HISTORY AND HERMENEUTICS *

In this paper I hope to initiate a truly reciprocal discussion between philosophical hermeneutics and the methodology of historical inquiry.

As regards philosophical hermeneutics, the concern to learn something from historical research occurs too infrequently. Philosophical hermeneutics moves with more assurance along the ascending pathway toward ontology, which carries it away from the practicing historian’s kind of inquiry toward consideration of the historicity of human experience in general. The descending pathway which leads back toward historical inquiry is less familiar to it, yet it is along this trajectory that we encounter the most significant questions for hermeneutics. The ascending dialectic, Plato said, is arduous. But the descending one is even more so.

1. FROM HISTORICAL METHODOLOGY TO HERMENEUTICS

In taking the ascending pathway, philosophical hermeneutics does not intend to improve historical methodology. Even less does it seek to constitute some alternative method. For it is not a method, and its purpose is quite different. What it does try to reflect upon is the dependence of historical inquiry on the historical condition that characterizes human existence. If this meditation has any significance for historical method, it is only through a kind of feedback which may clarify some of the paradoxes that arise out of this methodology. Prior to that, philosophical hermeneutics “addresses itself”—in the sense of Auseinandersetzung—to the most radical level of historical understanding, the level of its ruling interests. I am taking the word ‘interest’ here in Kant’s sense when he considers the interest of reason in some enterprise of knowledge or

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practice. By reflecting directly on the interests that rule the kind of knowledge that results from historical inquiry, philosophical hermeneutics may be able to illuminate indirectly history's object and its method.

1. The Interest for Knowledge in Historical Inquiry. One interest that rules historical inquiry is that historical knowledge be so constituted as to be worthy of being called scientific knowledge, hence that it exhibit an object of knowledge that responds to the general criteria of objectivity. These criteria are those which Kant elaborates in the Analogies of Experience in his first Critique. Reduced to their essentials they say the following.¹

We must be able to distinguish between "objective" succession (that is, succession in the object) and "subjective" succession (in our representation of phenomena). In other words, we must be able to oppose a temporal order subject to rules to simple succession in the flow of our representations which is indifferent to order. This criterion of objectivity is important for our discussion because it directly applies to the temporality of experience. It says that objectivity depends on our capacity to maintain this distinction between objective, rule-governed succession and succession per se.

This is not all. Our notions of experience and objectivity, in the strong sense of this term, presuppose not only order and interconnectedness (whether causal or not), but also unity, so that this experience may be called my experience. This is the meaning of Kant's Transcendental Deduction. There is no connectedness without unity and no unity without self-awareness. Consequently, an ordered experience is an experience that can be ascribed to a consciousness in such a way that each person may call it his own experience.

The heart of this argument is that the connectedness of experience requires a higher principle than the conceptual network that governs this connectedness, namely, the condition that this experience be ascribable to whomever it belongs to and that it be ascribed to him as a unified as well as an ordered experience.

How does this founding of the notions of experience and objectivity concern the historian's interest? It affects it insofar as what moves him as a man of science is the desire that his object and his "science" satisfy the requirement for an experience that is not just ordered but also unified.

At the same time, his interest is to reduce as much as possible the difference between the human sciences and the natural sciences.

This requirement is not described correctly if it is presented as a prejudice upheld by the prestige (or the imperialism) of the natural sciences; in brief, if it is seen as an abusive extension of the methodology of the natural sciences to the field of the human sciences. To reflection addressed to the foundational interests of these disciplines, this transference from one field to another proceeds from a deeper requirement arising out of the interest for knowledge.

If it is true that there is experience in the strong sense of the term only if it is interconnected and unified, then the difference between the natural sciences and the human sciences is inessential. If it were essential, it would menace the idea of the connectedness and unity of historical experience by menacing the unique character of the conceptual network underlying this connectedness and this unity. The same argument which argues against a plurality of worlds argues against a radical plurality of areas of experience and objects which would make historical inquiry impossible.

2. History and the Interest for Communication. I now want to consider whether there is not another interest at work in historical inquiry, an interest which appears not at the level of reflection on the methods of history and the natural sciences, but through hermeneutical reflection on the historical condition of our existence. This interest points to an essential difference between history and the natural sciences.

If the interest for knowledge which seeks to relativize as much as possible the difference between the natural and the human sciences rests upon the requirement to constitute an ordered and unified experience and if this requirement is grounded in the final analysis on the possibility that "the I think must be able to accompany every one of my representations," it is this possibility that must be interrogated. In effect, it signifies nothing more than the condition that the historian should be able to, at least potentially, ascribe experience as ordered and unified to himself. Yet if this possibility of self-ascription contains the possibility of doing history, to further reflection it also reveals a conflict of interests underlying the foundation of history.

We might think, following Kant, that it is a conflict between a theoretical and an ethical interest. But what hermeneutics instead claims to do is to generate a crisis within the very concept of the theoretical as it is expressed by the requirement for connectedness and unity. It brings this crisis about by uncovering the historical
condition of what we just called (following the spirit, if not the letter, of Kant's first Critique) the self-ascription of experience.

Let us try to make sense of this movement from historical inquiry to historicity. The first step consists in recognizing that the self-ascription of experience is not an originary, sovereign act which constitutes the field of experience. It is always preceded by an experience of belonging-to, of belonging to what knowledge attempts to posit in front of the subject as its object of knowledge by distinguishing in the object an ordered sequence different from the sequence of the order of representations in their free play.

This belonging-to is easily overlooked in the constituting of the object of the physical sciences, and seemingly without apparent harm. The science of Galileo and Newton was born, after all, from a decisive break between the physical world and the perceptual world whose significations continued to reflect ancient and medieval cosmologies. By cutting the physical object loose from the perceptual field, the mathematicized sciences of nature thereby constituted the physical object as an object that I can oppose to myself; that is, that I can distinguish from other objects and stand over against the subjective flow of my experience. And yet, even on the plane of the natural sciences, we ought to remember that this constituting of the physical object is possible only because I am first thrown into situations I have not chosen, because I am affected by things I do not create, and because I can undertake to orient myself in these situations and project my ownmost possibilities into them.

This belonging-to which the physical sciences cannot abolish is even less capable of being denied or disowned by history. The historical object cannot be completely brought before me as my other temporal representations can.

In the first place, it presents a temporality not unlike my own. My temporality is primordially "paired" (Husserl) to another temporal field which I apprehend in so far as the other is also a subject like me, a subject in a manner analogous to the way I am a subject. This Paarung assures that the unfolding of my flow of consciousness is accompanied by that of my contemporaries. This accompanying of one flow by another appears to signify something radically different from my representations being accompanied by the "I think," even when this is understood as "I can ascribe my representations to myself." It is one "I can" accompanied by another "I can" analogous to my own in its capacity to ascribe its experiences to itself.

But this is not all. The oddness of historical reality in comparison to the physical object cannot simply be contained within the
oddness of intersubjectivity. The temporality of historical reality consists also in the fact that the accompanying of one temporal flow by another appears as a relation of contemporaneity, a relation which, in turn, is just a cross section of a larger all-encompassing temporality which includes succession as well as coexistence. Therefore historical temporality must be designated as englobing my personal history in its threefold relatedness to the temporalities of my contemporaries, my predecessors, and my successors (to use the language of Alfred Schutz).

My temporality belongs to this larger temporality, and this belonging-to no longer seems capable of being submitted to the Kantian criterion of the distinction between a sequence indifferent to order and a rule-governed sequence. If the physical object may still be constituted by this distinction, the historical object calls for another sort of constitution, a constitution that would take into account a multitude of temporal fields themselves placed into relations of contemporaneity, precedence, and descendance, within an all-encompassing temporal field which is history itself.

This enigma of a deeper level of constitution by means of which history removes itself from the limiting framework of the conceptual network that enables us to make scientifically intelligible to ourselves what we call experience and the objects of experience, is the tearing away not of ethics from physics, but of the historical from the natural.

Moreover, this belonging-to is not at all unintelligible. It is the condition for what we understand, even in ordinary language, when we speak of the past as what is transmitted to us through traditions. It is within the framework of such transmission that we speak of our predecessors and our successors. The intelligibility of the historical field is specific in terms both of the rules of connectedness and of the higher principle to which connectedness itself is submitted.

As concerns the rules of connectedness that govern historical experience, they cannot be derived from those which govern the connection of things in physical experience; that is, from that imperious order which—to use Kant’s example in the Second Analogy—constrains us to perceive a ship descending a stream. Of course human events are interwoven within the flow of things. If we are on the ship we descend the stream along with it. But, however allowable it may be to articulate the ordered and objective sequence that we rightly call the flow of things, by means of a single law of causality understood as regular succession, to the same extent we need to
articulate that transmission of tradition which links us to our predecessors and even to our contemporaries in specific categories that include (a) the human agents who start events of which they are the authors; (b) these agents’ interpretations of their actions in terms of motives; (c) the influence of one agent on another who takes the meaning of the first agent’s action into account; (d) the regulation of projects by norms and of norms by institutions; (e) the founding of such institutions and their sediment; and (f) the continuation, breaking off, or renewal of contents so transmitted. In short, historical transmission needs to be thought of differently than as succession as it is conceived by the natural sciences, and historical method must accordingly differ from the method used in these sciences.

The higher principle to which connectedness itself has to be submitted is different in each case. The higher principle operative in historical knowledge is no longer the abstract identity of the “I think,” but the requirement that all temporal fields (or streams) other than my own be similar or analogous to mine within the over-all temporality of history.

If we may here invoke analogy as the transcendental principle that relates each temporal flow to every other temporal flow, it is not to introduce—in a falsely empirical sense—an argument by analogy by means of which we would conclude the existence of our contemporaries, predecessors, and successors. The analogy in question here is a transcendental principle, not an empirical argument. It signifies that others, all these others, before, with, and after me, are egos as I am an ego; that is, they, like me, can ascribe their experience to themselves.

The function of this analogy as a transcendental principle is to preserve the equality of the signification T'—equality in the sense that others are equally egos, in every dimension of the greater temporal field. My predecessors, contemporaries, and successors could, can, and will be able to designate themselves as “T” and attribute their experience to themselves. This is why the transmission of tradition may under certain conditions simulate as much as one may desire the rule-governed succession of things. It may lend itself, under such conditions, to the approximation of a causal explanation. But we understand the conditions for such simulation as themselves resulting from a reification by means of which historical reality loses its original status. That, in fact, human relations throughout history are, to a considerable extent, reified to the point that the course of history is no longer distinguished from the flow of
things, defines history's misfortune, not its primordial constitution.

One witness to this fact is the project of utopia, which untiringly
directs our imagination toward a historical condition liberated from
any reification. Such imagination would be simply de-re-istic if it
did not point toward possibilities really implied by the primordial
nature of the historical bond; that is, toward those possibilities
which the course of history has in a way frozen or petrified, thereby
cutting them off.

This comment about utopia allows us to catch sight of the re-
sponse to the question left hanging above. What interest, we asked,
bears us back from history as a form of objective knowledge to the
bond of belonging to lived history underlying every relation to
objective history? This interest, it seems to me, may be called the
interest for communication. The term 'communication', though,
must be taken in a sufficiently large sense so that we may, at least
 provisionally, avoid choosing sides between Gadamer and Habermas
in the discussion about this subject which has opposed them to
each other.²

But my concern today is for the epistemological requirements for
communication, not its ethical and political implications. In other
words, I am limiting myself to considering communication as a
transcendental principle capable of entering into conflict with the
principle of significance which earlier enjoined us to unify all our
experience and to take the regional difference between history and
nature as secondary.

The interest for communication may be called practical in con-
trast to the theoretical emphasis inherent in the interest for knowl-
dge. But "practical" is not identical with "ethical." If it were, we
would fall into the old neo-Kantian dichotomy between judgments
of value and judgments of fact. This interest is practical in the
sense that it is an interest for a competence, in Chomsky's sense
when he distinguishes between competence and performance. The
competence may be reified, and, under the condition of reification,
it simulates the simple objective connectedness we call the flow of
things. But the meaning of this competence may be better expressed
for our purposes in more positive terms, as follows.

First, going back to the notion of a larger temporality, or an all-
encircling temporality, evoked above, we may say that this com-
petence consists in keeping "open" our access to our contempo-
raries, predecessors, and successors even when many of our projects,

norms, and institutions are already reified to such an extent that they have become incapable of recovery. Keeping ourselves open in this fashion signifies letting ourselves be exposed to the efficacy of history. Consciousness so exposed to history is a consciousness of being affected, the project of letting oneself be affected, and the competence to stay affected.

A second way of expressing the meaning of competence is thereby suggested. If the analogy of the ego is the transcendental principle that distinguishes historical connectedness from the connectedness of things, the competence we are interested in historically is the untiring capacity to discern the difference between these two forms of connectedness; that is, to identify, despite all appearances to the contrary, the analogy of the ego not only in the short-term relationships of love and friendship, but also in our long-term relations with our contemporaries, predecessors, and successors as well.

This competence for discriminating the historical as such places the interest for communication into a polemical relation with the interest for knowledge, which now appears as a competence for not discriminating the historical as such, for not taking account of the difference between the historical and the natural, in virtue of the principle of significance which forbids us from conceiving of a plurality of experiences as well as a plurality of worlds. In this way we discover the paradox that history both depends on and is independent of the natural sciences.

II. FROM HISTORICITY TO HISTORY

The way back from a philosophical hermeneutics toward the methodology of historical research, we said, is the more arduous path to follow. Yet it is on this way that hermeneutics has to test its capacity to contribute to an authentic critique of historical method. Its task is not completed with the return to foundations; it must end in a renewed dialogue with historical research. Yet the return to foundations may even risk becoming an obstacle or an inhibition to the carrying out of this second part of the hermeneutical task. The danger, in effect, is that hermeneutics may conceive of itself as standing in a purely dichotomous relation with historical method. This is the case when the kind of objectification inherent in this method is taken to be just a form of alienation, a denial of belonging-to. But such alienation expresses the perversion of our belonging to history rather than its denial. The way back to method is possible only if hermeneutics can give an account of a principle of the externalization of experience which would not be already and as such alienating, but of which alienation is an additional per-
version, and which therefore is presupposed by alienation. This principle of externalization must be inherent in the mediation that constitutes belonging-to, if the movement toward objectivity is to be possible. In other words, it must be one feature of the mediation which we described above as the transmission of a tradition and which appeared to us as the primordial characteristic of historical reality.

We first become aware of this principle of externalization in a concrete way with temporal distance. We are separated in time from our predecessors. One consequence of this separation is that history is knowledge by means of "traces" and the past is accessible to us only through marks, inscriptions, documents, archives, and the monuments of all kinds that play the role of "facts" for historical inquiry. Because these facts are in a sense observable, history may, to a certain extent, join observation and explanation, following a model of intelligibility close to that used in the experimental sciences.

But it does not suffice simply to invoke temporal distance. It is still possible to argue with Plato that the perversion of the historical bond begins with recourse to external marks which come to serve as traces for subsequent generations. This primary misfortune is the externalization of memory in such marks. Plato's famous argument against writing in the Phaedrus (274e–277a) applies to historical objectification to the extent that it sets in opposition two forms of memory, the one internal and based on the requirements for true reminiscence, the other external and submitted to the condition of marks and imprints. History, after all, is a particularly explicit case of remembrance by means of traces and imprints. Plato’s sharp attack against externalization in marks and his ringing defense of reminiscence without external mediation forbids our simply recognizing the fact of temporal distance. It is why we need to introduce a principle of distatiation, which is a form of putting something at a distance rather than the mere fact of being at a distance.

To invoke distatiation as a principle is to attempt to show that the very experience of belonging-to, underlying historicity, requires something like externalization in order to apprehend, articulate, and understand itself.

Francis Dagognet has attempted to demonstrate this in his book, Ecriture et iconographie, from a somewhat different perspective. Arguing from Plato’s own comparison of writing and images, he develops by means of the concept of iconicity a general theory of

inscription in images which is directly opposed to the Platonic theory which reduces the image to the status of a shadow; that is, to a diminished form of reality. He shows that the icon—in writing as well as in painting and all the other graphic forms by which thought represents and describes the universe—has the effect of augmenting rather than diminishing reality. It succeeds at this through various strategies which have in common the ability to abbreviate our experience by circumscribing it with a few distinct signs in order to amplify it, thanks to a combinatorial power released by the conciseness of the sign system. He opposes this effect of augmentation to the erosion that ordinary perception undergoes through the effacement and attenuation of contrasts, differences, and oppositions. Thus the graphic image works in a direction opposite to the sort of entropy that affects ordinary forms of perception.

Now it is externalization in marks which makes possible this intensification of our experience. In a similar manner, our perception of history, too, is intensified and augmented by means of the externalization that accompanies its being deposited in a trace or inscription. As objective, historical experience and writing share the same fate. Historical experience as inscribed is put at a distance, and so history is a science based on traces. That it may begin with an external critique of the documents in an archive is a result of this fact, that historical experience allows itself to be externalized, inscribed, and perpetuated in the form of archives.

This conjunction between the objectification of historical reality and externalization in writing is of decisive importance for hermeneutics. Even if we were to admit with Dilthey that in the final instance historical understanding rests upon the capacity to transfer oneself into an alien psychic experience, such understanding would pose a hermeneutical problem only when it is mediated by written signs or any other kind of sign which resembles writing and which constitutes an inscription in the broad sense of the term. Then understanding is worthy of being called interpretation; that is, textual exegesis. As a text, history must not just be understood, but also interpreted. Between us and our predecessors, and even, for a large part, between our contemporaries and ourselves, understanding is mediated by something like a text. And this mediation gives temporal distance its true significance. The question is not the measurable gap that separates us from the past. This gap is rather the place of and the occasion for a mediation that may be characterized as textual or quasi-textual in nature. The size of this

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gap is so inessential that the same sort of mediation may take place between us and our contemporaries. This is attested to by the role played in human communication by the reading of written messages—letters, magazines, media of every sort—whose authors are still alive.

We need therefore to move beyond the brute fact of distance to the putting at a distance which constitutes externalization through inscription if we are to catch sight of and begin to circumscribe the principle of distantiation we are seeking.

It is necessary to return even further than just to inscription to discover the point where distantiation is inherent in belonging-to. Before any effective inscription, experience includes an inscribability in principle which makes writing possible. In investigating what made understanding possible, before any actual act of interpretation is applied to written signs, Dilthey saw that externalization in signs is the first condition for understanding others because these signs and the experience they express present a certain inner connection (Zusammenhang) or inner form which they offer to our understanding. Hence externalization and objectification are as primitive and radical as possible. They begin as soon as life is no longer simply lived, but begins to understand itself and to present itself for others to understand by means of the inner connection of its expressions. On the basis of this inner connection it may be said and described.

It is this originary putting at a distance which historical inquiry takes up in a deliberate, methodological use of distantiation.

This act is methodological in the same way Cartesian doubt is. Coming back to our earlier reflections on the transmission of a tradition, we will say that a tradition may be transmitted when we do not limit ourselves to living within it, but begin to consider it as an object at a distance even though this distantiation may one day serve as the foundation for a repetition that will take place in every way on another level than that of first naïveté. Such methodological doubt sometimes prolongs skeptical, nondeliberate doubt which consciousness may experience as an existential crisis. Hegel called this crisis with regard to tradition alienation in the famous chapter VI in his Phenomenology entitled "Spirit" (Geist). Culture (Bildung) is there identified with the pain of becoming a stranger to one’s own past as it had been conveyed by tradition during the stage of taken-for-granted customs. This alienation is the price paid in order that ethical substance (die Sittlichkeit) may become “subject.”
Methodological doubt is the same sort of doubt, but willingly assumed. In fact, the birth of history seems to have been linked to such a "work of negation" (Hegel) arising out of the pain of alienation. In this way our relation to the past becomes a question. The Greek historian Thucydides asked, "Why war?" More particularly, why this war among the Hellenes which ruined their panhellenistic dreams? It is easy to see that the desire to know which seizes anyone who asks this question cannot fail to bear upon the whole interrogation about the light of reason wherein the physical explanation of nature was already placed. To seek the aition of the war is to undertake an investigation similar to that undertaken in physics where others had already sought for the cause or causes of movement.

A bridge is thereby established between the truth of belonging-to history and historical method. The former requires the latter to the extent that skeptical doubt is transformed into methodical doubt and where an objective response is sought to a question possibly born out of anxiety. This methodological spirit may then seize upon everything in the historical bond which lends itself to objectification and inscription. History truly becomes the text of human action.

CONCLUSION

Has the argument of the "way downward" from hermeneutics to historical inquiry abolished the argument of the "way upward" from the methodology of history to the ontology of historicity?

Not at all.

The ascending argument says that historical transmission requires other categories than those which rule physical succession. It says, furthermore, that the underlying interest for communication cannot be reduced to the interest for objective knowledge.

The descending argument says that historical transmission cannot gain access to understanding unless it is objectified in the form of a text to be read. It says further that the interest for communication plays its transcendental role as regards the possibility of historical understanding only by means of a distantiation which is both methodological and critical and which legitimates the process of objectification.

The algebraic sum of these arguments is not zero. Its result is exhibited by the very paradox of historical methodology. The background of this paradox is history's being founded upon a double interest.

We may say, in effect, that the difference between history and the natural sciences is inessential insofar as history relies on facts and unites explanation with observation. But we may also say that this
difference is essential insofar as history cannot rid itself of the categories of meaningful action, such as project, motive, evaluation, norm, institution, or, finally, a historical agent operating in an intentional fashion. Consequently, the objectivity of history can be only analogous to the objectivity of the natural sciences, and history can never simply become one department of them.

This ambiguity inherent in historical method betrays history’s double allegiance to two distinct systems of interests: an interest for knowledge and an interest for communication. We have attempted to demonstrate that these two interests do not exclude each other, but rather mutually imply each other. In a way, they are the two foci of the same ellipse. And in the final analysis the dialectical relation between them justifies the paradox of methodology we have considered. History’s objectivity asymptotically approaches the objectivity of the natural sciences, but it can never become absorbed into it. The parallels in method cannot efface the foundational differences.

The two arguments of this essay come together into one argument which I would like to call a deduction (in the Kantian sense of this term) of the paradox of history.

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DOES HISTORY NEED HERMENEUTICS?

PROFESSOR Ricoeur argues that history reveals a fundamental paradox which derives from the peculiar character of its subject matter. The role of a philosophical hermeneutics, he suggests, is to reflect on the relation between historical inquiry and the historical condition, and on the connections between history and the interests that govern its pursuit. I want to question whether the notion of hermeneutics, at least as Ricoeur presents it, does any work in helping us to understand the problematic nature of historical inquiry. I would also like to ask whether any important theses have been argued in terms of philosophical hermeneutics that cannot be addressed with equal or greater perspicuity using independent modes of expression.