

Anxiety about History (Towards a practical philosophy of history)

HENRIK HDEZ.-VILLAESCUSA HIRSCH, Universitat de Barcelona
hhernand@xtec.cat

History and its likely start in Kant

Kant's writings published in response to the Philosophy of History of Herder¹ can be seen as an attempt to reconcile the possibilities offered by *the Critique of Pure Reason* with the linear conception of time characteristic of Christianity, according to which man *progresses*, as a species, towards the realization of the *idea* of freedom. But in *Muhmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte*,² Kant carries out an interpretation of the biblical story of the expulsion from Paradise from the point of view of the moral imperative of freedom,³ as it will be later understood in the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

We could summarize it this way: in Paradise, nature is what is merely *given*, *reality*. Man is part of that reality, until the question arises about himself.⁴ But while looking for the answer outside of himself, it will only find out what other things are, and so will the man subordinate its own being to the reality of those things, so that he will know his participation in nature, but not what singles him out from it.

So, to know what he is, the man has to invert the perspective and appropriate reality, make it a fruit of his own project, his own work.⁵ To him, relating to reality as its producer means to distinguish himself from it as *free*, and this freedom becomes the content of the project which singles him out as *final end*.

History is the *realization* of the idea of freedom, in which the man enters when he is expelled from Paradise. And the evidence of *progress* toward this *realization*, which takes place from this mythical moment, has not to be found in the material facilities for the exercise of freedom, which are subject to change in any direction, but in the degree in which humanity is collectively determined to exercise that freedom, whose increase can be seen in the evolution of the political institutions, from the most primitive to the contemporary of Kant.

History and anxiety

The *time* of this history is the succession of the series of events that leads from the mythical beginning to the ideal end. However, the validity of this sequence is only moral because, theoretically considered, lacks consistency: the mythical nature of its initial time, on the one hand, means precisely that it's out of the

¹ *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (1784), *Recensionen von I. G. Herders «Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit»* (1785), *Erneuerte Frage: Ob das menschliche Geschlecht im bestandigen Fortschreiten zum Besseren sei* (1797), all in *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, herausgegeben von der Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin, 1907/23, vol. VIII, pp. 15-32, 43-66, y vol. VII, pp. 77-94, respectively.

² *Muhmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte* (1786) in *ibid.* Vol. VIII, pp. 107-124.

³ *Ibid.* P.108

⁴ *Ibid.* P. 110-11

⁵ *Ibid.* P.111

sequence, and cannot, so to speak, be dated. The same applies, on the other hand, with its purpose, which, as showed by the *Transcendental Dialectic*, is *thought* as an idea. From a *theoretical* point of view, there is no way to hold the validity of the succession, because whenever we try to conceive its beginning or its end, they show their theoretical inconsistency. Therefore the self-consciousness of himself as historic, as an agent of a linear progression towards a goal, which the man reaches when expelled from Paradise, must be accompanied by the *anticipation of death*.⁶ This anticipation is not just theoretical awareness of a future event, but, while considered from the moral point of view, the experience of the progress of History towards the realization of the idea of freedom and, at the same time, from the theoretical point of view, experience of the loss of every effort in the inability to act effectively in a world that, as such, is merely a dialectical idea.

While Kant uses the term *anxiety*⁷ to refer to the fear of the unpredictable consequences of one's own actions, its characterization, according to his own words, as a *backdrop* consisting in death,⁸ approaches much better to the meaning which this term acquired from 19th century. *Fear*, indeed, has always an object. *Anxiety*, however, does not know what it's afraid of, is fear without an object. It is true that English most immediately distinguish these two concepts, for which the German language can use the same word. But just that enables us better to see the difference: we translate *Angst vor* by *fear of*, but we translate an *Angst*, for which we do not specify any object, as *anxiety*. Hence, outside the Paradise the man knows the fear of his own capacity to act, of the power of which he's now aware without being, however, able to control it. But the source of *anxiety* is the sense that this determination to action, all that will, is only apparently directed to objects, because any rational consideration shows that all action lets its fruits drop in view of the certainty of death.

Beyond Kant: anxiety as an experience of the present.

For Kant, the role of *anxiety* in his reflection on history is incidental. But if we read this Kantian reflection from the point of view of the modern concept of *anxiety*, the result is that this anxiety is the only content which can be given to the *present*. Let's see:

As we have just read, the biblical myth shows (The *Critique of Practical Reason* will justify it philosophically) that any *reality* is only experienced as something that has to be *feasible*, i.e., integrated into a project that is ultimately always the same: the project of freedom. This means that the present has nothing to do with the experience of reality understood as *what is as it is*, because this experience is only possible as long as that *what is*, is experienced as what I will do with it. Hence, the experience of reality reveals itself as an experience of the future. In reality I can't see anything but my future.

In this context *anxiety* (not *fear*, which also anticipates the future) becomes the only experience of reality that is not based on an anticipation of the future, precisely because it involves the denial of any future to the present reality. Anxiety, then, ends up being the only experience of the present as such, i.e. of the present as something that has no reality because it cannot be integrated into a project. What is present is only present as meaningless, inconsistent, and this inconsistency is experienced as *anxiety*. We could, summing all in one formula, say that man experiences anxiety about the *ahistorical* nature of the present,

⁶ Ibid. P.112

⁷ Ibid., p.111

⁸ Ibid., p.113

and that he can only escape it just by historicizing reality. Returning to the biblical myth, he would have, inside Paradise, an idyllic existence in which no more than present is given. And, out of it, a *thrownness* in History, in which this present is precisely what escapes.

The present as an experience of the split of Reason

Kant developed his concept of history between 1784 and 1786, i.e. before the publication of his *Critique of Practical Reason*. But the opposition, to the theoretical reason, of a practical discourse cannot be considered foreign to the Kantian concept of time. Indeed, the two irreducible uses of reason introduce, in turn, a qualitative difference between the two temporal ambits separated by the present moment, which can only be conceived: either conceptually determined and, therefore, already *been*, or, as has been highlighted in relation to Kant's writings on history, as *should be*, depending on an idea whose realization takes place in an undetermined future.

In any case, from the rational discourse, the present cannot be thought of as *being now*. Past and future cease to be two segments within the same line separated by the present. They are revealed as two qualitatively different experiences of time, as are both theoretical and practical uses of Reason, on whose essential heterogeneity they depend. This is of great importance. Attempts have been made to reconcile this new experience of time with the Christian one. But the fact is that the failure of the unity of reason had to also break the line of history. In a linear time, present had to be contingent, mere link, always in flight, of a series that, as we have seen, never stops. But considered from the split of our reason, this has value as an experience of ontological contradiction between theory and practice. Every instant is the experience of our limitation when appropriating reality, when taking our past as ours and integrating it into a future project. In short, the experience of the contradiction between (*already*) *to be* and *should be*.

But what *is* the present moment? From the perspective of theoretical and practical split is not a possible object of knowledge, nor a possible object of decision. The present, then, *is* simply *not*. The question about the present can only be answered with a silence to let him appear as *nothing*. Now our first identification of the experience of the present with that of *anxiety* acquires new value, and it is not coincidence that from this moment, little by little, this experience, mentioned only in passing in the writings of Kant, has been incorporated into philosophical language systematically.

This was done by Kierkegaard,⁹ who understood anxiety as the experience of having to choose what *should be*, that is, the future, without being able to remain in the present. Schelling had already introduced it,¹⁰ although not yet with a systematic basis, as the experience of failure of any decision, as the inability to accept or change the outcome of the own actions, which had become reality, *already been, past*. In the writings of Kant on History, anxiety, as we have seen, appeared as a concomitant to the experience of the course of time and the transience of the instant. But thought, like we try to do here, from the perspective of the contradiction between theoretical and practical reason, it appears as the only possible content of that instant, as the only experience of time as such which takes place either regarding the past, or the future or, ultimately, regarding the relationship between both. Bringing together the content with which anxiety

⁹ Kierkegaard: *Begrebet Angest* enin *Søren Kierkegaards samlede værker Udgivet af A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg og H.O. Lange 4 Udgave*. Gyldendal 1991, vol. 6.

¹⁰ Schelling, *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*, Hrsg. v. Horst D. Brandt u. Peter Müller. Meiner, Hamburg 2000. Although it will achieve more importance in other writings.

made his first appearance in Kant, and his subsequent philosophical development, we could say now that *anxiety is the experience of the instant, as inconsistency of reality in the expectation of death*.

Saying that the anxiety, understood in this way, is the genuine experience of the moment, is the same as saying that it is the genuine content of any experience in general. Then it should be that experience that Reason submits to its concepts, just to get away from its ultimate sense. It should be also be the anxiety that the artist overcomes in his creation, to the extent that it exceeds the bounds of reason, as seen by Schelling. And, as seen by Kierkegaard, the condition of erotic pleasure too. Knowledge, action, art and eroticism, emanating from the anxiety they intend to cancel, get this cancelation only temporarily. In the same moment they reach a result, they become integrated in the past and open the door again to anxiety. It is therefore not the result but the *process* that cancels out anxiety. Not the acquired knowledge, but knowing. Not the taken decision, but the experience of determining oneself to act. Not the work of art, but the productivity of genius in the creator. Not the joy, but its search and putting oneself in a position to enjoy.

The Philosophy of History as a free action

We have derived the experience of past and future of the two members of the split of our theoretical and practical reason. This derivation, in turn, makes the questions that may arise regarding the relationship between these two experiences involve the question of the relationship between the two uses of reason too. What happens when a subject, individual or collective, resigns both action and the hope that sustains it, that is to say, when he resigns to be subject of History, and flees to the easy repetition of what has always been? Doesn't this resignation mean that the future, which we think of as a *project* and an object of the will, becomes then lived as *already decided*, as an object that is no longer object of will, but of knowledge? Is not this a way of living the future as *already been* and, therefore, as *past*, as a repetition of past or as a *past to come*? Doesn't it occur as a result of an anxiety that does not get canceled by any of the mentioned ways? The past, meanwhile, is not a recurring object of interpretation, that is, of conceptual determination and, therefore, of *decision* regarding its essence? Is not this interpretation hold precisely from the point of view of a project? Does not any project expand, as it is *carried out*, the realm of possibility and therefore the horizon of interpretation of the past? Is Hermeneutic not a conversion of the past in an object of the will?

Overcoming the concept of an absolute Reason by a Reason split into two ambits mutually irreducible, but interdependent, leads to a time equally split into two interdependent areas, none of which holds no primacy. Is true that from the point of view of what is chronologically to come, is what has already happened what sets the conditions of possibility of future. But the reverse also happens, the past cannot be neutrally determined, but only from the possibilities opened up by a project. And this, in turn, can convert the past (or its interpretation) into a project, symmetrically to what happens to the anxious subject who, as we said, may face the future as a past, i.e. without a project.

What does *converting the past in a project* mean? It means to put oneself again in a position to decide about it. Accept *reality* as a result of a decision and, therefore, to assume our responsibility regarding our circumstances. Taking the past as a project is opposed to feel limited by the circumstances. If History is moving towards the realization of the ideal of freedom, then not only the future has to be decided, but the past too.

Summarizing: Anxiety is the *empirical content* of the present moment, and past and future are the result of its conceptual rationalization as *duty* or as *being*. Then the determination to *get rid* of the past as past

and integrate it into a future project may be seen as the *practical content* of that moment. This perspective allows us to claim the *Philosophy of History*, not only as a theory but as an action too: more than experience of anxiety, the present is determination to decide without respecting the limits imposed by the temporal sequence, i.e. without respecting the duality past / future. Seen this way, present turns out to be an unapproachable *common root* of two temporal ambits whose character, past or future, and their mutual relations, has to be decided. Anxiety becomes, then, a second dimension as ontological anxiety in view of the need for taking precisely that decision.

This makes the academic distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* a decision about our experience of History. Materially, they are the same, is the perspective from which we *decide* to contemplate this matter (the series of events) that varies. The turning points in the evolution of political institutions are those in which a community decides to overcome the so called "collective history," understood as a set of shared circumstances that determine its future and define its identity, and gets ready to *decide them again*, this is, to accept these circumstances as a result of a decision which, in consequence, has no longer to be the same. The sense of *crisis* associated with the so-called "historical moments" occurs precisely when a group can no longer recognize itself in its decisions, so that their fruit is lived as a mere past, as a mere circumstance.". Exactly the same happens with the "individual history."

Recapitulating: the theoretical and practical reason, the genial creation, the erotic enjoyment, have become activities by which the man, expelled from the present (represented by the Paradise), appropriates the fear of death with which he experiences the awareness of its *thrownness* in History. If philosophy assumes a purely theoretical paper, will only achieve, along with others, a fugitive use of anxiety. Only through a position of its own in front of this anxiety, can philosophy become *practical*. But what could such a practice look like? We could pick up the Kierkegaardian idea of a *school of possibility* which is, ultimately, a school of anxiety. But not to locate it in the lonely moors of Jutland which had so impressed the Dane. Philosophy has to regain the socratic ability to distress us when facing the present (or its fugacity) in order to make us face the decision to appropriate (or not) our past and our future. What that ultimately means is to get to the decision to appropriate (or not) ourselves. Because, remember, what drove the man from Paradise was the desire to know. And that of what he flees is not nothing but the anxiety that makes him a rational subject, that is, flees from anything but himself.

Twentieth century psychology has usurped the concept of anxiety to Philosophy, making it a condition that must be *cared*, not in a Heideggerian sense, but in the modern medical one, that is, deleted. Philosophy has now to decide itself to claim their property rights on this concept, and relate to him in its own sense of *care*, addressing anxiety as what tenses Reason when facing the nothingness and drives it to create, to form the nothingness into *being*.