteed, humans become either corrupt or superfluous (depending on the circumstances).<sup>27</sup> To be clear, this tendency is not characteristic of all cultures to the same degree, nor all religions or ideologies. It applies particularly to the (uncritical) *dogmatic* optimism of all eschatological and progressivist utopias that claim to have been blessed with a revelation or scientific knowledge that deciphers the absolute essence and meaning of everything for all throughout the total span of time in the becoming of the universe.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> In its progressive secular grounding, this seems to correspond to the stance of the judges, executioners, and ideologically faithful innocent victims in the 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarian regimes, the persecuted or executed ideologues under all possible hostile regimes, and political terrorists of all kinds. In its religious theodical/eschatological grounding, this may correspond to the stance of, e.g., fanatic Crusaders (from the Inquisition to the Ku Klux Klan), fanatic Muslim suicide bombers and terrorists, and all passive or active martyrs of every faith.

<sup>26</sup> This, of course, introduces some new elements to the meaning of our concern regarding the connection of politics, particularly (but not only) on the left, to psychoanalysis and the unconscious. Appeals to psychoanalysis, especially Freudian psychoanalysis, use its theory in order to explain why the supposed “subject of history”, such as the proletariat, movements or identities, or whatever else, does not engage in the supposedly expected revolution through which it will gain its (and the whole of humanity’s) emancipation from the socio-economic evils of exploitation, reification, repression, etc. Instead of or next to this, perhaps another orientation could be equally useful. Psychoanalysis and the recourse to the unconscious should also be used in to explain to ourselves how one arrives at, and can believe to be sound, an ideology that considers some absolute, ideal emancipation as “!”objectively possible and even provable by a supposed scientific knowledge of cosmo-historical laws. It may, then, turn out that the alienated “know better”; naturally, in a clearly *tragic* sense that presses for awareness and recognition. The same can, of course, be done for the philosophers and their own perfect “all round” theories with solutions for everything. Cfr., e.g., Theodorou, 2013. See also below note 41.

<sup>27</sup> Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759) has much to say on this. From a certain point of view, also, Luther and Protestantism reacted against Catholic Christian soteriology, which moved along similar lines or at least in this general spirit. The Protestant divination of labor presently seems to be one fold of its reaction against the soteriology of guaranteed salvation.

<sup>28</sup> In all cases, we can draw the line between reasonable and dogmatic stance by recourse to Kant’s distinction between critical *hope* about what one cannot know and uncritical taking one’s imaginary

Especially with regard to the totalitarianisms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Arendt appears to have given us some basic insights concerning the prescribed possibilities.<sup>29</sup> In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1951, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1958a) she develops the thematic of the superfluousness of humans that results from totalitarian and dogmatic ideological readings of the meaning of history.

Ideologies are harmless, uncritical, and arbitrary opinions only as long as they are not believed in seriously. Once their claim to total validity is taken literally they become the nuclei of logical systems in which, as in the systems of paranoiacs, everything follows comprehensibly and even compulsorily once the first premise is accepted. The insanity of such systems lies not only in their first premise but in the very logicity with which they are constructed. The curious logicity of all isms, their simple-minded trust in the salvation value of stubborn devotion without regard for specific, varying factors, already harbors the first germs of totalitarian contempt for reality and factuality. (Arendt 1958a, 457-8)

In *The Human Condition* (1958b), we come across the thematic I referred to as “unpreparedness.” Mentioning approvingly Machiavelli’s relevant estimation, she says that the application of the Christian directive of universal love and faith in God’s providence in affairs of real, social life and the state leads to corruption and makes people unable to protect themselves and the state from evil.

Goodness, therefore, as a consistent way of life, is not only impossible within the confines of the public realm, it is even destructive of it. Nobody perhaps has been more sharply aware of this ruinous quality of doing good than Machiavelli, who, in a famous passage, dared to teach men “how not to be good.” [...] [G]oodness that comes out of hiding and assumes a public role is no longer good, but corrupt in its own terms and will carry its own corruption wherever it goes. [...] A reformed Church therefore was even more dangerous in Machiavelli’s eyes, and he looked with great respect but greater apprehension upon the religious revival of his time, the “new orders” which, by “saving religion from being destroyed by the licentiousness of the prelates and heads of the Church,” teach people to be good and not “to resist evil”—with the result that “wicked rulers do as much evil as they please.” (Arendt, 1958b, pp. 76-77)<sup>30</sup>

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for knowledge of facts. Especially under conditions of continuous intense hardship and evil, the collapse of this difference turns hope for the good and for salvation into denial of evil and suffering that climaxes in paranoia.

<sup>29</sup> For the possibility of generalizing these analyses from the perspective of theological politics and political theology, see below note 40.

<sup>30</sup> For another reason, see Bernasconi, 2005. From a certain point of view, Europe’s current crisis appears to be the result of a disappointing incapacity to find a compromise between the interests of its ruling right-wing elite and the utopian vision of its political left, and the authentically felt threat that these inspire in the overwhelming moderate and disenchanting majority of its citizens. This failure,



Again, people who are caught within the web of historicist (but not only historicist) optimism are extremely dangerous, because they think that no matter how they evaluate the situation, whatever choices they make, the “laws of history” have predestined that, despite the possible transient evil and suffering caused by their actions, progress is safeguarded for humanity and, in the long run, the good will thrive. These are the conditions under which banal evil can appear and flourish! Banal evil is the result of people who light-heartedly engage in thoughtless, disastrous or criminal actions, having persuaded themselves that they are participants in a large-scale plan that is predestined to produce the best world for a truly emancipated and evolved humanity. We can see this in the following unfortunate and educative example.

Lukacs is known for his personal tragic itinerary, from his early existentialist fascination with Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky and tragic drama, to his turn to communism in a way that was rejected by Soviet intellectuals. At the time of his conversion (1918-19), Lukacs first wrote a piece titled *Bolshevism as a Moral Problem* (1918), wherein he wonders why the violent seizure of power from capitalist oppressors by the proletariat would bring about a state where all class struggle ceases, rather than a mere reversal of the oppression. No answer is certain, says Lukacs, and a *leap of faith* is necessary. As a modernized echo of Plato’s voice, he suggests that *people must learn to believe in the Bolshevik* «metaphysical assumption that *evil can engender the good*, or, as Razumikhin says in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, that it is possible to lie our way through to the truth» (Lukacs, 1977, p. 424; translation slightly modified, emphasis added). (Remember Dante’s saying: «the road to hell is paved with the best intentions!») The next year, Lukacs was more determined. He notoriously over-theorized the role of the revolutionary *qua* guardian of holy knowledge of the laws of society, economy, history, life, and death. For the newborn revolutionary Georg Lukacs, his *Tactics and Ethics* (1919) was, as the event has been characterized, his «Devil’s pact» (see Bell, 1977, p. 437). In this, he wrote:

It is not the task of ethics to invent prescriptions for correct action, nor to iron out or deny the insuperable, tragic conflicts of human destiny. On the contrary: ethical self-awareness makes it quite clear that there are situations—tragic situations—in which it is impossible to act without burdening oneself with guilt. But at the same time it teaches us that [...] there is a standard attaching to correct and incorrect action. This standard we call “sacrifice.” [T]he individual [...] sacrifices his inferior self on the altar of the higher idea [...]. [T]he idea represents an imperative of the

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resulting from the denial to acknowledge the reality of the consequences of European idealizations (i.e., that our values are the right ones and will eventually be espoused by all humanity, when they in fact are commonly perceived as in a state of nihilistic downfall) and the implied palpable unpreparedness, disorients the activist youth and gives excuses to the cynical right, the populist left, and resurgent nationalisms.

world-historical situation, a historico-philosophical mission. (Lukacs, 1972a, p. 10)

He then cited a passage from a novel by Boris Savinkov, the leader of a terrorist group during the Russian Revolution from 1904 to 1906:

[M]urder is not allowed, it is an absolute and unpardonable sin; it “may” not, but yet it “must” be committed. [...] [H]e sees, not the justification (that is impossible) but the ultimate moral basis of the terrorist’s act as the sacrifice for his brethren; not only of his life, but also of his purity, his morals, his very soul. In other words, only he who acknowledges unflinchingly and without any reservations that murder is under no circumstances to be sanctioned can commit the murderous deed that is truly—and tragically—moral. To express this sense of the most profound human tragedy in the incomparably beautiful words of Hebbel’s Judith: “Even if God had placed sin between me and the deed enjoined upon me—who am I to be able to escape it?” (*ivi*, p. 11)

(How strangely similar these words sound to those of Eichmann’s testimony in Jerusalem!) Then, in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923/1972b), Lukacs condemns the evil function of alienating reification (*Verdinglichung*) within the commercialized relations of capitalist production and develops his view regarding the meaning of the peoples’ emancipation from this. He teaches that, in order to liberate themselves from capitalist reification, people should arrive at a self-understanding according to which humans are in fact immersed in a dialectical, historical materialist process, which prescribes that history will bring about a final classless society where all evil (exploitation, shortages of material goods, etc.) will disappear and all humanity will achieve peace and brotherliness in a totalization of everything with everything.<sup>31</sup> But is this radically different from the case of reification? Does this restore the person in his or her sought after dignity? From a certain point of view, it recommends lightheartedness or inconsiderateness with regard to the lives and acts of revolutionaries and each particular person caught up in this dialectic. This call for “thoughtlessness” lies at the heart of totalitarian banal evil. From the alienation of reification, of being mere commodities, humans now face the danger of falling prey to the alienation of instrumentalization, of becoming mere amoral and dispensable cogs in the machinery of a material progress that works above any person and heralds the coming of “humanity’s” salvation on Earth.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> For the most recent Frankfurterian and a more charitable understanding of this text, see Kavoulakos (forthcoming).

<sup>32</sup> Arendt has more to say on this in her *Ideology and Terror* (1953), which became the last chapter of the second edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958).

But it is not only the ideologues of the revolutionary left seemingly willing to undertake the burden of the sins that have to be perpetrated and sacrifice themselves or others on the altar of future progress and happiness. Ideologues, if one might call them this way, exist also on the political right.<sup>33</sup> They, too, are also willing to offer themselves and their innocence for the betterment of society as a collection of individuals. They allow themselves to become greedy speculators who destroy employees, families, societies, pension savings, industries and national economies, leading to homelessness and suicide, but always in the name of capitalism's higher truth and a glorious future for all humankind. Bankers and brokers are allowed the almost godly privilege of playing their aggressive debt and destruction accumulating games due to the metaphysical belief that this is the way to purge sick and impotent members of society from the fundamental mechanisms of the economy, which guarantee future prosperity for all. For the whole system to work properly towards the projected progress, capitalist 'functionaries' have implemented, if not intensified and accelerated, the logic of the market's "invisible hand."<sup>34</sup> In this "ideology", there is a "godly" plan that guarantees the differentially just distribution of the breadcrumbs that fall from the lavish table of the rich to the poor and wounded—but, as it is demanded, also happy—Job-like figures around it.

The recent historico-political paradox, thus, arises: political action that claims to have absolute knowledge about the objective good for all creates a history of repeated banal evil for everyone. Let us, then, "thank" all these commissars of emancipation and angels of affluence for their 'great contribution' to the self-realization of history's supposed sublime meaning and move forward. Let us ask ourselves whether there is left for us any other possible view of the human condition and its fate.

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<sup>33</sup> "Only a shallow empiricism can fail to see that such monstrous societies are not the product of a national peculiarity (the German character) or a system of government ('communism') but are part and parcel of our civilization" (James, 1947).

<sup>34</sup> Smith's original idea seems to have been that no one could ever understand something like the logic of this invisible hand. But in a rather Leninist interpretation of the idea, Chicago neoliberalism in fact claims to have deciphered it and to be in a position to legislate accordingly; as Lenin claimed to know better than history, so Chicagoists claim to know better than the market. Totalitarianism is precisely raising such a claim and organizing governmental politics accordingly. Whatever is shorter than this view's Procrustean bed is stretched, and whatever is longer is cut down to fit perfectly. Ideas, especially axiological ones, are never merely personal data, never simply neutral mental content. As Gramsci discovered, they have *material power* that always demands to mold reality in their image. The precise status it is acknowledged to them over their objects and within history makes all the difference.

## Phenomenology, Benjamin's "straight gate," and the gravid moment

The following (non-Marxist) reading of Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (February-May 1940/1968) (especially I, VIII)<sup>35</sup> can, perhaps, help us to understand the predicament better. For a considerable time during the Weimar Republic days between World War I and World War II, Benjamin flirted with the idea of a hybrid messianic and dialectical materialist reading of history. Unfortunately, in 1940 he had to flee the Nazi regime, which had seized power in Germany. He found refuge in Paris, but there his life was soon under threat from the Vichy regime and he had to escape to safety once more. He thus crossed the French-Spanish border and arrived at Portbou, Catalonia. The fascist Francoist police told him that they would depart him back to France into the hands of the Gestapo. In absolute desperation over his fate, Benjamin committed suicide.

However, while in Paris, Benjamin found the presence of mind, courage, and time to write down perhaps his most political and philosophical piece, the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. It seems to me that the idea he tries to communicate in that text is that historical materialism is a fetishist myth that suffering humans have projected upon the course of evil events in history. It is a trick that over-optimists use to make history tell a secular fairy tale of progress. Caught in the spell of this fetish, people forget to be practical and sensitive in order to prudently confront the real evils that sometimes (or more often than not) prevail. Instead, they see these evils as mere passing events with no real present significance, since they are assimilable, fleeting moments in an age-old process that is predetermined to bring about the annihilation of all evil and the eternal reign of good for all. The Angel of History (inspired by Klee's *Angelus Novus*), Benjamin realizes, can only see the past (while pushed towards the future by history's winds). What he sees is thus only a series of unquestionably palpable catastrophes and suffering. This is the reality to which sober eyes can only bear witness.

This evil, he remarks, is crystallized as a "monad" in each successive "present," potentially harboring within itself the whole of history. It is no longer seen as an insignificant, transient moment within a historicist understanding of successive events

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<sup>35</sup> «The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" [or "state of exception"] [*Ausnahmezustand*] in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that *in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm*. The current amazement that the [evil] things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—*unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable*» (Benjamin, 1968, Thesis VIII; emphases added). For the Marxist reading, see Löwy 2005.

in a “homogenous” and otherwise “empty” temporal horizon.<sup>36</sup> The future cannot be seen even by the Angel, let alone by finite, mortal humans. The idea that historical evolution and its meaning could be seen from within the process of historical becoming, and that what we would see is the final reign of the good is, we now see, a psychotic vision, unconsciously formed by the unbearable burden of suffering immeasurable natural and ethical evils.

If we are to see Benjamin’s messianic understanding of history—his belief that, at some unknowable time and through an unknowable process, a savior figure will arise amongst humans in order to liberate them from suffering—as the residual delusion of a soul drowning in anxiety in front of an imminent lethal threat, we can remain content with the aforementioned part of this view. For us, it should not be necessary that «every second of time [...] [is] the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.»<sup>37</sup> In its irreducible facticity, every historical present moment is gravid with its own sense, dignity, and unpredictable potential for humanity’s fate. It should be lived in terms of what it could be, as well as remembered as what it was proved to be and as what it could have been. An Aristotelian phronetic estimation of the ultimates (*τὰ ἔσχατα*) involved in praxial circumstances and aretaic deliberation over the appropriate fallible principles to guide our praxial confrontation with them appear to be the only refuge we can have in our perspectival relatedness and engagement with the factic and critical implications for our resultant future.

A more prudent understanding of meaning in history is called for, along with a corresponding repositioning of politics and action and a more courageous acceptance of the human condition. There is no Canaan at the end of the long march through the deserts of suffering, only a few unexpected oases that soon need to be abandoned and many more mirages that lead some to madness and others to depression. There are only humans tormented by evil and the unnaturalness of an *arete* that is posed to them as a problem: how to be in the cosmos which is imagined as a home for all

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<sup>36</sup> See Benjamin’s Thesis XVII, XVIII. Benjamin appears to have drawn this concept of the moment in history from Nietzsche’s «History and Life» and from the analysis of the «Moment» in the section of *Zarathustra* titled *On the Vision and the Riddle*.

<sup>37</sup> See Benjamin’s Thesis XVIII.B. Arendt once argued that Christian and Jewish life as such is apolitical and that this was a result of the way the religions instruct their followers to exist in the world and in history (see Arendt 1994, 16-7). This, however, may be a serious mistake. If the political concerns the secularly-humanely conceivable correct rules for governing our co-existence in this world’s social multitude, and if the religious reading of meaning in history emphasizes the insignificance of concrete humans within the larger plan of an intelligent and voluntaristic supra-cosmic deity, then two things are implied. Firstly, under the absolute sovereignty of the latter (and at least within the scope it determines) no proper politics is conceivable or allowed (unless multiple religions/dogmas belong within that scope, in which case a theological politics is set in action). Secondly, any attempt at maintaining both concerns (within the same scope) can only lead to what is known as “political theology.” Now, since, as Hermeneutics teaches, no radical overcoming of or separation from tradition is possible (especially within literate cultures), the “fusion of horizons” condemns, for instance, modern politics to be exposed—positively or negatively, obediently or reactively—to former theologies and their corresponding evaluations of everything.

beings, but ever and again proves unviably *Unheimlich* for humans? What may come out of such a daring understanding of human existence and praxis in the lifeworld is a *realistic* view of meaning in history<sup>38</sup> and a correspondingly careful, though neither conservative nor reactionary, rearrangement of politics and action. Since, as Aristotle would have it, praxis is always exposed to the grave danger of guiding an action oriented by a wrongly conceived system of values, care should always be shown for deliberated novelty and corrective reparation of damages. Aristotelian phronesis, then, along with Kantian judgment and common sense as introduced to political theory, albeit incompletely, by Arendt (1992), can serve as our first rudimentary and tentative guide to a better and better understanding of the *Realitätsprinzip* and the stance it is expected to inspire.

From this perspective, the prospect of a supposedly determined future can never simplistically justify any current crime or suffering. No belief or faith in some absolute final good excuses the indifferent or resentful encouragement of a present evil; for it will rise and devour us all.

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<sup>38</sup> The so-called “Lacanian left” has turned its attention from attempting to explain why the supposed historical subject does not engage in acts that will liberate it from its ‘pathological state’ and offer it pure pleasure towards attempting to understand the hard truth of how it has come to this condition and how it can satisfactorily live with it. But, apart from its questionable leftness, this perspective leaves us in an aporia. It seems to call us to abolish the essentialist-normative claim for an ideal state, which ought to but cannot be achieved, in favor of a descriptive report about what happens to be the case with the anyhow ‘perverse’ “imaginary” and merely satisfactory (i.e., not fully pleasing) “enjoyment.” Sooner or later, however, the question arises: whose phenomenologico-dialectically mutually co-formative “symbolic” and “imaginary” system should be the at-each-time defining one for a unitary society? How can we be certain whose “imaginary” and “enjoyment” should never be forced on all? In such a contest, there is no guarantee either that the (evolutionarily) fittest will also be proved the most caring for all, or that the one that (at least) appears most caring also has the magical power to successfully persuade or compel factic reality to become what he or she believes it to be. The abandonment of “all round” theories, therapies, and solutions in general cannot work without the appeal to phronesis and common sense. What the latter mean becomes of course, once again, a serious task for the future.

\* This paper is an extended and elaborated version of the manuscript I presented at the workshop “Phenomenology and History” (July 18-19, Rethymno, Crete, Greece). I would like to thank all the participants for their comments and especially Fabrizio Palombi for his generous invitation to contribute to the present volume. Thanks also go to David Standen for his help in matters of linguistic correctness and clarity.

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## **Abstract**

### **Evil, unconscious, and meaning in history. Outline of a phenomenological critique of utopian-historiodicial politics**

Politics presupposes an understanding of meaning in history, according to which it manages the actions that accord with or serve this meaning (as an ultimate good). The aim of this paper is to examine the process by which meaning in history is formed, as well as its character. To do this, I employ suitably modified phenomenological analyses of intentional consciousness to bring them as close as possible to the thematic of the psychoanalytic unconscious. I first try to sketch the basis on which the modern problem of meaning in history arises and the fundamental responses produced by modern philosophy. Then, I delineate two basic understandings of meaning in history as developed by the founders of Phenomenology, Husserl and Heidegger, which are surprisingly close to those of modern metaphysics. Next, I draft the process by which the topic of the unconscious surfaces in the context of difficulties faced by critical epistemology in its effort to penetrate the unperceivable folds of reality, which should be acknowledged as a precondition of experience but also of action and ethics. After this, a brief phenomenological account regarding action and praxis in response to evil is presented as a specific concretization of this philosophy after its vaccination with the thematic of the unconscious. Next, I examine Merleau-Ponty's final, although ultimately failed, attempt to construct a phenomenological proof of the possibility of objective knowledge regarding historical meaning. In

addition, I consider how persistent maintenance of the ideologically optimistic reading of history simply concocts political action that crucially exposes humanity to the danger of perpetrating what Arendt called “banal evil.” The question, then, is whether Phenomenology can offer a non-nihilistic understanding of existence, action, and events in history. I argue that a cautious non-Marxist and de-Messianized re-interpretation of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), in tandem with an Aristotelian analysis of praxis and Kantian-Arendtian “common sense,” offers a sober, perspectivist, realistic understanding of the place of humans in the cosmos and of the historical course we happen to take in it.

**Keywords:** Arendt, Aristotle, Benjamin, politics, praxis, unconscious.