

Historical Discourse: An Ethical Discontinuity of a Detour of Meanings

Jennifer Luo

Abstract

Twentieth century has witnessed a series of historically monumental events that would forever transform the social, cultural, and political platforms of human civilization. In response, this has led intellectuals questioning the legitimacy of the Enlightenment tradition of rational objectivism, and ultimately to critique the notion of representability in the grandiose and splendor of meta-narratives. Today, I am no longer questioning whether historiography is possible, and neither do I want to question methodological and epistemological accuracy and legitimacy. Rather, my goal is to re-conceptualize historical knowledge as an historical understanding within the space of philosophy. In this manner, the past can be argued to be not an object to be mastered and interrogated, but a Thou to be engaged with in a dialogical understanding, allowing it to speak to us through traces. History, then, becomes an ethical task situated and mediated between hermeneutics and deconstruction. The point is to situate one against the other in order to exemplify the tensions that help to sustain a possible space of impossibility. It is in this permanent *futuristic* event of agreement that this possibility will be waiting for us.

Key Words

Historiography, History, Theory, Hermeneutics, Deconstruction, Ethics

Twentieth century has witnessed a series of historically monumental events that would forever transform the social, cultural, and political platforms of human civilization. In response, this has led intellectuals questioning the legitimacy of the Enlightenment tradition of rational objectivism, and ultimately to critique the notion of representability in the grandiose and splendor of meta-narratives. The French linguistic turn of the 1960s only further complicated the matter, giving professional historians little recourse to fall back into the comfortable space of objective historiography. As we enter into the twenty-first century, postmodern critique has no longer left historians scrambling frantically to justify their positions - they have now returned to writing their history books. Today, I am no longer questioning whether historiography is possible, and neither do I want to question methodological and epistemological accuracy and legitimacy. I no longer want to address the first question of possibility because despite the postmodern critique for an unrepresentable past, history as a discipline has nevertheless continued to flourish and continued to pursue its possibility. The second question of epistemology and methodology would be an immense and inexhaustible task; as such, it would be very difficult to uptake such complex ideas here in a brief essay. Instead, in situating between and transcending beyond Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jacques Derrida, my task is to reconceptualize historical knowledge as historical understanding. Standing within and without the philosophical discourse of history is a space of destabilized play where the implications are twofold: there is a possibility of an impossibility that brings out a tension nevertheless remaining true to ethics; and an openness to dialogue where understanding is never a clear and direct route to the other, but rather a complicated detour that often times may lead us astray and disillusioned.

As such, my question becomes ethical and is one that concerns any one who dares to call him/herself an intellectual. It is ethical because it concerns an understanding of an other subject. As intellectuals it concerns us because as scholars, as students and as teachers, our responsibility is to pursue historical questions and help foster a meaningful engagement with the other.

1. The Scene of Historiography

The role of historiography and the possibility of a truthful representation of the past using the empirical method with assumptions of pure objectivity have been relentlessly interrogated by the so-called postmodernist movement beginning in the middle of the twentieth century. The critiques of classical historicism under the tradition of Leopold von Ranke have been addressed by historical theorists such as Wilhelm Dilthey, and most recently by other theorists in disciplines including sociology, feminism, linguistics, post-colonialism, and so on. Today, after engaging with postmodern thinkers, historians are not unaware of the cautionary measures that need to be taken in order to maximize the space of historiography.

On the one hand is the classical historicism of Rankean objectivism where the investigator can recover a truthful past through a sifting of evidence and then simply reconstruct and present the past as it had "actually happened". Counter to this tradition on the other hand is subjective relativism where there is no determinable Truth nor a uniform and coherent trajectory of events and their respective causes and effects. Rather, there are multiple and complex truths, some of which have been lost and

thus irretrievable, thereby calling to question the validity and accuracy of classical historicism. Yet on either end of the spectrum are dangerous ethical limits. In the first case, the call for an objective narrative without the awareness of an “historically effected consciousness”, as Gadamer calls it,ⁱ would thereby illegitimatize other marginal groups and their narratives.ⁱⁱ There is also an immanent danger of abusing rationality in an instrumentalization of reason as a justification for institutional goals and motives, claimed to be in the best interest of a particular group of people.ⁱⁱⁱ In the second case, ultimate subjective relativism allows for extremists such as Keith Jenkins arguing for an end to history and an end to ethics.^{iv} This raises the question of whether such radical subjectivism really has anything meaningful to say. While it may be true that historians can never get at the whole truth, advocating impossibility is simply not a productive argument and allows for an escape into nihilism and professional irresponsibility.

A question that I would like to raise here is whether we can ever rightly speak of a historical knowledge that does justice to the historicity of humankind - humankind that consists not on one person, but a plurality of individuals that cannot be subsumed under a universal category. Or perhaps one would be more responsible if one rethinks of it as an historical understanding? Is there a difference in diction? There is: the connotation of knowledge as some objective truth obtained through observation reconstructed by logic into a causal explanation, and the connotation of understanding as a dialogue that can be achieved through intersubjective experience and willful participation. Such an understanding is then open to critique and differences, is exposed to risks, and is never guaranteed. In this reconceptualization of historical knowledge as historical understanding the past is no longer an object to be mastered, but rather a subject, a Thou to engage with in a dialogical understanding, allowing it to speak to us through traces, and through playful interrogation.

2. Representing with Difference; Destabilizing with Play

Gadamerian hermeneutics claims for the universality of dialogical interpretation and understanding. For Gadamer, it is about the suspension of prejudices and presuppositions so as to strengthen the other’s viewpoint. But even this assumption of a continuous understanding can become problematic, as his first encounter with Derrida had proved to be. Gadamer also teases out the ontology of representations. Instead of thinking of the copy of an original as an inferior imitation, Gadamer wants to argue that each reproduction is not a mere copy, but rather insofar as it re-presents the original there is something different in this re-presentation.

This means that historical accounts as representative reconstructions of past events are attempts to reproduce the past in a meaningful way so as to contribute to a better understanding. Each textual interpretation becomes different in its mode of presentation thereby adding something on to a previous interpretation inasmuch as it brings something new to the surface, creating a tension between the old and the new. As such, each re-presentation intensifies the understanding in its totality within the larger picture. As Gadamer would have it, “presentation remains essentially tied to the original represented in it. But it is more than a copy. That the representation is a picture—and not the original itself—does not mean anything negative, any mere diminution of being, but rather an autonomous reality... It is no longer a one-side relationship.”^v In other words, in becoming its own presentation in re-presenting, it achieves a state of its own reality.

Another way to consider this would be in the dynamics of play. What happens when we experience play in the most innocent, most primitive sense? When one is at play, one allows play itself to envelop and take in oneself to the point where the self is lost over to play. What follows is an opening up of an infinite expansion of possibilities in which play unfolds. While such possibilities may be argued as bounded by what each individual brings to the forefront of play, nevertheless there spring up incalculable surprises which one can never fully prepare for. This ontological structure may also be understood in the aesthetics of improvisation. That is to say, in play one can never fully prepare for the coming of the other; yet at the same time one ought to prepare by bringing forth one’s presuppositions and prejudices in order to be surprised. It is only within these imminent surprises that the beginning of a new understanding can take place. However historical play is not a pantomime; it does not only involve gestures and actions, but also speech. Which is where we may turn to Derrida for a critique of language.

Notorious for writing extremely difficult critiques that span across multiple humanity disciplines including literature, feminism, politics, philosophy, and of course history, one may wonder of what value Derrida’s deconstruction may provide to understanding any sort of constructive historical theory. Despite what many critics of Derrida have accused, deconstruction is not destruction, and neither is it a condemnation of a logocentric Western philosophical tradition of metaphysics as inherently corrupt or dysfunctional. Rather, the point of deconstruction is to break through the rigidity of foundations and structures so as to expose the presuppositions of an overarching truth, the dangers of which include institutional authority that may marginalize the other outside of what is deemed to be the

ultimate truth.^{vi} Derrida has also argued that writing leaves a mark of its own active signature, and in standing in for the absence of the writer and the subject, the meaning drifts, and thus breaks with the presence required for iterability.^{vii}

Language is not only never transparent, but that it never retains self-identity, which is required for iterability; meaning is thus inherently ambiguous and there can be no guarantee of symmetrical exchange of signification. In this problematization of the relationship between sign, signified, and signifier that nevertheless must rely on the usage of language is the implication of multiple meanings that destabilize the very structure of language itself. This destabilization works to reinvigorate otherwise dead meanings bound to the logic of either-or binary oppositions. What allows for the condition of writing, and ultimately language and understanding to function is not a self-same symmetrical relationship between sign and signified, and neither is it a passive difference, but rather Derrida's famous neologism *différance* intended to describe the active and passive deferral of meaning.^{viii} There is inherently a movement not of metaphysical presence, but that of absence, intervention, and breaches.

But the fabrication of historical representation through language - between thought, speech, and action - is already a detour of meanings. At this level of historiography there is not only a language barrier but also a temporal chasm that brings problems of historical context and the question of accurate interpretation. One of the major problems of classical historicism was the naïve belief that the historian could somehow bridge the temporal distance between the past and the present, bringing the ghosts of the past into the present and write about them as if they were still alive. Time, says Gadamer, "is not a chasm that can be bridge. It is the ground which supports the arrival of the past and where the present takes its roots." Furthermore, "every 'new' position which replaces another continues to need the 'former' because it cannot itself be explained so long as it knows neither *in* what nor *by* what it is opposed." Thus, temporal distance is what provides the grounding upon which an event of understanding can unfold.^{ix} Ultimately, understanding can never be a direct relay of meanings, but rather a dissemination of meanings filtered through complications such as language and context, dispersed between an interplay of differences and caught between the conditions of absence and presence... and thus a nuanced detour. Further, it is not the mark of identity that draws the relationship closer, but rather it is precisely the trace of difference that distinguishes one from the other that it is possible to argue that a copy, in retaining its bond to with the original is able to become itself - this is the necessary tension of historical representation. There is no direct route to historical understanding; similarly, there is no immediate path to the understanding of the other. As soon as dialogue begins, it is already an interrupted and unfinished conversation.

3. *Ich und Du: A Pseudo-Quasi-Structure of Dialogue*

Gadamer's project of a philosophical hermeneutics of the human sciences is to formulate how to better understand the human person as s/he is historically situated - i.e., to become more aware of a historically effected consciousness. In light of understanding history through interpretation, how is the individual, who already stands as thrown within history, allow the past to speak for itself without imposing meanings upon it? For Gadamer it is ultimately impossible to sever the individual from his/her subjectivity. Yet one can utilize these presuppositions and prejudices and through language come to a better understanding of the other in dialogue. For Derrida the other whom we have no immediate access to, is never a transparent self to the self; how can one assume that through dialogue any sort of understanding can be achieved? And yet, the other whom confronts me demands instantly that I not only acknowledge her existence, but that the fact that she turns her gaze upon me she confront and stands against me as an other human being; unique, yet just the same as me. This double resistance of confrontation becomes an ethical imperative that despite resistances and misunderstandings, nevertheless understanding must be perservered.

We bring to the forefront of understanding our biases, prejudices, and presuppositions - these we can never escape from. For Gadamer, these are necessary conditions for understanding. The trick is knowing how to temporarily suspend and bracket one's judgment, allowing the other's voice to be heard over one's own, and then proceeding in such a way so as to strengthen the other's argument; within this dynamism something changes. But for Derrida, the preconditions for understanding are rather breaches, dissociations, and following Friedrich Schleiermacher, misunderstandings - the very forms that took place between Derrida and Gadamer's first encounter in 1981.^x Surely, Gadamer is not ignorant of this other *pre*condition. As he himself acknowledged, understanding is "restricted by the resistance offered by statements or texts and brought to an end by the regaining of a shared possession of meaning, just as happens in a conversation when we try to shed light upon a difference of opinion or misunderstanding."^{xi} In questioning the other, one questions oneself. When understanding takes place, the original presuppositions and prejudices are altered. This transformation is what expands the finitude of our horizons. As perhaps both Gadamer and Derrida would agree, to understand is to understand

differently, though each formulates this in different ways: Gadamer stresses the universality of hermeneutics, while Derrida emphasizes the inherent tensions. In keeping dialogue open, there is always an element of surprise.

The dialogical structure of understanding where one enters into a relationship and converses with the past as other is in fact a pseudo-quasi-structure where one can never fully prepare for the event of understanding that happens over us. I call it a pseudo-quasi-structure in an attempt to retain structure on the one hand, but also to push it to its limits: because one can never do away with structures; i.e. there must be some foundation, some common ground to begin from. I locate this common ground in the good will and responsibility of the other, and the existence of a desire to come to an understanding.^{xii} It is *pseudo* because while the foundation is a condition for understanding, as dialogue unfolds the structure may or may not subsist; it is *quasi* because the flow of understanding is both rigid and fluid: rigid because it requires some form of communicative language which restricts communication, and fluid insofar as there are an infinite number of unpredictable possibilities that may unfold.

Historical understanding is not an I-It relationship but rather an I-Thou. That is to say, historical understanding is an intimate event, a dialogical experience that requires participation from both interlocutors. The Thou, which can be seen as the historical past, is not a tangible object that is subject to one's mastery under observation. Rather, it is a Thou that relates itself to us - puts demands on us, even - that is, it is a relationship that involves a tension of active participation, and passive anticipation. It is active insofar as we must pose questions for participatory inquiry, and passive insofar as our anticipation towards the past does not guarantee anything. It is a Thou that demands understanding, and yet at the same time restricts access. This double movement means that for historical interpretation there is an ethical dimension that needs to be teased out.

4. Practical Historiography as Ethical

To summarize thus far: what has been laid out is a basic roadmap of the theoretical spectrum of historiography and a positing of limits and dangers on either extreme. Focusing on the themes of instability, the dynamics of absence and presence in repetition, and disseminating detours from Derrida, and those of play, historicity, and dialogue from Gadamer, I have attempted to draw out the significance these may have on a reconceptualization of historical knowledge as historical understanding. We see that even before dialogue begins there are already risks and no guarantee of understanding, i.e. there is always the possibility of an impossibility, as Derrida would have said. But this does not mean that one should abandon understanding altogether. Instead, this tension poses to responsible scholars and prudent intellectuals that one must nevertheless continue to pursue; even if complete understanding remains forever futural, and is always on the way.

As a conclusion, I would like to propose that in the practice of a theory of history, the role of the historian (or any intellectual concerned with a history of the plurality of beings) is ethically imminent. When we write history, we are endeavoring to represent and understand the past. In this process of writing we are not passive players of an already scripted play. Following Hannah Arendt's conception of each individual as the site of action in representing and constructing history, historical discourse is ethical precisely because it is practical. It is practical because we actively practice history using theory as a disciplinary toolbox to reconstruct historical meanings - meanings that are both already constituted and in the process of constituting. It is ethical because the reconstruction of history is never self-same, and hardly ever an accurate and holistic account; imminent as meanings are delayed. Most importantly, it is ethical because the subjects and subject matters of historical discourse concerns not just one individual but an entire community of *all* individuals. To be ethical to a community of individuals is to represent without marginalizing, to understand, promote, and endeavor to keep plurality while building solidarity. This is the task that confronts intellectuals, and is a task that concerns every individual on every corner of this shared world we call home.

Notes

ⁱ One of the most significant concepts of Gadamer's hermeneutics, the original in German is *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*, translated as "historically effected consciousness" by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall. The term connotes the passive and active states of consciousness as it is situated and realized in history. In Gadamer's own words, "there is a certain legitimate ambiguity... [that is] used to mean at once in consciousness effected in the course of history and determined by history, and the very consciousness of being thus effected and determined." *Truth and Method*, 2d revised edition, translated and revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), xxxiv.

ⁱⁱ This has been the focus of critiques of various schools of theory such as postcolonialism, feminism, and social culturalism. For an elaboration and detailed discussion, see Georg Iggers, *Historiography in the twentieth century: from scientific objectivity to the postmodern challenge* (Hanover, UK: Wesleyan University Press, 1997); and *The houses of history: a critical reader in twentieth-century history and theory*, selected and introduced by Anna Green and Kathleen Troup (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

ⁱⁱⁱ One only needs to look at the rational justification of Hitler's and the National Socialists' "final solution" in solving the "Jewish Problem", and at contemporary conflicts in the Middle East.

^{iv} Jenkins argues for this in favor of morality and a moving forward in time, though it is unclear what he really means and how he distinguishes between "ethics" and "morality". For the argument, see Keith Jenkins, *Why History? Ethics and postmodernity* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999).

^v *Truth and Method*, 139.

^{vi} For Derrida's own defense of these accusations, see among others: *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, edited and with commentary by John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997); and *Points... Interviews 1974-1994*, edited by Elisabeth Weber and translated by Peggy Kamuf and others (Stanford, New York: Stanford University Press, 1992).

^{vii} For further elaboration and details, see Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context" in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated with additional notes by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 327-30.

^{viii} Derrida's conceptualization of *différance* is perhaps best articulated (at an introductory level) in: *Writing and Difference*, translated, with an introduction and additional notes by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); *Dissemination*, translated, with an introduction and additional notes by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); and *Margins of Philosophy*, translated, with additional notes by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

^{ix} See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness" in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 5:1 (1975), 8-52.

^x See *Dialogue and Deconstruction, the Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, edited by Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (State University of New York Press: Albany, 1989).

^{xi} Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Hermeneutics as a Practical Philosophy" in *Reason in the Age of Science*, translated by Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 109.

^{xii} I bear in mind the questions posed to Gadamer by Derrida during their famous first encounter in the Goethe Institute of Paris in 1981 about the appeal to a Kantian good will, and thus a return to metaphysical presuppositions. He also questions the possibility of the "lived experience" of an understanding free of misunderstandings—which in point of fact, is already a misunderstanding of Gadamer's hermeneutics. For a complete account of the encounter and responses, see *Dialogue and Deconstruction*.