Filozofija i društvo, godište XXXVII, broj 3
izdaje / published by
Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju
Kraljice Natalije 45, Beograd, telefon: +381112646242
Email: institut@ifdt.bg.ac.rs
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Štampa: Donat graf, Beograd

Tiraž: 300. Časopis izlazi četiri puta godišnje.

Cena 350 dinara; godišnja pretplata 1200 dinara.

Objavljivanje časopisa finansijski pomaže Ministarstvo nauke, tehnološkog razvoja i inovacija Republike Srbije.

Radove objavljene u časopisu nije dozvoljeno preštampavati, u celini ili u delovima, ukoliko nije naveden izvornik.

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FILOZOFIJA I DRUŠTVO
PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIETY

broj 3 2026.
godište XXXVII

Beograd 2026.
YU ISSN 0353-5738 UDK 1+316+32
3

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PHENOMENOLOGY, HISTORICAL A PRIORI AND THE QUASI-TRANSCENDENTAL: MAPPING THE COMPLEXITY OF WHAT IS UNFOLDING

FENOMENOLOGIJA, ISTORIJSKI A PRIORI I KVAZITRANSCENDENTALNO: MAPIRANJE SLOŽENOSTI ONOGA ŠTO SE ODVIJA

UDK: 165.62
165.171
DOI https://doi.org/10.2298/FID2603407C
Original Scientific Article
Received: 04.09.2026. Accepted: 18.09.2026.

PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIETY
VOL. 37, NO. 3, 405–700

To cite text:
Caminada, Emanuele, and Olga Nikolić Marić. 2026. "Historical A Priori and the Quasi-Transcendental: Mapping the Complexity of What Is Unfolding." *Philosophy and Society* 37 (3): 407–420.

Emanuele Caminada, Olga Nikolić Marić

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Historical A Priori and the Quasi-Transcendental: Mapping the Complexity of What Is Unfolding

ABSTRACT
The introduction situates the special issue within contemporary debates on the transformation of transcendental philosophy, by examining the historical a priori and the quasi-transcendental as two related attempts to rethink the transcendental question under conditions of historicity. It begins by outlining the problem of how transcendental conditions of possibility can be understood once they are recognized as historically constituted, socially mediated, and open to transformation. It then examines the notion of the historical a priori through the relation between Husserl and Foucault, focusing on their different accounts of historicity, subjectivity, validity, and critique. The following section turns to the quasi-transcendental, particularly in Derrida and its contemporary phenomenological reception, presenting it as a related attempt to rethink constitutive conditions without setting them as timeless foundations. The authors subsequently consider the implications of both notions for questions of history, normativity, critique, and freedom, arguing that they illuminate the tension between constitutive force and historical contingency. In this context, critique is understood as an interrogation of historically sedimented conditions that shape experience without ever fully determining it, while freedom is conceived as the possibility of reflecting upon and transforming these very structures. Finally, the editors introduce the contributions to the special issue, highlighting the different ways in which they address the relation between transcendental inquiry and historicity.

KEYWORDS
historical a priori; quasi-transcendental; phenomenology; transcendental philosophy; critique

From the Transcendental to Its Historicization

The transcendental tradition has long been concerned with the conditions that make experience, knowledge, and meaning possible. From Kant onwards, transcendental philosophy sought to identify structures that could account for the possibility of objective validity and shared experience. Yet during the nineteenth

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and twentieth centuries, the apparent stability of these conditions became increasingly difficult to maintain. Hegel emphasized the historical development of reason itself; Husserl investigated the sedimentation of meaning within traditions and lifeworlds; Foucault exposed the historical contingency of orders of knowledge; and Derrida questioned the possibility of any pure distinction between transcendental conditions and empirical reality.

The present special issue originates from a simple but far-reaching question. If contemporary phenomenology has largely accepted the historicity and sociality of subjectivity, what becomes of the transcendental project itself? Can phenomenology still speak of conditions of possibility once these conditions are recognized as historically generated, culturally sedimented, and socially mediated? Or must transcendental inquiry yield to analyses focused on discourse, practices, institutions, and relations of power? The call for papers invited contributors to address these questions through two notions that have acquired increasing prominence in recent debates: the historical a priori and the quasi-transcendental. Although emerging from different albeit related philosophical contexts, both concepts seek to articulate a common insight: that the structures through which experience, knowledge, and social life become intelligible are neither timeless foundations nor merely empirical facts. Rather, they are historically instituted formations that shape our experience while remaining open to transformation. The contributions collected in this issue explore the conceptual and critical consequences of this insight from a variety of perspectives.

The concepts of the historical a priori and the quasi-transcendental can therefore be understood as responses to a shared problem. Both seek to preserve the constitutive dimension of transcendental inquiry while acknowledging the irreducible historicity of human existence. Both attempt, in different ways, to rethink the relation between necessity and contingency, between structure and event, between critique and history.

The subtitle "Mapping the complexity of what is unfolding" introduces a theme that is broader than the historical a priori and the quasi-transcendental themselves. It concerns our historical self-situation. The issue is not merely that historical formations structure experience, but that we may ourselves inhabit a period of transformation whose contours are not yet fully intelligible. That gives the whole volume its contemporary relevance.

The subtitle also reflects a characteristic phenomenological insight. Historical transformations are rarely experienced as completed wholes. We encounter them from within, as participants rather than external observers. The patterns that later appear as coherent historical formations often first emerge as fragmented experiences, conflicts of interpretation, shifts in practices, and changing horizons of possibility. To reflect on the historical a priori or the quasi-transcendental is therefore not only to investigate the constituted structures of past worlds, but also to seek concepts capable of illuminating the incomplete and often ambiguous processes through which new forms of life are currently taking shape. The task of critical reflection is therefore not only to

reconstruct established historical formations but also to accompany their ongoing reconfiguration, describing the tensions, possibilities, and emerging orders that shape the present before they have fully crystallized into recognizable historical realities.

For sure, the aim of the present special issue is not to settle these questions once and for all. Rather, it seeks to open a space of dialogue around a set of concepts and problems whose significance has become increasingly apparent across phenomenology, critical theory, and the human sciences. By bringing into conversation debates surrounding the historical a priori and the quasi-transcendental, we hope less to provide definitive answers than to establish a framework within which their philosophical stakes can be more clearly articulated and further explored.

The Historical A Priori: Between Husserl and Foucault

One of the most striking results of recent scholarship is the recognition that Husserl and Foucault may have more in common than traditional narratives suggest. The notion of the historical a priori offers a privileged point from which to reassess their relation.

As Wouter Goris has argued, the decisive distinction in Husserl's later work is not between the historical and the transcendental, but between the objective a priori of the sciences and the historical a priori of the lifeworld. What Husserl seeks to uncover is not a set of timeless logical forms detached from history, but the historically sedimented framework within which meaning, evidence, and validity become possible. The historical a priori is therefore neither a mere empirical fact nor an eternal structure.

The notion of a historical a priori emerges precisely from the attempt to overcome the opposition between historical contingency and transcendental necessity. In his reconstruction of Husserl's late thought, Wouter Goris argues that the historical a priori should not be understood as a mere accumulation of historical facts, but rather as the outcome of a "systematic production of differentiated evidences" (Goris 2012: 305). Historical formations become sedimented through processes of meaning-constitution and come to function as relatively stable frameworks within which further experiences, practices, and forms of knowledge become possible. The historical a priori thus designates neither an eternal structure nor a factual event, but a historically instituted field of evidence that acquires the normative force for a given lifeworld. According to Goris, Husserl's concept of the historical a priori is intended to overcome the opposition between an ahistorical epistemology and a historicism devoid of invariant structures. The historical a priori thus refers to historically constituted invariants: formations of meaning that arise through historical processes yet continue to function as conditions of intelligibility and as structuring forces within a tradition. Both tendencies, ahistoric epistemology and historicist relativism are, in Goris's interpretation of Husserl, the result of unresolved tensions in the understanding of positivistic history.

This perspective resonates with interpretations offered by Andreea Smaranda Aldea and Amy Allen (2016), who emphasize that both Husserlian genealogy and Foucauldian archaeology reveal the contingency of structures that nevertheless shape our experience. Historical formations are constitutive of our world while remaining contingent in their genesis. They are necessary for us, but not necessary in themselves. We become aware of them when, in times of change or crisis, new orders unfold and thus we can make the experience that there is something like an 'order', a structuring pattern of our experience and thought. What comes to experience is that there is an order according to which a culture lives, judges, and understands itself. This order appears neither natural nor necessary but as historically constituted and contingent, thus prompting a critical interrogation of its claim to validity. At the same time, such an order is not a homogeneous totality. It is differentiated and positional: actors occupy distinct locations within it, and these locations condition what they can experience, perceive, say, and do. Consequently, the historical order reveals itself not merely as a shared framework of meaning, but also as a field structured by asymmetries of access, agency, and possibility.

Foucault radicalizes this insight by relocating the analysis of conditions of possibility from consciousness to discourse. Historical a prioris no longer denote structures recoverable through transcendental reflection, but rather the historically variable rules governing what can appear as sayable, visible, and thinkable within a given epoch. Foucault therefore shifts analysis from the axis consciousness-knowledge-science to the axis discursive practice-knowledge-science. Foucault's historical a priori is conceived as the set of the conditions for what can be said, rather than the conditions of validity of judgments.

Despite this decisive displacement, both Husserl and Foucault share a critical ambition. In both cases, the task is to render visible what functions as self-evident, to expose the historical constitution of what appears natural, and thereby to open a space for reflection. Their disagreement concerns the status of subjectivity, truth and normativity. Whereas Husserl ultimately appeals to transcendental subjectivity as the site where evidence and validity can be renewed, Foucault insists on the anonymity and dispersion of discursive practices. For him, the crisis of modernity derives precisely from the persistent attempt to ground critique in the figure of a constituting subject.

As Goris emphasizes, Foucault's archaeology is "far from seeking to reactivate the historical a prioris of past discourses." Rather, the description of such historical a prioris serves an investigation of our own archive, one directed not toward the determination of our identity through the play of differences, but toward a definitive renunciation of all anthropological constants (Goris 2012: 328). On this reading, Foucault preserves the critical thrust of genealogy but abandons its therapeutic dimension, if by "therapy" we understand with Goris the Husserlian project of reactivating sedimented meanings. To borrow Hans Joas's distinction, Foucault's genealogy is primarily negative rather than *affirmative*: its aim is not to recover forgotten sources of validity but to expose the contingency of what appears necessary. Husserl and Foucault thus share a

commitment to revealing the historicity of the orders within which experience unfolds. Yet they diverge significantly regarding the question of validity. Husserl seeks a renewed grounding of validity through transcendental subjectivity and lived evidence. Foucault, by contrast, deliberately remains within what he calls an "anonymous transcendental field," refusing to appeal to either a constituting transcendental subject or a collective subject as the ultimate source of meaning (Foucault 1969: 83-84).

This methodological move, due in part to the influence of Hyppolite, allows Foucault to avoid subjectivist assumptions and opens the way for genuinely structural analyses. At the same time, it raises the question of whether the possibility of an opening or renewal of meaning has thereby been curtailed. Indeed, as Foucault famously puts it, the various modalities of enunciation, rather than referring back to the synthesis or unifying function of a subject, reveal the subject's very dispersion: "Dans l'analyse proposée, les diverses modalités d'énonciation, au lieu de renvoyer à la synthèse ou à la fonction unifiante d'un sujet, manifestent sa dispersion." (Foucault 1969: 74, quoted in Goris 2012: 330). In place of a constituting consciousness, archaeology uncovers a field of practices, positions, and relations within which subjects themselves are historically formed and transformed. Foucault's position can be situated in the wake of Hyppolite's notion of the transcendental field and Merleau-Ponty's account of the subject as a "field of fields." Prior to functioning as a constituting subject, the subject is itself constituted and instituted by the historical and social field in which it is embedded.

Foucault's notion of the historical a priori marks a decisive shift away from both transcendental subjectivism and essentialism. Rather than following the axis of consciousness, knowledge, and science, archaeology investigates the relation between discursive practices, forms of knowledge, and the sciences. In this framework, the subject no longer appears as the origin of constitution, whether as transcendental ego or empirical consciousness, but as situated within historically specific practices. While Foucault does not deny the possibility of transforming discourse, he rejects the idea that such transformation falls under the sovereign agency of a constituting subject. Discursive orders are constituted through practices rather than mental acts. For this reason, the crisis diagnosed by contemporary thought is not rooted in a neglect of subjectivity, as Husserl maintained, but rather in the enduring primacy accorded to the subject, origin, and transcendental reflection at the expense of analysing concrete practices. As Goris observes, the Husserlian project of reactivating sedimented meaning appears to Foucault not as a remedy for the crisis but as one of its symptoms; accordingly, their respective concepts of the historical a priori diverge.

This divergence also illuminates an important difference between classical and contemporary phenomenology. Whereas Husserl's critical project remains tied to questions of evidence, rational self-responsibility, and the justification of norms, many contemporary phenomenologists have drawn on Foucault's analyses of power and normativity to investigate how social orders shape lived

experience. Critical phenomenology focuses less on grounding norms than on exposing the mechanisms through which forms of normality are produced, maintained, and contested. Social norms are understood as historically situated frameworks that both enable and constrain action, perception, and self-understanding. Yet this development should not be construed as a simple abandonment of classical phenomenology: rather, it reinterprets phenomenological analyses of embodiment, habituation, and lifeworld constitution in order to describe how structures of exclusion and marginalisation are lived from the first-person perspective. The resulting tension between Husserl's concern with validity and optimality and Foucault's emphasis on power, contingency, and normalization remains one of the defining fault lines of contemporary phenomenological debates.

The Quasi-Transcendental and the Transformation of Transcendental Philosophy

A parallel development can be observed in the emergence of the notion of the quasi-transcendental. If the historical a priori became a central concept in historical epistemology, the quasi-transcendental has increasingly acquired a similar function in contemporary phenomenology and post-phenomenological thought. The term is most closely associated with Derrida. As Andrea Hurst notes, quasi-transcendental structures function as conditions of possibility while simultaneously resisting the status of absolute foundations (Hurst 2025). The phenomena we constitute could always be constituted otherwise; consequently, the boundaries and distinctions that make meaning possible also prevent the constituted phenomenon from attaining a fully stable or essential identity. The quasi-transcendental therefore occupies an unstable position between the empirical and the transcendental. It neither abandons transcendental inquiry nor accepts the classical model of immutable conditions. Rather, it shows that constitutive conditions are themselves exposed to historical transformation, reinterpretation, and displacement.

This point is captured by Geoffrey Bennington's characterization, discussed by Richard Rorty, according to which quasi-transcendentality acknowledges both the necessity and the impossibility of a strictly transcendental standpoint (Rorty 1995). Philosophical reflection cannot simply dispense with questions concerning the conditions of possibility, yet it can no longer appeal to foundations untouched by history, language, and difference. On Rorty's reading, Derrida continues to speak as if transcendental inquiry remains unavoidable, while refusing to derive from it any positive or definitive foundation. The resulting argument remains powerful against scepticism, but abstains from grounding an alternative metaphysical standpoint.

In a particularly suggestive remark, Rorty proposes that future historians of philosophy may well view the twentieth-century disputes among phenomenology, historical epistemology, pragmatism, Habermasian critical theory, and deconstruction not as conflicts between fundamentally opposed paradigms, but

as internal debates within a broader intellectual movement. From this perspective, the notions of the historical a priori and the quasi-transcendental can be understood as parallel attempts to reformulate the transcendental question after the collapse of the opposition between universal form and historical contingency. Both Foucault's archaeology and Derrida's deconstruction seek, in different ways, to transform transcendental philosophy rather than simply abandon it.

Contemporary phenomenology has increasingly mobilized the notion of the quasi-transcendental in precisely this spirit. As Lisa Guenther's critical phenomenology illustrates, the constitutive conditions of experience are understood as historically sedimented and socially mediated structures that shape possibilities for action, recognition, and critique (2021). Such conditions are neither merely empirical facts nor universal transcendental structures; they are constitutive while remaining contingent and transformable. The growing success of the term "quasi-transcendental" may therefore be compared to the earlier role played by the "historical a priori" within historical epistemology. In both cases, concepts whose meanings remain contested have acquired remarkable explanatory power because they enable philosophers to articulate the historical and social determination of experience without entirely relinquishing the transcendental question.

The present special issue starts from this observation. Rather than treating the historical a priori and the quasi-transcendental as isolated concepts belonging respectively to Foucault and Derrida, it proposes to read them as two related ways of thematizing the historical and social constitution of experience, language, and knowledge. Their conceptual proximity should not obscure their differences, but it invites a renewed examination of the transformations that the transcendental problematic has undergone in contemporary phenomenology and critical theory.

History, Critique, and Freedom

What is ultimately at stake in both notions is not only a theoretical problem but also a practical and political one. The question concerns the possibility of critique and, moreover, of the sources of its validity.

If our experience is structured by historically instituted frameworks, can these frameworks be transformed? If social norms, institutions, discourses, and symbolic orders condition our perception of the world, how can they become objects of criticism?

The appeal of both the historical a priori and the quasi-transcendental lies precisely in their ability to hold together two insights that are often treated as incompatible. On the one hand, human experience is never immediate but always structured by inherited forms of meaning (what in contemporary phenomenology is emphasized as generative phenomena). On the other hand, these structures are contingent and therefore open to revision.

This tension is particularly visible in contemporary critical phenomenology. Analyses such as those advanced by Lisa Guenther explore how historically

constituted norms shape lived experience while remaining susceptible to contestation and transformation. The task of critique is therefore neither to uncover timeless foundations nor merely to describe empirical realities. Rather, it is to interrogate those historically sedimented conditions that govern what can be experienced, recognized, and enacted. In this sense, both the historical a priori and the quasi-transcendental point toward a conception of freedom that is neither absolute spontaneity nor mere adaptation to given circumstances. Freedom becomes possible precisely through reflection upon those historically instituted structures that constitute our world while never exhausting its possibilities.

The leading hypothesis of this special issue is that the notions of the historical a priori and the quasi-transcendental are best understood not in isolation but as two interconnected attempts to rethink the transcendental question under historical conditions. By tracing contemporary debates on the quasi-transcendental back to the controversies surrounding the historical a priori and their common phenomenological background, it becomes possible to gain a more comprehensive view of the problems at stake and to better appreciate the divergent solutions proposed by different authors. The relevance of this perspective is particularly evident in the domain of normativity, where these approaches offer markedly different accounts of how critique, validity, and social transformation are to be understood.

Moreover, bringing into dialogue debates from different periods concerning concepts that perform analogous theoretical functions makes it possible to enrich contemporary discussions with valuable insights into their philosophical significance. Such a comparative perspective helps to clarify what is truly at stake in these notions and to assess the different tasks they are called upon to perform. At the same time, it remains essential to understand each concept within the specific conceptual field in which it emerges, since its position within that field largely determines its purpose, scope, and meaning.

The success of philosophical concepts is not necessarily proportional to their clarity. On the contrary, some terms gain currency precisely because they condense a complex set of problems into a striking and suggestive formula. Detached from the systematic contexts in which they originally emerged, they often undergo significant shifts in meaning, becoming available for new theoretical tasks and intellectual constellations. Such developments can be philosophically productive, but they also require careful scrutiny. This is particularly true of the notions of the historical a priori and the quasi-transcendental. Both owe part of their appeal to the fact that, when viewed through a static understanding of post-Kantian philosophy, they appear as oxymoronic expressions. If the transcendental is identified with the universal, ahistorical and necessary, and the empirical with the contingent, material and historical, then the very idea of a "historical a priori" or a "quasi-transcendental" seems paradoxical. Their apparent contradiction is also what has made them particularly attractive within contemporary debates.

Yet such a reading presupposes a rigid opposition between the transcendental and the empirical that phenomenology has already begun to call into

question. The apparent paradox becomes even more striking when measured against a Kantian conception according to which the transcendental, the formal, and the a priori largely coincide. Within such a framework, the empirical is the domain of contingency and history, whereas transcendental philosophy is tasked with identifying universal and necessary conditions of possibility. Phenomenology unsettles this strict division. Husserl's distinction between formal and material a priori structures, together with his analyses of the lifeworld and of sedimented traditions, points toward a transcendental field that cannot simply be opposed to empiricity.

From Husserl onwards, what is at stake is not the simple abandonment of transcendental inquiry but its transformation. Read without the ideological biases that have often shaped his reception, Husserl's own project already contains the resources for such a transformation. In his *Ideas II*, the phenomenological analysis seeks to bring into view precisely those dimensions of experience that ordinarily remain unnoticed (Husserl 1989). The categories that structure the natural attitude, and even more so those inherited from naturalistic worldviews, are not taken as self-evident descriptions of reality but as possible indices of experience among others. The emancipatory and critical potential of phenomenology lies in its effort to loosen the grip of an unquestioned standpoint, to reflect upon the position from which one experiences and judges the world, and to integrate this positionality into philosophical reflection without appealing to a view from nowhere.

In this way, Husserl opens the possibility of analysing constitutive structures that are themselves historically generated or historically transformed. Naturalism, for example, is not merely one doctrine among others; it functions as a historically instituted framework that conditions how reality is understood and investigated. Similarly, the lifeworld is not a fixed foundation but a horizon continually shaped by processes of sedimentation, transmission, and renewal. The transcendental field therefore reveals a peculiar form of empiricity and contingency of its own. At the same time, Husserl's recourse to eidetic analysis seeks to distinguish within these historically changing formations what is relatively invariant from what is merely contingent, thereby avoiding both ahistorical essentialism and historical relativism.

Derrida's introduction of the prefix quasi- before the transcendental can be understood within this broader trajectory. Far from simply negating the transcendental, it invites a renewed interrogation of its meaning. In this respect, Derrida's gesture is reminiscent of a characteristic operation of Husserlian eidetic analysis. As Adorno observed, phenomenological concepts are often developed through constellations of contrast: a paradigmatic case is initially selected, and progressively differentiated through a series of variations that reveal its essential contours. Thus, imagination may first be defined in opposition to perception, only later to be reintegrated into a broader account as a kind of quasi-positional act. The introduction of a borderline or intermediate case does not dissolve the concept but compels a reconsideration of what is genuinely essential to it. Something similar occurs with the quasi-transcendental.

The addition of the qualifier quasi does not merely serve to mark a distance from classical transcendental philosophy; rather, it raises the question of how the very meaning of the transcendental must be transformed once its historical, social, linguistic, and practical dimensions are taken seriously.

To undertake this conceptual work is more than an exercise in academic positioning. Like every intellectual field, contemporary philosophy is not immune to the dynamics of branding and differentiation. Yet the enduring significance of notions such as the historical a priori and the quasi-transcendental cannot be explained by such factors alone. Their philosophical importance depends on whether they genuinely allow us to rethink the relation between constitution and contingency, normativity and history, critique and situatedness. For this reason, it remains necessary not only to assess what these terms have come to mean in contemporary debates, but also to evaluate the extent to which these newer appropriations continue, transform, or depart from the intentions that originally informed their development.

The Contributions to This Issue

The contributions gathered in this special issue take up the tensions presented above in different ways, exploring how the *a priori* can be historicized without losing its constitutive force and how the quasi-transcendental reconfigures both the conditions of experience and the possibilities of critique. In choosing the order of the papers, we have opted for a broadly chronological approach, moving from Kant through Husserl and Merleau-Ponty to Derrida, in the hope of making the historical dimension of the problem more visible in this way as well.

Philipp Quell's contribution opens the issue with a phenomenological rereading of Kant that brings the problem of the a priori into dialogue with contemporary debates on queer futurity, highlighting queer elements of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Intervening between antisocial approaches that refuse futurity and utopian approaches oriented toward the "not yet," Quell proposes "critical possibilization" as a way of conceiving futures that are neither foreclosed nor predetermined. The paper highlights how the mediating role of imagination between sensibility and understanding reveals experience itself as a productive and plastic process. Thus, on Quell's reading, the *a priori* is not simply given in advance as a fixed and timeless structure: it takes shape through acts of synthesis, schematization, and reflective engagement that are themselves historically mediated. According to this reinterpretation of Kant, concepts can function as conditions that orient experience, opening it towards the future, without prescribing the concrete forms that it must assume. Quell thus reconceives them as quasi-*a priori* invitations to engagement, capable of becoming operative in the formation of futures while remaining open to transformation.

Riccardo Valenti's contribution turns to Husserl's late phenomenology in order to rethink the relation between transcendental constitution and historicity through the notion of the maternal. Drawing on Husserl's analyses of

teleology, intersubjectivity, and generativity, as well as on the reception of these concepts in the Milan School, Valenti reconstructs the maternal as a generative field in which sense is instituted, transmitted, and renewed across generations. The particular strength of his contribution lies in showing how the maternal can be understood both as a historical a priori and as quasi-transcendental, thereby illuminating both concepts by putting them to work within a concrete transcendental-phenomenological analysis. As a historical a priori, the maternal names historically mediated conditions of embodiment, inheritance, transmission, and reactivation through which meanings acquire continuity. As quasi-transcendental, it designates a field that is genuinely constitutive of meaning and historical continuity, while itself existing only through the historical processes it conditions. In this way, Valenti offers a particularly productive account of how phenomenology can accommodate historicity without abandoning its critical and constitutive ambitions.

Vanessa Ossino and Damian Nussbaumer pursue this problem through Merleau-Ponty, whose implicit conception of the historical a priori they present as an alternative to tensions they identify in Husserl and Foucault. Their argument begins with Merleau-Ponty's redefinition of the a priori. Once phenomenology takes facticity, embodiment, and situated existence as its point of departure, the hierarchy between a priori necessity and a posteriori contingency can no longer be maintained. The a priori is instead grounded in facticity, temporalized within lived time, and inseparable from historical and linguistic conditions of sense-formation. This also transforms the phenomenological methods: reflection cannot claim complete transcendental detachment because the reflecting subject remains radically situated within the world it investigates. Against this background, the authors reconstruct Husserl's tension between universal structures of historicity and contingent processes of linguistic and intersubjective transmission, before showing how Merleau-Ponty radicalizes phenomenology's historical dimension. This ultimately leads them to offer a distinctly Merleau-Pontian interpretation of the historical a priori as a "logic within contingency", in which necessity remains bound to the sedimented yet transformable horizons of existence.

Rebeca Pérez León's article seeks to clarify Derrida's distinctive use of history, différance, and the quasi-transcendental by reconstructing the methodological trajectory through which these concepts emerged from his engagement with Husserl. Arguing against readings of Derrida's philosophy either as a form of radical historicism or as a disguised transcendentalism, she reconstructs Derrida's thought as a non-empirical and non-transcendental *historicism* (italicized to distinguish it from historicism in the usual sense of the term) that emerges through an internal repetition, reduction, and transformation of Husserlian phenomenology. On this basis, she offers an original interpretation of Derrida's enigmatic characterization of the quasi-transcendental as "a condition of possibility that is simultaneously a condition of impossibility".

Daniel Brennan's concluding contribution takes up the Derridean determination of the quasi-transcendental and puts it to work in a literary analysis of

Lucy Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport*. Following Lisa Guenther, Brennan understands quasi-transcendental structures as historically contingent formations – such as late capitalism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy – that constitute experience while themselves being historically produced. Methodologically, he models his reading of Ellmann on Derrida's reading of Joyce: just as Derrida points out how Joyce's literary equivocity discloses what Husserl's pursuit of univocity suppresses, Brennan aims to show how Ellmann's novel figures a consciousness saturated by its historical conditions, enacting this quasi-transcendental constitution through its formal literary devices. Its pervasive commas continually defer closure, while the recurring phrase "the fact that" gathers factical determinations into an ongoing, unstable flow. Ellmann's refusal of the full stop can thus be read as a refusal of classical phenomenological *epoché*, revealing consciousness as inseparable from its historical, material, and embodied situatedness. Brennan's contribution thereby broadens the question of critique beyond its classical form in philosophical and theoretical discourse, showing how literary form itself can enact a critical phenomenology.

Across the volume, the conditions that make experience, meaning, and orientation possible are repeatedly shown to be neither timeless structures standing outside history nor merely empirical products of particular contexts. Instead, they emerge as historically instituted, embodied, transmitted, and transformable formations that nevertheless exercise a constitutive force. Whether through Quell's account of possibilizing concepts, Valenti's interpretation of the maternal as the generative field of transmission, Ossino's and Nussbaumer's take on Merleau-Ponty's "logic within contingency," or Pérez León's reconstruction of *différance*, the papers converge on the need to think conditions of possibility as themselves implicated in the processes they condition.

This also has important consequences for the question of critique. If there is no fully external or ahistorical standpoint from which historically constituted conditions can be assessed, critique cannot simply consist in stepping outside them. It must instead proceed immanently, by exposing their contingency, tracing their formation, and opening possibilities for their transformation from within. Brennan's contribution extends this insight beyond philosophical and theoretical discourse by showing how literary form itself can participate in such a critical task. In this sense, the historical *a priori* and the quasi-transcendental emerge throughout the issue as concepts for thinking not only how meaning is historically constituted, but also how historically sedimented structures can remain open to reconfiguration, renewal, and critique.

Taken together, these contributions suggest that the opposition between transcendental inquiry and historical critique is increasingly difficult to sustain. Rather than choosing between constitutive structures and historical contingency, they explore the productive field of tension in which both dimensions intersect. The historical a priori and the quasi-transcendental emerge, in this context, not as settled doctrines but as ongoing attempts to think the complex processes through which meaning, normativity, and freedom take shape within history.

The editors do not intend this volume as a conclusive statement on the relation between the historical a priori, the quasi-transcendental, and the transformation of transcendental philosophy. On the contrary, many of the questions raised here remain unresolved: the status of normativity, the relation between historical contingency and validity, the role of subjectivity, and the possibilities of critique all continue to be matters of ongoing dispute. The present collection has a more modest ambition. It is to provide a first orientation within this complex terrain and to create the conditions for a broader discussion. We hope that the dialogue initiated in these pages will be pursued in future work and will contribute to a renewed examination of the ways in which phenomenology and its interlocutors continue to rethink the relation between history, constitution, and freedom.

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Emanuele Kaminada, Olga Nikolić Marić

Istorijski *a priori* i kvazitranscendentalno: Mapiranje složenosti onoga što se odvija

Apstrakt

Tekst situira temat u kontekstu savremenih rasprava o transformaciji transcendentalne filozofije, razmatrajući istorijski a priori i kvazi-transcendentalno kao dva povezana pokušaja da se transcendentalno pitanje ponovo promisli pod uslovima istoričnosti. Tekst najpre izlaže problem načina na koji se transcendentalni uslovi mogućnosti mogu razumeti onda kada se prepoznaju kao istorijski konstituisani, društveno posredovani i otvoreni za transformaciju. Zatim razmatra pojam istorijskog a priori-ja kroz odnos između Huserla i Fukoa, usredsređujući

se na njihova različita shvatanja istoričnosti, subjektivnosti, važenja i kritike. Naredni odeljak posvećen je kvazi-transcendentalnom, naročito kod Deride i u savremenoj fenomenološkoj recepciji njegove filozofije, pri čemu se ovaj pojam predstavlja kao još jedan pokušaj da se konstitutivni uslovi promisle bez da se postave kao bezvremeni temelji. Tekst potom razmatra implikacije oba pojma za pitanja istorije, normativnosti, kritike i slobode, pokazujući da oni osvetljavaju napetost između konstitutivnosti i istorijske kontingencije. U tom kontekstu, kritika se razume kao preispitivanje istorijski sedimentiranih uslova koji oblikuju iskustvo bez mogućnosti da ga ikada u potpunosti odrede, dok se sloboda shvata upravo kao mogućnost refleksije o tim strukturama i mogućnost njihove transformacije. Na kraju, tekst predstavlja priloge u tematu, ističući različite načine na koje oni razmatraju odnos između transcendentalnog istraživanja i istoričnosti.

Ključne reči: istorijski *a priori*, kvazitranscendentalno, fenomenologija, transcendentalna filozofija, kritika

UDK: 305-055.3
DOI https://doi.org/10.2298/FID2603421Q
Original Scientific Article
Received 29.12.2025. Accepted 25.8.2026.

PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIETY
VOL. 37, NO. 3, 405–700

To cite text:
Quell, Philipp. 2026. "Critical Possibilization: An Essay Towards the Grounding of Not-Yet Determined Futures." *Philosophy and Society* 37 (3): 421–446.

Philipp Quell

CRITICAL POSSIBILIZATION: AN ESSAY TOWARDS THE GROUNDING OF NOT-YET DETERMINED FUTURES

ABSTRACT
This paper intervenes in a central tension within queer theory between antisocial refusals of futurity (Edelman) and utopian, relational horizons of the "not yet" (Muñoz, Ahmed). It proposes an inbetween position grounded in a phenomenologically rereading of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: queer futurity becomes neither a negation of future nor a guaranteed utopia, but a practice of "critical possibilization." First, building on Muñoz's concept of trace and Ahmed's concept of orientation, I argue that traces and orientations must be "met halfway": neither idealist projections nor merely given, they demand reflective, embodied modification. Second, I reconstruct the *Critique's* framework as beginning from the duality of sensibility and understanding and resolving their mediation through imagination's preconscious, synthesizing activity already operative in perception. Recasting the *Critique's* theoretical tools as amounting to an "originary acquisition" of both the evidential force and the actual taking shape of the a priori shows how the a priori exhibits, in practice, a realization of notyet possibilities – what I term the transhistorical, quasitranscendental character of the a priori based on a plastic structure of experience. Third, I diagnose a "straightening" tendency in the *Critique*, even as historical and conceptual factors queer this trajectory, revealing a third, indispensable yet not fully thematizable place of imagination, judgment and reflective feelings. Fourth, I reframe experience as a possibilizing structure animated by a drive "hunting for meaningful units" (Zhok 2016), Finally, through Kant's deployment of the "focus imaginarius", I show how critical metaphysics institutes an imaginary point within the real, freeing experience from strict (physical) determination and cause as well as opening a space of "determinable indeterminacy" within experience. "Critical possibilization" names this disciplined, felt, and embodied mode of realizing notyet possibilities: concepts are quasia priori invitations to engagement that can become futures without being fixed by them. This modest middle path aims to enable theoretical work at the edge of emergent possibilities while remaining faithful to contextual as well as historical conditions and the productive character of individual acts.

KEYWORDS
possibilization; quasi-transcendentality; queer futurity; Kant; productive imagination

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§ 1: Introduction

Within queer theory, two prominent orientations toward the possibilities of queerness have emerged, each implying a different understanding of "queer." On one side, the antisocial (or antirelational) thesis advances arguments that refuse the obligation of queer politics to sustain futurity, repair, or the smooth functioning of existing social and experiential orders. It affirms negativity and structural rupture as constitutively queer (Bersani 1996; Edelman 2004). On the other side, the utopian (or relational) thesis emphasizes that queer phenomena are conditioned by – and work through – extant social structures;[1] consequently, queerness must also be conceived as opening utopian horizons for "another world" rather than refusing futurist narratives. Muñoz frames this horizon as a "not yet" of possibilities immanent to the present that require a different, queer orientation to become sensible and actionable (Muñoz 2009). As Halberstam and Freeman suggest, such an account entails a reworking of time: linear, progressive, reproductive chronologies must be supplemented – and sometimes interrupted – by non-linear recursions and temporal drags that can explain how possibilities come to appear through returns, delays, and rebindings of past and present (Freeman 2010; Halberstram 2005).

Here, representation does not name mere reproduction of what has been, but, in line with phenomenological "presentification," a modification of the given. Remembering and looking back are conceived as acts that realize what was only "vaguely" prescribed within the given present (Brudzińska 2019; Micali 2008). Drawing on this, Sara Ahmed describes how experiential "lines" can be ruptured by altering how we inhabit and re-present the past and the given (Ahmed 2006).

Thus, the utopian thesis conceives queerness as "another institution" of the world. From an antisocial perspective, however, any institution and any project of re-presentation risks being unfaithful to its queerness: the generalization of a particular experience into a law or value for another future misrecognizes the "obliquity of relation" and the "vicissitudes" of individual experience that straight orders aim to negate (Edelman 2004: 5f.).

Edelman's perspective stems from a psychoanalytic – more precisely, Lacanian – account of subjectivity and experience. Here, the individual is primordially situated within a pre-subjective and unruly imaginary grounded in instinctual structures. Through the symbolic – a sedimented structure not only of language but also of institutions, social codes, etc. – the individual is subjectivized, and imaginary experience becomes structured by the symbolic as the Other of the individual. As the Other inaugurates the subject of experience, the "laws" of experience do not stem from the pre-subjective individual but from the (symbolic) Other. Thus, subjectivation is characterized by the

1 Phenomenologically speaking, queer phenomena are "phenomena of negativity," that is, as Michael Staudigl explains, we are confronted with experiences in which the constitution of sense is ruptured (Staudigl 2015).

experience of an original lack and, conversely, this pre-subjective, instinctual, i.e., affective life becomes the other within the ordered world of subjective experience. Lacan names this "jouissance" – translated as "enjoyment" (Lacan 1998) – which amounts, as Edelman argues, to a ceaseless "surplus" of desire with regard to the symbolic order of the social, since affective life is by definition the other of the symbolic order, a retroactively emerging other of the Other. "Queerness, therefore, is never a matter of being or becoming but, rather, of embodying the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order" (Edelman 2004: 25). For this reason, no symbolically instituted future is able to give rise to this "other jouissance" (Lacan 1977, 1992).

In what follows, I develop an inbetween position between antisocial refusal and utopian futurity. It recognizes a futural impulse immanent to queer expression, even as it insists on the risk of co-optation by the existing symbolic order's rules and categories. For this, I offer a phenomenological rereading of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and claim that:

(i) the basis of the *Critique* can be characterized as a straight space of thought queered by the theoretical encounter with Hume's empiricism.

(ii) the *Critique*'s conceptual framework acknowledges this queerness by introducing a novel conception of imagination, yet ultimately attempts to straighten this space.

(iii) the a priori forms, categories, and regulative ideas articulated in the *Critique's* Analytic and Dialectic – though presented as objective conditions of possible experience (the transcendental) – can be read as transhistorical and quasi all along.

§ 2: Preliminary remark: From queer frames to a queer framework

Before elaborating my argument, I offer a preliminary remark to consolidate my framework. First, my re-reading is based on the relational thesis elaborated by Muñoz, supplemented by ideas of Sara Ahmed. Second, it is consolidated through a critique of the account of time and queered futurity entailed in Muñoz's conceptualization.

Muñoz refers to phenomenological time when he develops the implications of possibilities *in potentia*.[2] Besides the ordinary idea of the past as elapsed

2 I adopt this notion of possibilities *in potentia* from Marc Richir. He insistently recalls Husserl's *Ideas I* claim that "fiction is the vital element of phenomenology" (Husserl 1982: §70). On Richir's reading, the "infinite variations of phantasy" are possibilizing insofar as, in an instant, they seize upon the "infinite progression of phantasy variations": the variation "more or less knows what it must comply with, namely which congruence is adequate",=. Thus, indeterminacy in the given is conceived as an intertwining of the implicit and the explicit. In free phantasy's variation, representation engages virtuality – i.e., the *in potentia* givenness of vague horizonal prescriptions – as "zones of indeterminacy" within the given. These zones ground a manifold of possible events of sense (*Sinnereignisse*, in Richir's terms) (Richir 2011: 68ff.). In this context,

time, he describes a second past, a "no-longer-conscious" that subsists in the present through "traces." These traces can be revisited and help to open a horizon that deviates from the "ordinary" or "straight" course of time. Drawing on Heidegger, Muñoz calls this opening of an altered future "ecstatic." In this way, the ordinary here and now – since it entails traces of the past – bears a "surplus" of "queer futurity." Muñoz concludes: "Opening oneself up to such a perception of queerness as manifestation in and of ecstatic time offers queers much more than the meager offerings of pragmatic gay and lesbian politics" (Muñoz 2009: 32).

By this, Muñoz connects two strands: debates about efficacious queer practice and recent phenomenological discussions of time. Regarding the latter, it has been shown that there are two different versions of the past in phenomenology: the ordinary past and a past that has never been present (Brudzińska 2019). Phenomenology understands remembering and imagination as acts that re-present, but this re-presenting is itself a moment within the flow of time. Hence the problem: how can re-presentation presentify what is not present? The problem deepens with "free phantasy," in which something ideal – or at least something never actually perceived – is varied in a free play of imagining. As Stefano Micali explains: "On the one hand, it has the same internal structure as remembering, intentionally implying [a past experience]. On the other hand, this [experience] is only a pure possibility rather than a past experience that occurred in the common world" (Micali 2020).

In other words, traces and their re-presentability support the hypothesis that something queer or non-ordinary complements the ordinary course of things, even if unrecognized in everyday life. Queerness for Muñoz not only addresses different forms of (sexual) directedness but also recognizes the foreign in the familiar.

Sara Ahmed deepens Muñoz's idea. For her, orientation designates the primordial basis of individual experience and is rooted in the bodily inhabitation of a historically sedimented world. The intuitive awareness of differences within one's orientation does not result from an epistemological process but from the bodies inhabiting space. These sedimentations are expressed in certain lines of experience. Orientation consolidates by intuitively following these lines: "The body [and also thought] orients itself by lining itself up with the direction of the space it inhabits [...]" (Ahmed 2006: 13). All this results in a "lack of neutrality"; space is always oriented in a historically contingent way. According to Ahmed, lines in Western spaces (of thought) have the character of "straight lines" (ibid.:16).

"Queer moments" occur when an individual body cannot follow straight lines. The result is disorientation. When such a queer body subsequently wants

"virtuality" designates the dimension of vaguely prescribed possibilities of *possibilities in potentia* (virtual possibilities): not a separate ontological realm but the phenomenological field of determinable indeterminacy (*Vermöglichung*) that phantasy articulates and thereby modifies subjectivity as such (cf. Amalric 2025).

to set a direction for itself, it must bend the "straight lines," thereby modifying space and its lines. Attempts to prohibit or regulate these bent lines of queer bodies correspond to an effort "to straighten the line" (ibid.: 23).

Consequently, queer futurity not only results from the engagement with traces; it is already at work at the affective level, in bodies' resistance to adopting straight lines. This pinpoints a risk in Muñoz's conception. He grounds his realization of not-yet possibilities through traces in the principle of hope and identifies it as a form of "idealism." Although this idealism includes an "affective surplus," aligning with Ahmed one can say it underestimates the affective or bodily dimension; conversely, Ahmed's account can seem to overemphasize the bodily dimension, as if the queer body alone could foster a queer futurity.

A reflective supplementation thus seems necessary to transpose a trace into "queer futurity." Traces are not mere substrates for the reflective grasp of a queer idealism, nor are they simply ready to be used; they must be met halfway.[3]

Ad hoc, Edelman's radical rejection of futurity might seem a solution because it includes the affective and the symbolic. However, this leads to a different problem. The risk of the Other's influence can indeed be inhibited – but only at the price of degrading an individual being to a negative existence. Such a dwelling in negativity does not fulfill the needs of affective life. This is already evident in later Lacan. When he tries to develop trajectories that foreground a possible life of "other jouissance," he struggles to find a language that does not reestablish the symbolic (Lacan 1998). More importantly, he maintains that every isolation of this "other jouissance" leads to the total collapse of an individual psyche (Lacan 2018). Recently, a promising attempt to provide "other jouissance" with a livable existence is Barbara Cassin's conception of the sophist: "[I]t is a matter with him and for him of a discourse that acts more than it expresses, and not through persuasion but through performance: a logos-pharmakon with an effect on the other and a world-effect [...]". (Cassin 2020: 125) Here too, pure negativity must be integrated into social life and thus merges with the symbolic. In short, a negativity that discursively refuses any future at least implicitly solicits a discursive future for its utterance to be possible at all. It is ecstatic although it prefers not to be.

3 I adopt the phrase "meeting halfway" from Karen Barad. In her widely received *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, she argues that critique, reflective praxis, and discourse must acknowledge their own materiality and their transformative effects. She links this to a critique of the dominant understanding of the relation between language and materiality: "Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every 'thing' – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation. The ubiquitous puns on 'matter' do not, alas, mark a rethinking of the key concepts (materiality and signification) and the relationship between them. Rather, they seem to be symptomatic of the extent to which matters of 'fact' (so to speak) have been replaced with matters of signification (no scare quotes here). Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that doesn't seem to matter anymore is matter" (Barad 2007: 132).

Based on this, my alternative is phenomenological. For phenomenology, every perception is not the apprehension of an isolated object; every perceived is adumbrated before a horizon. This horizon, as Husserl already claimed, is a "determinable indeterminacy," i.e., it bears possible determinations of the perceived (Husserl 1982: § 42). These possible determinations are not distinctly given; since they are only vaguely prescribed in the horizon, they appear as a certain "style." To transpose this "style" into actual possibilities requires complex operations, and recent research shows that these operations are not only realizations of subjective possibilities but also modifications of the subject itself.[4]

Consequently, the subject engaging its horizon does not remain unaffected. In this context, László Tengelyi redefined "experience": while "straight" experience (*Erlebnis*) perceives the world along its lines, "queering" experiences (*Erfahrung*) change the lines of experience and thereby, in principle, change the subject of experience (Tengelyi 2004, 2007). Thus, the engagement with "traces" must be conceived as "queering experiences" rather than "perceptions of queerness." The following reference to Kant applies this idea in the context of transcendental philosophy and aims to sketch a conceptual tablature. To recognize the conceptions of queerness provided here, I will use a minimal definition of "straight," "queer," and "straightening."

To conceptually consolidate this definition, I draw on Husserl's account of evidence, which distinguishes two dimensions: (i) degrees of intuitive fulfillment (adequate vs. inadequate) and (ii) the doxic modality of certainty (apodictic vs. nonapodictic). Adequacy names the limit case in which what is intended is given originarily and fully (paradigmatically in immanent experiences such as a heard tone). Inadequacy covers graded fulfillments: the experience of a thing remains necessarily inadequate because, at best, it is apprehended multisidedly but never allsidedly (Husserl 1982; III, §§8–10). By contrast, apodictic evidence is modal indubitability – an appearing "that could not be otherwise" (Ströker 1978). It is achieved, if at all, when what is experienced becomes the theme of a reflective, eidetic intuition. Not every reflection satisfies this condition: ordinary introspection in the natural attitude remains bound to historically sedimented horizons. Only the *epoché*, which opens the sphere of "absolute consciousness," secures the possibility of apodictic insight; here the phenomena are bracketed and can be subjected to free variation so that their essences are intuited, and – if successful – this intuition is accompanied by a feeling of indubitable certainty.

Without entering debates on eidetic intuition (*Wesensschau*),[5] this distinction illuminates the working senses of "queer" and "straight". Beyond its epistemic

4 Bernhard Rang further elaborated this in his *Kausalität und Motivation* (Rang 1973). Recently works of Michela Summa or Emmanuele Caminada have further investigated theseideas (Caminada 2024; Summa, Spano, and Schmidt 2024).

5 Husserl's idea is strongly connected with his project of transcendental phenomenology and his understanding of how the a priori of experience is elicited. Indeed, one line of argumentation within the recent discussion of the quasi a priori strongly relies on Husserl's idea of *Wesensschau* (cf. Quell 2026).

import, it bears on the relation between singular experience and generally accepted categories. While adequate/inadequate givenness remains tied to concrete objects, only bracketing allows one to refrain from direct reference to any particular object in one's claims. In other words, only the suspension of the object's factical positing makes possible assertions with a validity that surpasses reference to a specific context – whose presence, in any case, is adumbrated. Consequently, the categories articulated within the adequate/inadequate register of the natural attitude remain provisional and revisable as "new sides" show themselves; they are bound to a concrete affair (*Sache*). By contrast, eidetic insights achieved in the apodictic register exhibit an ideal, nonempirical validity: they do not derive from this or that worldly instance yet are meant to hold across possible worldexperiences but only as descriptions "from a distance."[6] This phenomenological clarification underwrites the minimal definitions of "straight," "queer," and "straightening" employed below. In this sense,

- *Queer*: the experience in which a new side of an affair arises that unsettles, revises, or deconstructs existing categories.
- *Straight*: experiences that affirm or reproduce the existing categories.
- *Straightening*: essences – in their phenomenological understanding as descriptions from a distance – are used to stabilize the existing order.

Thus, in the act of straightening, the distance is effectively revoked, and the apodictic register collapses back into the natural attitude. Does this merger of registers automatically negate the essence's apodictic modality? Strictly speaking, apodictic force attaches to eidetic insight within the *epoché*; once the bracket is relaxed and the insight is "applied" in the natural attitude, its modality shifts (Berghofer 2018, 2022). It no longer functions apodictically but as a regulative, at best assertoric, norm guiding worldly articulation. In this transition, the modal force of apodicticity does not survive; what held apodictically under the *epoché* now operates only as a regulative (assertoric) norm within the world.

In what follows, I map, in five steps with reference to Kant, the stakes of this transposition, where theoretical description interlaces with worldly interest. This will happen in five steps:

i. Reconstructing the *Critique's* framework: lays out Kant's duality of sensibility and understanding and the mediating role of imagination.
ii. Reading the a priori as quasia priori: argues that the status of forms, categories, and schemata is processual and historically mediated.
iii. Straightening in the *Critique*: shows how Kant's method assigns "proper places" and privileges to straighten expierence.

6 I adopt the description of *epoché* as a view from a distance that lets a new (philosophical) perspective emerge from Ricœur (Ricœeur 2024).

iv. Motives and pressures within the *Critique*: situates the framework between rationalism and Humean empiricism and elicits the sensual basis of critical orientation. This grounds the hypotheses that experience has to be conceived as "possibilizing structure."

v. Toward critical possibilization: proposes quasia priori concepts as a modest middle path that opens notyet possibilities while remaining faithful to one's conditions.

§ 3: Experience as complicated and heterogeneous process

Nowadays the *Critique of Pure Reason* is canonical, supplying concepts and problems that shaped nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophical thought. Yet immediately after its publication it faced sustained criticism and did not accord with common sense; the *Prolegomena* (Kant 2004) – published after the allegations and refutations – reads in part as an apologia and clarification, and the *Critique*'s second (B)[7] edition revises essential portions of the text.

Among the systematic reasons for this reception is the *Critique*'s starting point and the mediation problem it generates. Kant begins from affection of the subject (*Gemüt*) and distinguishes two heterogeneous yet conjoint sources of experience: sensibility and understanding. Sensibility receives; it provides the matter of experience (sensation) within the a priori (i.e., independent of experience) forms of space and time (A20/B34; A42/B59). Appearances are thereby "the undetermined object of an empirical intuition" (A20/B34), while the thing in itself "is not and cannot be cognized through them" (B45). The understanding, by contrast, does not intuit anything; it thinks the object given in intuition by synthesizing the received manifold of sensations under concepts, thereby making objects of possible experience present. Kant puts this as follows:

> The understanding is not capable of intuiting anything, and the senses are not capable of thinking anything. Only from their unification can cognition arise. But on this account one must not mix up their roles, rather one has great cause to separate them carefully from each other and distinguish them (B75–76).

At the same time, empirical intuition – whose matter is sensation – is the "material" on which our experience of objects depends; only through synthesis and conceptual determination can an appearance become an object within experience.

The duality of intuition and understanding raises what Paul Ricœur calls a "paradox of mediating between two heterogeneous principles" (Ricœur 2024: 71): how can a non-sensible capacity (the understanding) nevertheless seize and order what is only given sensibly? Kant's framework necessitates a pre-conscious, synthesizing preparation of the sensible "manifold." He states: "this

7 I will cite the Cambridge edition of the *Critique* (Kant 1998) with the abbreviation "AXX/BXX." If the quote was just introduced in the B-version the abbreviation will be "BXX."

manifold must first be gone through, taken up, and combined in a certain way in order for a cognition to be made out of it" (B102). He attributes this pre-synthesis to imagination, "a blind though indispensable function of the soul, without which we would have no cognition at all, but of which we are seldom even conscious" (A78/B103).

In brief, Kant understands experience not as a mere impression of an outside world but as the outcome of inner acts processing impressions. Ricœur therefore rightly notes: "[In Kant,] perception itself appears as a very complicated process within which the imagination is already working" (Ricœur 2024: 62). Along this line, Dieter Lohmar, drawing on Kant and phenomenology, coins "weak imagination": in everyday experience, acts of phantasy complement sensory impressions and thus already participate in the immediate appearance of real objects (Lohmar 2008).

Thus, Kant assigns to imagination a mediating spontaneity that allows experience to arise at all. This integration of imagination into experience – and its founding role for any object of knowledge – also motivates Kant's refusal of an ultimate cognition of reality "as it is in itself": we can know objects only as they appear under our sensible and conceptual conditions.

This becomes even more evident at the beginning of the "Transcendental Dialectic," the second part of the *Critique*. Kant criticizes traditional metaphysics for inscribing ideas (*Vernunftbegriffe*) onto experience. As a result, experienced things appear as if they are grounded in principles situated in the inner core of the subject, but this is a consequence of "transcendental illusion," which shows how products of thought can be taken as if they determined objects themselves. Thus, Kant writes that

> in our reason (considered subjectively as a human faculty of cognition) there lie fundamental rules and maxims for its use, which look entirely like objective principles, and through them it comes about that the subjective necessity of a certain connection of our concepts on behalf of the understanding is taken for an objective necessity, the determination of things in themselves. (B353)

Critique for Kant clearly designates a regulative restriction of cognition's validity: just because certain "fundamental rules" subsist in reason and guide the understanding's use, these "subjective necessities" must not simply "fly beyond" (B352) the immanence of experience to be incorporated as absolute principles of reality.

Instead, the experience of reality emerges through the interaction of sensibility and understanding. The *Critique* sets this as an absolute limit: we have no cognition of reality beyond possible experience. However, within these limits there is already an open process due to the dialogical structure of understanding and sensibility. It remains unforeseeable what sensibility gives to understanding. And, as imagination is the mediator between understanding and sensibility, the situation becomes even more dynamic because not only is the matter of experience unforeseeable, but the processing of imagination remains "hidden". Thus, Ricœur emphasizes: "Nobody before Kant had thought of a

function of imagination related to shaping our world of experience" (Ricœur 2024: 69). From such a perspective, the future of experience is not fully determined but always carries a degree of indeterminacy in its development. In the following, I will argue that this concerns not only the content but also the form of experience.

§ 4: From logic to groundlaying: The quasi-a priori

My hypothesis might seem to contradict the architectonic of the *Critique*, since its structure presents a different picture. It consists of two main parts, the "Analytics" and the "Dialectic." Whereas the "Dialectic" has mainly a regulative purpose – namely, as already indicated with "transcendental illusion," to inhibit reason from trespassing its own limit by providing regulative principles – the "Analytics" is concerned with discovering the actual limits by analyzing sensibility and understanding and deducing sensibility's a priori forms and the understanding's a priori categories.

If the way understanding organizes experience and its categories are supposed to be "a priori," it would seem that, contrary to my hypothesis, it is indeed fully determined, and that the general form of experience cannot change. However, it should be taken into account that the notion of "a priori" undergoes an important shift in the *Critique* due to three aspects:

4.1. Resignification of "deduction"

Since Aristotle, deduction designates logical derivation from established propositions; unlike induction, it applies the general to the particular. Kant's "deduction," however, refers to a legal practice: the justification of a rightful application of a law in an ambiguous case. In this sense, the deduction of the categories does not follow as a logical conclusion but justifies their lawful use, constitutively conditioned by the framework of experience that the *Critique* introduces (Henrich 1969, 1989). In a later text, Kant maintains that the categories are neither "divinely implanted" nor "innate representations", instead, they are acquired through deduction as an "original acquisition" (Kant 2002).

By conceiving experience as generated by two heterogeneous faculties – sensibility and understanding – mediated by the imagination, Kant adopts a stance at a distance from "natural" experience. From within this distanciation, he acquires the categories as the apodictic rules of experience. Yet this apodicticity is conditional in a double sense:

a) It depends on, and is confined to, the very framework that institutes the distance. Absent the positing of experience as arising from two heterogeneous sources and their imaginative mediation, the categories would have, at best, a provisional (assertoric or merely regulative) status. Thus, the sense of the a priori as an objective condition shifts to a framework-bound apodicticity.

b) It is not given, but it has to be acquired. In the context of this acquisition, the deduction takes on the task of the categories' exhibition (*Darstellung*) (B 168). The "*Darstellung*" is not a representation *(Vorstellung*): it is a rulegoverned and spontaneous act that makes the concept's apodictic modality; it does not merely emerge as an apodictic concept.

4.2. Particularity of the "categories"

Kant does not derive the pure concepts (categories) from recollection of representations, but from abstraction "from all content of a judgment" (B95). From this the table of categories "arises" (B105). It has been debated whether the table is complete, and whether completeness is possible by such a procedure; moreover, the logical "forms of judgment" Kant relies on are strongly informed by rationalism (Vorderobermaier 2012; Wolff 1995).

This further radicalizes the frameworkbound apodicticity (a): the a priori not only depends on the previously posited framework; its categorical "material" is itself drawn from a historically sedimented world of thought. Accordingly, the a priori is not simply frameworkdependent but historically conditioned. Regarding (b), the scope of exhibition must be specified: does it merely disclose tacitly operative objective conditions, or does the act of exhibition retroactively furnish the objectivity?

4.3. Realization of the categories as a conditioned possibility

In Kant's further argumentation, the problem of exhibition deepens because, due to the "schematism" introduced after the "Deduction", the acquisitional character of the categories concerns not only their apodicticity but also their very appearance. The argument for the categories and their Deduction is developed within the domain of "pure understanding." The categories are pure concepts, independent of sensibility; to be applicable to experience, they must be rendered sensible. Correspondingly, if the bottomup movement has imagination preforming appearances for understanding (§3), the topdown movement of pure understanding requires that imagination schematize pure concepts into sensible rules. The schema is a product of the imagination – "the representation of a general procedure of the imagination for providing a concept with its image" (A141/B180). In this way, imagination makes concepts generated at a distance from sensibility fit for application to what is given. In the concrete setting of the *Critique*, Kant translates the categories previously "deduced" into timerules (schemata) that underwrite the principles of experience and thereby guide our discrimination of objective experience from mere illusion – that is, from errors of sense or of understanding.

Alberto Rosales revisits this process of acquisition, exhibition and schematization. From the bottomup perspective of natural experience, the categories depend on imagination for their actualization: only through imagination can the understanding apply its categories to sensible impressions. In other words,

only then do the categories function as rules of experience. Accordingly, Rosales maintains that the categories thereby pass "from potentiality to actuality"; only after this actualization do "the functions of [deduction and schematization] appear for the first time, which until now remained potential in the innate basis of understanding" (Rosales 2000, 114–15). In other words, the natural experience has to be set in place to provide an actual basis for distanciation and analysis of the *Critique*. How does this affect the evidential force of the a priori?

Already in the context of the "Deduction", Kant himself offers a striking description: he calls this process of critical distanciation and analysis an "epigenesis of pure reason" (B167). How should this be understood? Two immediate readings suggest themselves:

a) Subjective Platonism. The categories reside in the understanding as innate principles; when "actualized" in natural experience and afterwards intuited in critical reflection, they are already contaminated by imagination and sensibility. Each exhibition is therefore a historically and sensibly tinted copy of the original.

b) Transcendental Idealism (teleological reading). The dialectic of potentiality and actualization should be removed from a strict dualism of sensibility and understanding. Every actuality bears the potential for a further, more articulated "subject," such that the *Critique* becomes a moment within a teleological becoming of spirit.[8]

Catherine Malabou sketches a "third way" that acknowledges the processual character of epigenesis while remaining faithful to Kant's framework. She argues that the transformative dynamics displayed in the "Deduction" and the "Schematism" amount to an indeterminacy of the subject. Although this indeterminacy is determinable (e.g., via schematization or deduction), it is not a "higher" determination that subsumes prior stages (Malabou 2016). Each determination gathers the potential of a current actuality and reforms it; the resulting actuality again bears the potential for further reformation. Against a "classical" teleological dialectic, this becoming is plastic: the subject, in its becoming, affirms the unforeseeable. However, although reformation is unforeseeable for the subject, it is neither arbitrary nor merely contingent, nor is it the unfolding of an innate potential. Rather, a structural indeterminacy within the subject conditions free acts – such as the deduction or the schematization – that in turn change the subject. Retrospectively, these changes present themselves not as contingent novelties but as the exhibition of necessary conditions of the own experience (Malabou 2004).

8 Without explicating it, I refer to Hegel's conception of the dialectics between potentiality and actuality as well as his integration of Kant into these dynamics (cf. Hegel 2021: 465-506).

4.4. The innate possibility of giving oneself rules

On this basis, the "a priori" Kant attributes to the categories can be read as the realization of not-yet possibilities that transform the very condition of experience. The "transcendental," designating the "conditions of possibility of experience," is a priori in that it makes experience possible by grounding it in categories *in potentia*. Although the actual table of categories stands within a sedimented rationalist line of thought, it is not merely reproduced; through activation and schematization the realization of the categories transforms them.

In this vein, JeanLuc Amalric proposes the notion of a "transhistorical quasitranscendental": Kant's effort runs through the "history [of thought] in a culminative [...] manner" and generates "transhistorical structures," a generativity that provides a horizon of experience and is thus "quasitranscendental" (Amalric 2025). The word "quasi" derives from the Latin "quam si," which literally means "as if" (Ferrarin 2025).

The a priori in the *Critique* is quasi all along. The institution of the transcendental can possibilize an a priori ground of experience only if the categories are taken as if (quasi) they are a priori. This not only binds sensibility and understanding inextricably together at the conceptual level, but also, at the evidential level, binds the transcendental – and its acquisitions of an a priori – to a preset framework. This framework, as I will show in § 7, essentially depends on imaginative acts. Moreover, as I will discuss in §6, this amounts to a plastic structure of experience being inherently able to reform itself through experience.

§ 5: Decomposing queerness in its straight elements

Despite these intersections – imagination and the idea of an "originary acquisiton" implicitly deconstructing the notion of the transcendental as the exhibition of objective conditions – the general trajectory of the *Critique* amounts to an effort at straightening experience. Kant foreshadows this when he calls imagination a "blind though indispensable" function (A78/B103), that is, indispensable for experience, yet not granted authority regarding ordering. And, although he specifies the process of deduction as a system of epigenesis, he grants no room for indeterminacy when he maintains "that the categories contain the grounds of the possibility of all experience in general" (B 167).

To illustrate his straightening effort, Kant borrows a metaphor from physics. When a body moves without external forces, it describes a straight line; when exposed to another force, it deviates into a "curved line." He writes:

> In order to distinguish the proper action of the understanding from sensible force that meddles in, it will thus be necessary to regard the erroneous judgment of the understanding as a diagonal between two forces that determine the judgment in two different directions, enclosing an angle, so to speak, and to resolve the composite effect into the simple effects of the understanding and of sensibility. (A270–271/B326–327)

This "diagonal of forces" analogy rests on a specific premise in that context: the faculties are strictly distinguished like vectors of force in physics, and mixed ("diagonal") effects must be resolved into their elements, to assign them their proper place.

Thus, critical thought as Kant conceives it amounts to decomposing composite effects and assigning each element to its proper place. (In section 6.2., I will further elaborate on that problem of place). In this sense, representations are to be resolved into what belongs to appearance and what to concept, so as to identify where the sensible has influenced judgment and produced a "diagonal" result. It becomes clear that Kant intends, metaphorically and methodologically, to straighten the lines of experience.

In my terms, the straightening of the *Critique* culminates in Kant's introduction of the "transcendental." Kant himself does not understand it as quasia priori; the conditions he delivers and deduces are, as such, the conditions of possible experience (A11–12/B25). He clearly has a strong hierarchy in mind: "thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind" (A51/B75).

Metaphysics should become possible as a science "according to a sure plan" (Kant 2004: 260). Natural science can never reveal the "inside of things, i.e., that which is not appearance but can nonetheless serve as the highest ground of explanation for appearances" (ibid.: 352). Thus, Kant sees himself compelled from the outset to go beyond the field of possible experience to the "concept of a being which is in no way dependent on appearances nor bound up with them as conditions for its determination" (ibid.: 356). In order to be scientific, this transgression must adhere to the previously recognized basic rules of thought; that is,

> that we think the world as if it derives from a supreme reason, as regards its existence and inner determination; whereby we in part cognize the constitution belonging to it (the world) itself, without presuming to want to determine that of its cause in itself [...]. (ibid.: 360)

It is therefore a matter of transcending the world metaphysically in a reasoned asif, without "presuming [anzumaßen] to want to determine" the world's cause itself (ibid., 365). This does not alter the fact that such a propaedeutic systematization depends on imagination as a distinct power – thereby implicitly giving any a priori positing a quasia priori character. Moreover, the "sources" of experience – elements in the original Greek sense of primordial causes – are themselves imagined on a Newtonian model of forces as straight lines. But what justifies treating this presupposition as a priori if the Newtonian picture is itself conditioned by a Euclidean geometrical model (in §7 I will elaborate the scope of this analogy in detail)?

One may reply that without privileging an originally straight and ordered space, stable knowledge and responsible worldshaping would be impossible; the quasi must be domesticated by reason if a common life is to be sustained. Yet to accept reason's supremacy without reserve risks to court dogmatism, since it appears presuppositionless but in reality, depends on earlier models

and knowledge. In what follows, drawing on the *Critique*'s historical and conceptual queerness, I argue that charging Kant with such dogmatism oversimplifies the transcendental framework and overlooks a crucial, implicit idea: the sensing of thought.

§ 6: What really *drives* the Transcendental?

6.1. Historical queerness: Liberation from rationalism

In the historical context of the *Critique*, two philosophical strands are fundamental. On the one hand, as already described in the context of the categories, there is the straight, rationalist influence; on the other, there is the queer encounter with British empiricism that roused Kant from his "dogmatic slumber." (ibid.) Hume's philosophy fundamentally motivated Kant to reject the guiding idea of rationalism that would trace every phenomenon's principle back to a homogeneous logic, and instead to understand experience as the result of a complex process of impression and apprehension.

To use Ahmed's vocabulary, Kant gains the categories by following the lines in the space of thought given by his education, interest, etc.; but as his framework is fundamentally altered due to his queer encounter with Hume, he confronts the challenge of straightening the "curved lines." According to the definition in §2, the *Critique*'s framework queers the prevailing order by introducing a new side to the affair: a heterogeneous basis of experience (sensibility and understanding, mediated by imagination) that displaces a homogeneous rationalist logic. It would be an overstatement to call Kant queer, but the historical context of the *Critique*, the criticism it faced, and its conceptual tensions at least support the hypothesis that there is an atmosphere of "certain uncertainty" (Fanon 2002: 110). Inherited from rationalism, Kant's intellectual basis could be regarded as a "catholicity of the rational," according to which reason is an absolute power of "unconditioned value" (Sartre 1995). Hume's empiricism theoretically queers such a basis by positing impression and habit before any idea (Lohmar 2016). If Hume awakened Kant from his dogmatic slumber, this can be regarded not only as a "queer moment" but as "queering experience," through which the *Critique*'s framework is realized – a becoming of a notyet possibility.

Put this way, the trajectory of the *Critique* is foremost a liberation from the given and its possibilities and a movement toward the notyet possible. However, this liberation is both relief and burden, because as soon as the "catholicity of the rational" no longer serves unconditionally, only experience can suffice as a basis. In the distanciation and absolute immanence of the critical discourse of the subject, there is no possibility of an external reference. Within the horizon of the *Critique*, freedom amounts to a dynamic of transforming experience engendered through the interplay of sensibility, thought and imagination, and this repeats the initial question (§ 2) of how the products of these acts can gain evidential force in the world without its conditioning framework (§ 4).

6.2. Conceptual queerness: Sensing thought

The section "On the Amphiboly of Concepts of Reflection," which transitions from the "Analytics" to the "Dialectic," offers an insightful answer to this. Here, Kant discusses the possibility of orientation within one's experience without external reference points. He calls such orientation "reflective" and its status "subjective." Reflection, he maintains, is concerned not with objects and objective knowledge but with "the state of mind in which we first prepare ourselves to find out the subjective conditions under which we can arrive at concepts" (A260/B316). Every cognition has different "sources," such as understanding, imagination, and sensibility, and reflection elucidates to which place an experience belongs. Generally, judgments once accepted, assumed, or posited are experienced as a singular instance in the form of something appearing as something. Some "immediately certain" judgments may need no further investigation, but with regard to "concepts", reflection on the faculties involved in their genesis is mandatory. All such acts are rooted in the "faculty of judgment."

Since reflection is restricted to the subjective field of experience, it can only investigate different representations and concepts by comparing them with each other. Orientation results from the differences that emerge through relating representations, concepts, judgments, etc., and gives grounds to affiliate them to different "places." Eventually, "transcendental reflection" defines the a priori possible relations and, therefore, prefigures differences and their corresponding places in the subject.

> [I]n pure judgments a priori this must happen through transcendental reflection, through which (as already shown) every representation is assigned its place in the faculty of cognition proper to it, and hence also the influence of the latter is distinguished from it. (A270–271/B326–327)

François Lyotard highlights the peculiarity of transcendental reflection. On the one hand, it aspires to delineate the lines of reflection; on the other, orientation through subjective reflection means "feeling a difference within my own subject." Transposed into thought, the issue is a "subjective distinction" that allows reason to determine its "*Fürwahrhalten*" – how reason can take something as true in the absence of "objective criteria of knowledge." If the delineation of different "realms" within one's experiential field is grounded in felt states, then the judgment of reflection is "tautegorical," because the "identity of form [the different realms] and content [the particular experiences]" rests solely on reflective feeling: it synthesizes the act of thinking that takes place before an object with the affection this act produces. Reflection is an "inner repercussion" or resonance of the act. Pure reflection thus entails the capacity of thought to be immediately informed of its own state by that very act, without any other measure than feeling itself. Consequently, reflection no longer designates an exclusively intellectual effort but the sensing of cognitive acts, since – as Lyotard, with reference to Kant, emphasizes – the expression or

indication (*Anzeige*) of subjective reflection is not a proposition but a feeling of pleasure or displeasure; it is on the basis of this sensed state alone that the subject is oriented in thought (Lyotard 1994: 1–50).

This process of self-affection enables orientation in oneself and grounds the distinction of experiences. The form of reflection Kant introduces in the "Amphiboly" is indeed subjective; it refers to the self as an inner whole of experience but must be situated before the definite constitution of the subject's limits. This produces a problem in the architectonic of the *Critique*. If Kant initially starts his assessment of experience based on the division of sensibility and understanding, on what reflection is this initial division based? Is it a judgment that needs no further investigation as "immediately certain"? If so, how can understanding and sensibility be a priori fundamental while their a priority is founded on a judgment? Thus, it must be asked what the role of judgment with respect to understanding and sensibility is.

As with imagination, Kant's description of judgment remains undecided. He states: "If understanding is the faculty of rules, judgment is the faculty of subsuming under rules, i.e., of determining whether something belongs to a given rule or not" (B171). A physician may be well informed in anatomy or pathology, but this abstract knowledge does not suffice to decide "in concreto" (B174) a patient's condition. Experience may "sharpen" this power of judgment, but the ability itself cannot be taught; it results from "natural wit [*Mutterwitz*]" (B173).

Without judgment as a "natural wit" no rule would be possible in concrete experience; imagination is "blind though indispensable" (A78/B103). Both seem to share a third place of experience not accessible to objective knowledge, although "indispensable" and necessary for experience to be possible. Are judgment and imagination one faculty, or two powers? If they are so crucial to experience and objective knowledge, why are there only introductory statements or remarks between the lines about them? And, last but not least, how are they interrelated with the reflective possibility of sensing cognitive acts?

6.3. Experience as motivated and possibilizing structure

Due to the scope of this paper, I will not be able to further elaborate on these interesting questions. However, they already indicate that, if experience is conditioned by a quasi and transhistorical transcendental and can be changed by free acts, such as the deduction or schematization, it exhibits a general structure that can be affected and can affect itself (cf. § 4). [9] Through complex and

9 I adopt Dieter Lohmar's interpretation of Kant's concept of affect (Gemüt) in the *Critique*. He distinguishes between exogenous and endogenous affections. Exogenous affections comprise all external stimuli that affect sensibility and supply the matter of experience (sensation). Endogenous affections denote internally originating forces that modulate these affective processes—such as the spontaneity of the understanding and the synthesizing activity of imagination—which prestructure what is given to us (Lohmar 2008).

heterogeneous processes, experience emerges, and through immanent acts[10] – what I called self-affection before (§ 3) – the very structure of experience can alter. It is not about possibility versus actuality; yet this straightening does not result from a mere repetition of universals; it issues from originary acquisitions (§4). These acquisitions reform the structure of experience by imaginatively instituting a framework in which that structure is viewed as if it were a physical phenomenon (§5). Andrea Zhok offers a structural account of experience well suited to this reformative process:

> Experience is emergence in both an epistemic and an ontological sense, because it creates the room for possibilities. Such a dynamic possibilizing dimension expresses a constitutive 'drive'. To be a living consciousness hunting for meaningful units is tantamount to being a possibilizing actuality. (Zhok 2016: 233)

Understanding Kant's effort of critical straightening against the background of a "drive [...] hunting for meaningful units" helps to highlight the productivity concealed by calling the first part of the *Critique* an "analytic". If the *Critique* embraces the queer encounter only to incorporate it into a logic of the conditions of experience, it reproduces the status quo in a new situation – namely, a situation queered by the encounter with Hume – and thereby straightens queerness. Yet this straightening does not result from a mere repetition of universals; it issues from originary acquisitions (§ 4) that, in return, can be conceived as being rooted in a productive drive which amounts to the reformation of experience's structure by inventing a framework in which the structure of experience is imagined as if it were a physical phenomenon.[11] Given the experience's roots in a plastic structure, hasn't the whole edifice of the *Critique* been possibilizing all along? Indeed, this idea can be supported and further differentiated by a passage in the "Transcendental Dialectic."

§ 7: Critical possibilization

As noted earlier, "transcendental illusion" arises when ideas of reason are taken to determine objects constitutively – whether objects of possible experience or nature as a whole. To mark the proper (regulative) use of ideas, Kant invokes an analogy that can be traced back to Newton.

10 I do not confine my account to subjective reflection (cf. 6.2); it also encompasses objective reflection – namely, the analysis of the pure understanding, of sensibility, and of reason's regulative effort.

11 I cannot further pursue the deepseated relation between drive and imagination here. An increasing body of phenomenological work addresses this question (Bernet 2006, 2012; Brudzińska 2019; Micali 2020). In my view, Micali's account – more precisely, his notion of "phantasy," following Marc Richir (Richir 2000, 2004) – as a "dramatization of affective life" is especially apt for marking the difference between acts of reason and acts of imagining.

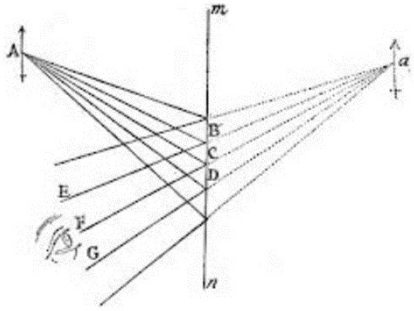


Figure 1

In the *Opticks*, Newton analyzes a mirror phenomenon in which an observer stands before a looking glass (cf. Fig. 1). Owing to reflection, the object appears as if it were "really placed at *a* without the interposition of the looking-glass; and all vision is made according to the place and shape of that picture." Reflection thus doubles the object: by the mirror's transposition, it is not the physical object "A" that is seen, but an imaginary "a" generated on a projection plane. Newton calls this plane imaginary, and thereby designates a *focus imaginarius* (Newton 2010: 18).

By contrast, transcendental analytics treats experience itself as its object; it analyzes experience as real ("A"), not as imaginary ("a"). Within the methodological distance from "natural experience" established by *Critique*, this stance is legitimate. But if results acquired under this stance are carried beyond the bounds of possible experience – so that pure concepts or ideas are taken to determine objects as things in themselves – reason lapses into transcendental illusion. To guard against this, Kant writes:

> I assert: the transcendental ideas are never of constitutive use, so that the concepts of certain objects would thereby be given, and in case one so understands them, they are merely sophistical (dialectical) concepts. On the contrary, however, they have an excellent and indispensably necessary regulative use, namely that of directing the understanding to a certain goal respecting which the lines of direction of all its rules converge at one point, which, although it is only an idea (focus imaginarius) – i.e., a point from which the concepts of the understanding do not really proceed, since it lies entirely outside the bounds of possible experience = nonetheless still serves to obtain for these concepts the greatest unity alongside the greatest extension. (A644/B672)

For Kant, then, critical re-orientation amounts to a regulative gesture. The *focus imaginarius* is not a real item within experience but a point of orientation entirely outside its bounds; it serves to guide understanding toward maximal systematic unity. Crucially, this does not "extend apodictic force" into nature. The regulative employment does not constitute objects; it confers a methodological, heuristic necessity (unity as a rule of inquiry), not a constitutive, object-giving necessity.

Relative to Newton, a double transposition occurs:

a) From *Optics* to *Critique*: Kant recasts the optical model as a transcendental one. In Newton's case, an "imaginary" point locates the apparent image produced by reflection (the place where reflected rays seem to meet). Kant borrows this as a metaphor: the *focus imaginarius* names an ideal point of convergence for the "lines of direction" of understanding's rules. It is not a locus of objects nor a source from which concepts proceed, but a regulative orientation point "entirely outside the bounds of possible experience" (A644/B672).
b) From particular phenomena to experience as such: the "mirror" becomes the reflective stance of critique; the "image" becomes the systematic projection that orients inquiry into experience in general. This can be illustrated with "Figure 2".

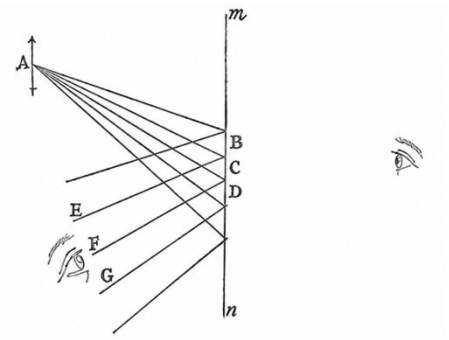


Figure 2[12]

Seen from the imaginary side, the *Critique*'s concepts and analyses can present themselves as if they were simply "real," but they are the products of a transcendental discourse instituted by imaginative transposition. The result is not a suspension or "bending" of physical laws (which, for appearances, remain governed by strict causal determination); rather, a meta-physical field (in the critical sense) is opened in which inquiry is oriented by regulative ideals toward unity and extension. Experience is not merely the passive effect of composed forces and reflected trajectories; through imaginative transposition and subsequent originary acquisitions, new grounds for organizing and extending experience can emerge.

This brings into focus the geometrical metaphors at A644/B672 – the "lines of direction" converging to a point. Why must determination converge on one point? Do these metaphors lean too heavily on a model of classical physics and on an image of the understanding that gathers representations into a point (the concept)? My claim is that Kant presumes that transcendental acquisitions can be carried back as regulative norms into natural experience without a change

12 The modification of the illustration has been executed by ChatGPT v5.5.

of their modal force. He does not register a "loss" (better: a transformation) of evidential force when he steps from the transcendental stance back into the natural attitude. Yet if the a priori is: a) framework-bound and generative (it generates both the apodictic modality and, through spontaneous acts, the categories themselves) (§4); b) conditioned by "queer experience" that introduces a new side, revising extant categories (§5); c) nurtured by a productive drive that possibilizes new configurations (§6); then possibilization has been operative all along. If Kant resists acknowledging this transformation, it signals how deeply seated the drive toward the "catholicity of the rational" is in the subject named "Kant."

Why not, then, simply relinquish Kant? Because, despite these problematic assumptions, the *Critique* – seen from the perspective of possibilization – offers a fruitful trajectory for transforming an acquired a priori, generated at a distance, into a lived orientation. To move beyond Kant with Kant is to recognize the gap between the transcendental stance, in which an a priori is acquired and enjoys frameworkbound apodicticity, and the natural attitude, where its application is at most regulative and assertoric.

Bridging this gap can draw on two resources already in play: "transcendental reflection" (§6.2) and schematization (§4.2). Recapitulating: transcendental reflection orients the subject in its own cognitive acts by a reflective sensing of those acts – pleasure and displeasure signaling the fit of an act within the subject's whole constitution. Schematization, in turn, names the imaginative procedure that gives non-empirical concepts an intuitive rule of application; in the *Critique*, this takes the form of timerules because time has been identified as the general form of succession, and thus as the most far-reaching medium for application (B 67-73).

If we now detach this procedure from the *Critique*'s strict framework and relax the compartmentalization of faculties, acquisition appears as a creation from a distance that nevertheless takes its bearings from worldly phenomena. Schematization becomes a process in which the original phenomena are resignified by imaginatively treating them as if they were "really" constituted by the foregrounded a priori. No constitutive, object-giving criteria can adjudicate this process, since it remains immanent to the critical stance; nevertheless, it is not arbitrary. Orientation is supplied by reflective sensing, alongside further constraints such as systematic coherence, fecundity in organizing experience, and intersubjective transmissibility of the acquired orientation.

In this sense, it is a "critical possibilization"; it is not an abstraction but a practice: it discursively realizes notyet possibilities under constraints supplied by reflective sensing. The resulting discourse is grounded in lived, bodily individuality that is itself generative and tautegorical (§6.2). Because this exploratory field is neither fully determined nor purely rational, Kant's reliance on "straight lines" (convergence to a point) beyond the bounds of possible experience can be questioned. This opens the possibility of critically possibilizing other figures – curves, parabolas, bent lines – that figure different "reals." Paradoxically, the very idea of queering the possibilities of experience arises from engagement with the *Critique* itself – a text originally aimed at straightening experience.

§ 8: Conclusion

Across Sections 3–7, the *Critique* has been read as beginning from the duality of sensibility and understanding and addressing the resulting mediation problem by assigning imagination a preconscious, synthesizing role that already operates within perception. Recasting key aspects – Kant's redefinition of "deduction," the origin of the categories from logical forms, schematism making the categories sensible via imagination, and the difference between exhibition and presentation – substantiates conceiving the "transcendental" as transhistorical, quasitranscendental within a plastic structure of experience. Yet the *Critique* tends to "straighten" experience: according to the "diagonal of forces" analogy, it decomposes mixed effects to assign what belongs to sensibility or understanding, presupposing the understanding's governance and a hierarchical ordering of the conditions of possible experience. Historical and conceptual queerness within the framework unsettles this straightening, producing an atmosphere of "certain uncertainty," while, according to Kant, reflective orientation without external criteria relies on felt, subjective distinctions of judgment; judgment, together with imagination, thus occupies a third, indispensable yet not fully thematizable place in the subject's architectonic. Consequently, experience itself can be read as a possibilizing structure animated by a drive towards meaningful units so that the plastic structure of experience inherits an essential possibilizing capability. This motivates revisiting Kant's "*focus imaginarius*" and reading the *Critique* as a practice of "critical possibilization."

To come back to the initial discussion between utopia and no-future. With my re-reading of the *Critique* I tried to sketch a position in-between. One that is neither a refusal of any futurist narratives nor a utopian fabulation. I propose a more modest approach of "critical possibilization." As a point of departure, I embraced the peculiar notion of an "originary acquisition" as a hinge to move beyond Kant with Kant. Since the *Critique's* a priori is acquired within a framework shown to be instituted by imagination – one that takes its cue from a Newtonian physicooptical model – the a priori is, in a strict sense, quasitranscendental and trans-historical: its evidential force is conditioned by an imaginative distanciation and given world of thought. Put differently, imagination transposes a physical model into a transcendental field and applies existing concepts in this framework; hence the transcendental is "quasi" not because it is merely empirical, but because it depends on formative acts of imagination and it is transhistorical because it resituates given understandings. On this view, the *Critique* appears as a possibilizing architecture. "Transcendental reflection" connects this formative, cognitive work to its sensibleaffective basis, and through schematization the concepts generated at a distance are attuned to the affective groundlayers that participate in the background of acquisition. The articulated concepts have neither an automated future nor do they reject a future. Instead, they are invitations to an engagement that can become a future, but a future that is not fully determined by the concept.

This suggestion might seem quite abstract, and I admit that a lot of work has to be done to further substantiate the sketch provided here. Nonetheless, I think it can help to empower theoretical work on the edge of not-yet possibilities being faithful to the conditional nature of the individual context as well as the productive character of individual acts and perspectives.

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Filip Kvel

Kritička posibilizacija: Esej o utemeljenju još-neodređenih budućnosti

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad se uključuje u središnju tenziju unutar kvir teorije između antisocijalnih odbijanja budućnosti (Edelman) i utopijskih, relacionih horizonata „još-ne“ (Munjoz, Ahmed). On predlaže međupoziciju utemeljenu na fenomenološkom ponovnom čitanju *Kritike čistog uma*: kvir budućnost tako ne postaje ni negacija budućnosti ni garantovana utopija, već praksa „kritičke posibilizacije“. Najpre, oslanjajući se na Munjozov pojam traga i Ahmedin pojam orijentacije, tvrdim da tragove i orijentacije treba „sresti na pola puta“: oni nisu ni idealističke projekcije ni naprosto nešto dato, već zahtevaju refleksivnu, otelovljenu modifikaciju. Zatim rekonstrušem okvir *Kritike* kao onaj koji polazi od dualiteta čulnosti i razuma i razrešava njihovo posredovanje putem pretkognitivne, sintetičke aktivnosti uobrazilje koja je već operativna u opažanju. Preoblikovanje teorijskih oruđa *Kritike* tako da se ona shvate kao ono što podrazumeva „izvornu akviziciju“ kako evidencijalne snage tako i stvarnog oblikovanja *a priori* pokazuje kako *a priori*, u praksi, ispoljava realizaciju „još-ne” mogućnosti – ono što nazivam transistorijskim, kvazitranscendentalnim karakterom *a priori*, zasnovanim na plastičnoj strukturi iskustva. Treće, dijagnostikujem tendenciju „ispravljanja“ u *Kritici*, čak i dok istorijski i pojmovni faktori „kviruju“ ovu putanju, otkrivajući treće, nezaobilazno, ali ne u potpunosti tematizabilno mesto uobrazilje, suđenja i refleksivnih osećanja. Četvrto, iskustvo preoblikujem kao posibilizujuću strukturu animiranu nagonom koji „lovi smislene jedinice“ (Zhok 2016). Konačno, putem Kantove upotrebe „*focus imaginarius*“, pokazujem kako kritička metafizika uspostavlja imaginarnu tačku unutar realnog, oslobađajući iskustvo od stroge (fizičke) determinacije i uzročnosti, kao i otvarajući prostor „odredivoj neodređenosti“ unutar iskustva. „Kritička posibilizacija“ označava ovaj disciplinovani, osećajni i otelovljeni način realizovanja još-neostvarenih mogućnosti: pojmovi su kvazi *a priori* pozivi na angažovanje koji mogu postati budućnosti, a da pritom nisu njima fiksirani. Ovaj skromni srednji put nastoji da omogući teorijski rad na ivici emergentnih mogućnosti, uz istovremeno ostajanje vernim kontekstualnim i istorijskim uslovima, kao i produktivnom karakteru individualnih činova.

Ključne reči: posibilizacija, kvazitranscendentalnost, kvir budućnost, Kant, produktivna uobrazilja

UDK: 165.62
DOI https://doi.org/10.2298/FID2603447V
Original Scientific Article
Received 31.12.2025. Accepted 20.8.2026.

PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIETY
VOL. 37, NO. 3, 405–700

To cite text:
Valenti, Riccardo. 2026. "Handing Down Meaning. Generativity, Historicity, and the Maternal as a Quasi-Transcendental Field." *Philosophy and Society* 37 (3): 447–468.

Riccardo Valenti

HANDING DOWN MEANING. GENERATIVITY, HISTORICITY, AND THE MATERNAL AS A QUASI-TRANSCENDENTAL FIELD

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a phenomenological reconfiguration of the relation between transcendental constitution and historicity, especially through the notion of the "maternal", "natality" and "fecundity". Rather than approaching these features as a thematic object, symbolic figure, or empirical domain, the paper reconstructs them as a generative field in which meaning is instituted, transmitted, and renewed across time. Starting from Edmund Husserl's late analyses of teleology, intersubjectivity, and generativity (especially in *The Crisis of European Sciences* and the manuscripts on intersubjective inheritance) the paper argues that the validity of sense depends not on ahistorical formal conditions, but on historically operative processes of transmission and reactivation. This framework is developed through the Milan School's reception of Husserl. Enzo Paci's interpretation of phenomenological rationality as an infinite, ethically charged task of reactivation discloses the temporal and intersubjective conditions of reason, while Giovanni Piana's analyses of *tradere*, generativity, and intersubjective inheritance show that historicity is not external to transcendental life but constitutes its very mode of existence. Within this context, the maternal emerges as a structural configuration that articulates continuity without identity, inheritance without automatism, and renewal without rupture. The paper further clarifies this generative structure through a dialogue with Hannah Arendt's notion of natality and Emmanuel Levinas's analyses of paternity, fecundity and diachrony. While Arendt does not thematise the maternal in the sense proposed here and Levinas develops the maternity primarily as a figure of ethical substitution, I argue that their accounts of beginning, plurality, fecundity, and responsibility articulate complementary dimensions of the generative field reconstructed in this paper. On this basis, the maternal is finally characterised as a historical a priori and, more precisely, as a quasi-transcendental field: historically variable and embodied, yet structurally constitutive of the possibility of meaning, responsibility, and historical continuity. The paper concludes by suggesting that this reconceptualisation allows phenomenology to address its own historicity without abandoning its critical ambitions, opening a path toward a generative critique of transcendental reason.

KEYWORDS
Phenomenology;
Generativity;
Historicity;
Quasi-Transcendental;
Maternal

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Introduction. Historicizing the Transcendental through the Maternal

In Husserl's late phenomenology, the problem of validity is inseparable from the problem of history (see Carr 1974; Ni 2018 and Nobili 2024). For him, the ideality of meaning (most visibly in the sciences) does not endure by virtue of an abstract permanence, but only insofar as it is instituted, consolidated, transmitted, and repeatedly brought back to presence (see Bernet, Driker-Ohren, and Saber 2023 and Mensch 2016). In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Husserl insists that theoretical constructs cannot be understood independently of the *practical* conditions of their formation, stabilization, and reactivation. Idealities live only through a return to their *intuitive* origins, a return that is never definitive but must be continually renewed if sense is not to congeal into empty objectivity. This concern also motivates Husserl's critique of Modern objectivism (see Valenti 2025). The increasing autonomy of abstract scientific constructions is accompanied, he argues, by a progressive loss of meaning, resulting in science that becomes "meaningless for life" as such (Husserl 1970: 6). Such objectivism rests on a forgetfulness of origins, namely of those concrete and intuitive practices that originally oriented the scientific constitution and guaranteed its evidential and cumulative grounding. What is lost in this process is not only sensitivity to intuitive evidence, but also the active role and *responsibility* of the knowing subject, who risks becoming a mere executor of inherited results rather than a participant in the historical and cumulative life of reason. Against this background, Husserl rearticulates teleology as the internal form of rational existence. Accordingly, teleology does not designate a final goal toward which reason advances, nor an external finalism imposed from without. It names, rather, the historically structured responsibility to renew sense by bringing it back to presence (see Miettinen 2014, 2021 and Serban 2024a on the more and more pervasive role of teleology in Husserl late production).

Accordingly, in §15 of *The Crisis*, Husserl characterizes philosophy as an ongoing process that "hones and enriches the core of the becoming of philosophy" and describes philosophers as "bearers of this teleology," grounded in "our personal intentions in the unity of our historical task" (Husserl 1970: 70). Rationality here unfolds only through acts of reassumption and enrichment that bind together generations "for one another and with one another", drawing upon a shared spiritual heritage and pursuing a common "surviving goal" that is rediscovered and reactivated rather than merely preserved (Husserl 1970: 70–71). Teleology, understood in this way, already implies a *generative* structure of rational grounding. Every act of renewal substitutes itself for earlier sedimentations without abolishing them. Moreover, it conserves sense precisely by taking it up again for a new present and for others yet to come[1].

1 Indeed, *substitution* here does not imply replacement or negation of earlier sedimentations. It designates the phenomenological process of reactivation through which inherited sense is preserved precisely by being taken up again and brought to presence within a new historical horizon (see Cahoone, 1986: 5; Pradelle, 2013: 297-98). The same

Accordingly, validity persists only through such acts of renewal which are at once preservative and transformative. This generative dimension becomes increasingly explicit in Husserl's analyses of scientific praxis and historical transmission. In §40 of *The Crisis*, the transformation of prescientific life into scientific life is said to presuppose "an infinite horizon of inactive validities which function with them in flowing mobility," forming a "single indivisible, interrelated complex of life" (Husserl 1970: 149). Past achievements are thus not inert deposits but living resources, continually reclaimed through *Bildung*, communalization, and critique. The *Origin of Geometry* offers a paradigmatic articulation of this insight, making explicit the historical and intersubjective conditions of ideal validity[2]. There, Husserl identifies an intersubjective and historical a priori underlying every ideal institution: an open infinitude in which meaning becomes what it is only through its transmission and critical reassumption across generations. Language and, above all, *writing* secure the technical possibility of this transmission by enabling ideal constructions to be "understood for all future time and by all coming generations of men," and thus to be "handed down and reproduced with the identical meaning" (Husserl 1970: 377). At the same time, Husserl insists that no ideality survives by itself. The persistence of sense depends on what he calls a "propagative process of transferred meaning", binding together an open chain of generations of researchers, again, "working for and with one another" (Husserl 1970: 355–356, 363).

It is within this context that the question of generativity and transmission (and with it the phenomenological relevance of the *maternal*) becomes

semantic field will later be extended to generative substitution, as in the succession of human generations through birth and death, where substitution names a progressive explication, recovery, and sublation of sense rather than its loss. In this latter context, substitution acquires explicit ethical correlates, without abandoning its phenomenological grounding.

2 The *Origin of Geometry* constitutes one of Husserl's most explicit attempts to think the historical and intersubjective conditions of ideal validity from within transcendental phenomenology. There Husserl shows that ideal objects (paradigmatically geometrical ones) do not subsist as timeless entities, but acquire enduring validity only insofar as they are linguistically articulated and materially fixed in writing. Writing enables the sedimentation of meaning beyond the immediacy of intuitive presence and makes possible its transmission within a living tradition, in which past, present, and future contributors remain in communication (Husserl 1970: 355–360; Landgrebe 2011: 10, 38; Fink 1995: 174–176). Geometry thus exemplifies a process of idealisation that is intrinsically historical, intergenerational, and always perfectible, grounded in a continuous synthesis of past and new acquisitions whose "persisting manner of being" cannot be understood apart from its temporal and sociogenetic constitution (Husserl 1970: 355; Thierry 1995: 94). In this sense, the *Origin of Geometry* is emblematic for the present paper: it discloses a historical a priori of meaning grounded in transmission, reactivation, and renewal, thereby anticipating the generative logic later articulated in Husserl's manuscripts on intersubjectivity and generativity. The emphasis on inheritance, continuation, and responsibility across generations provides a crucial phenomenological background for understanding the maternal not as an empirical origin, but as a quasi-transcendental field of sense transmission and historical renewal.

unavoidable (see Serban 2024b)[3]. In this paper, the maternal does not designate a thematic domain, a biological origin, or a metaphorical image. It names, rather, a generative function: the historically operative passage through which sense is brought into the world, handed over, and rendered available for renewal beyond the sovereignty of its originators. More precisely, the maternal will be treated here as a field rather than as a subject, substance, or originary event. By "field" I mean a relational configuration in which embodied dependency, temporal succession, intersubjective mediation, and separation operate together as conditions for the institution and transmission of sense. Such a field conditions historical experience without determining in advance the forms that experience must take. It makes transmission possible while leaving open the ways in which what is inherited will be reassumed, contested, or transformed by those who receive it. If the validity of meaning depends on its capacity to be transmitted, reactivated, and renewed beyond the lifespan of individual subjects, then transcendental constitution cannot be fully accounted for in terms of purely *formal* conditions. What comes into view instead is a *field* of conditions that are historically variable and yet constitutive of experience: a domain in which constitution is inseparable from inheritance, mediation, and the temporal labour of reassumption. Husserl explicitly approaches this problematic in his late manuscripts on intersubjectivity and generativity, where analyses of pairing (*Paarung*), generative temporality, and intermonadic inheritance reshape the very sense of transcendental life. In the manuscripts gathered under E III – especially in E III 5 – as well as in the later volumes of *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*, references to sexual mating, generation and maternity emerge in connection with originary institution, separation, and the generative continuity of sense across generations[4]. Even if

3 By "maternal", this study does not refer to maternity as a metaphor, nor does it thematize pregnancy or gestation as empirical phenomena. Rather, it adopts a phenomenological perspective on what it concretely means to bring into the world and to hand over (that is, to institute, sustain, and transmit sense beyond oneself). The maternal is thus approached as a generative structure in which emergence, separation, and renewal are articulated together, grounding the possibility of teleological reactivation and historical continuity. In this sense, it designates a quasi-transcendental field: neither a biological fact nor a symbolic figure, but a phenomenologically accessible condition of generativity and responsibility through which finitude is progressively explicated and renewed within a shared historical horizon. Analyses explicitly devoted to pregnancy and embodied maternal experience remain indispensable (Depraz 2003; Ferrarello 2025; Heinämaa 2014; Miglio 2021; Serban 2022; Smith 2016; Staehler 2025; Trigg 2021), but exceed the scope of the present inquiry.

4 Husserl does not develop a systematic concept of maternity, nor does he treat it as a thematic object of analysis. References to maternity appear instead within his late investigations of generativity and intersubjectivity, especially in manuscripts devoted to birth, corporeal pairing (*Paarung*), and the intermonadic transmission of sense. In this context, maternity figures as a concrete site in which originary institution (*Urstiftung*), separation, and continuity intersect. The manuscript group E III (particularly E III 5) is crucial because it explicitly addresses the problem of teleology, generative temporality beyond individual monadic constitution. Here Husserl analyzes birth not merely as

these remarks remain episodic rather than systematic, they indicate a decisive shift: accordingly, phenomenological constitution must be thought through the conditions of its transmission, not beside them. This is the point at which, I believe, the category of the quasi-transcendental becomes methodologically clarifying. What is at stake is not the thematic introduction of empirical content into transcendental philosophy. Rather, it is the emergence of a constitutive field that is neither universal and ahistorical in the classical sense nor reducible to brute facticity. Within this framework, the maternal can be understood both as a historical a priori and, more precisely, as a quasi-transcendental field. These expressions designate related but distinct dimensions of the argument. "Historical a priori" describes the mode in which the relevant conditions operate: they are instituted and sustained through historical practices of embodiment, inheritance, mediation, and transmission rather than existing as timeless forms outside history. "Quasi-transcendental," by contrast, identifies their philosophical status. These conditions are constitutive of the possibility of meaning and historical continuity, yet they do not ground experience from an ahistorical position; they themselves exist only through the processes they condition.

The maternal is paradigmatic of this structure because it articulates continuity without requiring identity between what generates and what is generated. It enables inheritance without reducing transmission to repetition and renewal without construing novelty as absolute rupture. Its constitutive force therefore lies precisely in its historical and relational character. The maternal does not precede history as an invariant schema subsequently instantiated in empirical life. It operates within history as the configuration through which sense can emerge, be sustained, separate itself from its origin, and become available for further constitution. In this way, it allows transcendental phenomenology to acknowledge historically mediated conditions of possibility without reducing validity to contingent context. The claim of this paper is that this generative field becomes conceptually explicit through the Milan School's engagement with Husserl's late manuscripts[5]. In Enzo Paci and Giovanni Piana, *maternity*

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an empirical event, but as a transcendental-genetic threshold through which subjectivity enters an already operative world-horizon and becomes inserted into an intersubjective chain of generations. E III 5 thus marks a shift from static and genetic analyses toward a genuinely generative account of transcendental life, in which inheritance, tradition (*Tradierung*), and renewal become structural conditions of meaning. The importance of these manuscripts lies precisely in showing that the transcendental constitution presupposes historically mediated conditions of emergence and transmission, without thereby collapsing into empirical anthropology. For the manuscript context, see Zur *Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität* (Husserliana XIII–XV) and the Digital Husserl Manuscript Archive (KULeuven).

5 By "Milan School" I refer to the phenomenological tradition developed in Milan around Enzo Paci from the late 1950s onward, and continued by figures such as Giovanni Piana. This tradition emerges in continuity with the critical rationalism of Antonio Banfi, from whom it inherits a strong emphasis on the historical responsibility of reason and on philosophy as an open, task-oriented practice. Characterized by a historically

is not treated as a marginal theme but as a privileged access to the intersubjective and teleological articulation of transcendental historicity. It is the site where constitution, transmission, and responsibility converge. The comparative architecture of the argument should therefore be understood as deliberately asymmetrical. Husserl, Paci, and Piana provide its phenomenological and historical core: the claim that transcendental constitution must be understood through generativity, intersubjective inheritance, and the historical transmission of sense is reconstructed from within this trajectory. Arendt and Levinas enter at a different level. They are not presented as belonging to the same line of reception, nor as supplying an alternative foundation for the argument. Their concepts of natality, fecundity, and maternity are introduced comparatively in order to clarify two implications of the generative structure already established: the openness of historical beginning and plurality in Arendt, and the diachronic structure of separation, vulnerability, and responsibility in Levinas. The comparison is thus intended to differentiate dimensions of generativity rather than to assimilate heterogeneous philosophical projects.

On this basis, the following sections reconstruct (i) Paci's account of phenomenological rationality as an infinite, historically situated task of reactivation and responsibility; (ii) Piana's grounding of historicity in intersubjective inheritance, *tradere*, and infinite generativity; and (iii) a comparative engagement with Arendtian natality and Levinasian fecundity and maternity, through which the political and ethical dimensions of generative temporality are further differentiated. These analyses prepare the final claim that generativity is not an optional supplement to transcendental inquiry, but one of the conditions through which its claims to validity can remain historically operative.

Phenomenological Rationality, Historicity, and the Task of Transmission in Paci

In *Tempo e verità nella fenomenologia* di Husserl, Enzo Paci develops an interpretation that does not merely re-read Husserl's phenomenology but redefines its very conception of rationality[6]. In his work, phenomenology is not

and ethically oriented engagement with Husserl's phenomenology, the Milan School focuses in particular on time, intersubjectivity, generativity, and the socio-historical implications of transcendental inquiry. Rather than treating phenomenology as a system of timeless structures, it emphasizes its interpretive, critical, and socially embedded character, drawing extensively on Husserl's unpublished manuscripts and situating phenomenology within broader debates on history, culture, and responsibility (see Papi 1990 and Renzi 2023).

6 This text is selected for its particular relevance to the present argument. It includes, in its appendix, the first Italian translation of materials from Husserl's E III manuscripts, which are central to the analysis of generativity and intersubjective historicity developed in this study. It also marks the beginning of Paci's mature philosophical phase, in which phenomenology is explicitly rearticulated as a historically and socially responsible form of rationality (see Paci 1963).

understood as the disclosure of timeless structures detached from historical life. It is articulated instead as a historically situated rational practice, inseparable from the temporal and intersubjective conditions in which meaning is constituted, transmitted, and renewed. What is at stake in Paci's reading is therefore not a marginal correction of Husserl's project, but a decisive shift in the understanding of *reason* itself. This shift is grounded in a reconfiguration of the Husserlian *cogito,* as exposed in fourth and fifth *Cartesian Meditations*. Rather than functioning as an abstract point of absolute self-presence, the cogito appears as finite, horizon-bound, and personal: a *persona-monad*e (that is, a concrete stream of intentional life rather than an isolated metaphysical substance) whose intentional life is always already exposed to time and to others (Paci 1961: 16). Rationality, in this sense, cannot be secured once and for all. It unfolds within finitude as a task that must be continuously assumed and renewed in the course of historical existence.

The task-like character of phenomenological rationality is articulated by Paci through the Husserlian motif of *immer wieder* ("again and again" or "always anew"; see Trincia 2022). Indeed, scientific and phenomenological inquiry are characterized by the necessity of "always beginning again", of repeatedly reactivating meanings that have been sedimented, obscured, or lost. As Paci emphasizes, the persistence of sense depends on acts of reappropriation through which meaning is reconquered as the genetic correlate of intentional life (Paci 1961: 18). Accordingly, meaning is never simply preserved. Conversely, it survives only insofar as it is taken up *anew within lived experience*. From this perspective, historicity does not appear as an external limitation imposed upon rationality, but as its very mode of operation. This becomes particularly clear in Paci's reflections on time and reduction. Moreover, presence itself must be understood temporally: "when one speaks of presence, one must think of temporality, of the task of rendering the past alive" (Paci 1961: 59). Indeed, phenomenological reduction does not suspend history in order to reach ahistorical essences. Rather, it discloses the processes through which meaning is sedimented, forgotten, nefariously *fetishized*, and potentially reactivated[7].

7 From this perspective, the maternal dimension of sense does not concern origin as possession, but transmission as responsibility. What is at stake is not who owns meaning, but whether meaning can be released from fixation and allowed to remain historically alive. Moreover, in Paci's work, the problem of fetishization and commodification marks a decisive transformation of Husserl's critique of objectivism into a socio-historical and political analysis. While Husserl diagnoses the loss of meaning resulting from the sedimentation and autonomization of scientific idealities, Paci radicalizes this diagnosis by showing how such processes are structurally connected to capitalist forms of appropriation. In *Relazioni e significati* (vol. II, 1965), he explicitly links the temporal alienation of meaning to the alienation of labour, arguing that when products are detached from the concrete processes and subjects that generated them, they become abstract, exchangeable, and exploitable (Paci 1965: 203–215). This line of thought is further developed in *Funzione delle scienze e significato dell'uomo* (1963), where Paci interprets the mathematisation and formalisation of knowledge as practices that conceal their genetic and historical constitution, thereby facilitating commodification (Paci

Historical materials become meaningful only when they are transformed from inert residues into living documents capable of speaking again within the present. This reinterpretation extends to the very notion of phenomenological essence. Essences are not abstract entities detached from experience, but "things that have a sense for us" (Paci 1961: 91). At this point, the epistemological stakes of Paci's reading become even more explicit. Phenomenology is no longer a neutral descriptive enterprise; it becomes a *critical* practice oriented toward the recovery of meaning from alienated and reified forms. Paci thus characterizes phenomenology as a "phenomenology of reason" unfolding within historical time, engaged in a struggle against alienation and against the commodification of meaning (Paci 1961: 92–93).

Rational inquiry acquires, in this way, an intrinsic ethical dimension: it responds to the responsibility of preserving and renewing the sense of human experience against its objectivistic reduction. The temporal and critical dimensions of phenomenological rationality are further deepened in Paci's account of intersubjectivity. Drawing on Husserl's analyses in the *Cartesian Meditations*, intersubjectivity is no longer treated as a secondary problem added to an already constituted subjectivity. It appears instead as the very space in which rationality is formed and sustained. The relation to the other is not simply given. Rather, it must be cultivated through an open-ended process of inquiry, education, and formation. Paci explicitly describes this process in pedagogical terms, characterizing the relation to the alter ego as an "exercise" and as a form of *paideia*, i.e., a continuous formative practice through which subjectivity is shaped in and through its relation to others (Paci 1961: 132–136). Within this framework, the *lebendige Gegenwart* ("living present"; see Held 2010 and Olbromski 2011 on this concept) is not conceived as a punctual now, but as a dynamic temporal field that includes both evidence and its unrealized potential (Paci 1961: 137). What emerges here is a conception of phenomenological reason as essentially historical: not because it is relative to its time, but because it exists only through acts of reactivation, transmission, and shared responsibility. As Paci writes, the task that the ego accomplishes together with other egos consists in the "human presentification of cosmic time" (Paci 1961: 138). Rationality is thus intrinsically collective and oriented toward a future that it cannot fully anticipate.

This generative orientation becomes finally patent in Paci's interpretation of *Urstiftung* ("originary institution") and *Paarung* ("pairing"), developed with reference to Husserl's analyses in E III 5. Here, the original institution

1963: 121–130). Against this background, presentification acquires a civic and ethical meaning: reactivating sense becomes a critical practice aimed at reclaiming the dignity of those who produce and inherit knowledge. As Paci insists, only a science capable of renewing its meaning through historical reappropriation can function as a force of liberation rather than domination (Paci 1963: 128–145). Presentification thus names a finite yet open process of totalisation, through which both intellectual and practical labour resist objectification and remain bound to communal responsibility. For a contemporary perspective on this see Angus 2021.

is understood as a "temporal creation" that is always already intersubjective (Paci 1961: 144). In this context, the transcendental cogito "has given way to the couple", and with it to an original collectivity from which the person emerges through separation rather than indifferentiation (Paci 1961: 145). Here, *Paarung* designates the associative pairing through which another embodied subject can be experienced as analogous without being reduced to the self. For Paci, this intersubjective structure becomes the basis of a common presentification through which objectivity and a shared world become possible (Paci 1961: 147–150). Indeed, the apparent permanence of meaning does not rest on the supposed eternity of logical or mathematical objects, but on the capacity to re-presentify them within the temporal horizon of the *Lebenswelt*. Their seeming supratemporality is grounded instead in omnitemporality: in our ability to draw them "always again" from an ante-predicative lifeworld (Paci 1961: 151). Rationality thus depends on the continuity of an intermonadic universe in which meaning is transmitted, transformed, and renewed through historically situated institutions and practices. Although the maternal relation is not yet fully thematically developed at this stage, the structural logic of Paci's account already calls for a generative figure capable of articulating inheritance, separation, and renewal without collapsing them into identity. This structural requirement comes to explicit expression in Paci's description of the Husserlian "world of reason" as a "maternal world," in which birth, loss, and rediscovery form a "submerged continent" of human experience (Paci 1961: 250). The maternal does not designate here an undifferentiated origin to which rational life might return. It names, rather, the generative configuration through which sense is instituted, relinquished, and made available for historically new acts of appropriation. Separation is therefore not opposed to teleological continuity but constitutes its operative condition. Teleological progress, in this context, should not be understood as a linear development toward a predetermined completion, nor as the automatic accumulation of rational achievements. It designates an open and fallible process through which sedimented meanings are brought back into relation with the intuitive, practical, and intersubjective conditions of their validity. Progress occurs when inherited sense is neither passively repeated nor simply superseded, but critically reactivated within a new historical horizon. What is transmitted persists only by becoming susceptible to interpretations and uses that its originators could not fully anticipate.

The maternal structure is teleological in precisely this non-finalistic sense. It sustains continuity by enabling what it brings forth to separate itself from its origin and to enter an intersubjective history of renewed constitution. As Paci observes, the preservation of identities within the concreteness of historical and social life "allows the transformation of pregnancy into a genetic, cosmic, and historical fact" (Paci 1961: 252). Pregnancy here does not provide a biological model for historical development; it renders visible a logic in which generation involves both continuity and release. The maternal consequently belongs not to a single monad, but to the intermonadic community as the field in which inherited sense can be preserved only through its transformation.

Taken together, these analyses allow phenomenological rationality to be understood as an infinite task rather than a completed achievement. Reason unfolds through finite acts of reactivation within a historical horizon structured by in-finite intersubjectivity and generativity. Reflection itself becomes a relational act, for "*riflettere è relazionarsi*" (Paci 1961: 187), situating the subject within a web of inherited meanings and future possibilities. Thus, in its later stage, phenomenology does not seek to escape time, but to inhabit it critically, acknowledging that meaning lives only insofar as it can be transmitted, renewed, and transformed. The problem of transmission, already implicit in this account, will be explicitly thematized in the following section through Giovanni Piana's engagement with Husserl's unpublished manuscripts, where the generative structures of historicity are brought fully into view.

Generativity, Intersubjective Inheritance, and the Maternal Structure of Historicity in Piana

In *Esistenza e storia negli inediti di Husserl*, Giovanni Piana radicalizes the conception of phenomenological rationality articulated by Enzo Paci by locating historicity at the very core of transcendental constitution. Through a sustained engagement with Edmund Husserl's unpublished manuscripts, Piana shows that historicity is not an external determination imposed upon transcendental life, but the structural form through which subjectivity itself becomes possible. What is decisive in this move is the shift from a merely contextual understanding of history to a structural account of generativity. Accordingly, transcendental existence is historical because it is generative through and through. From the outset, Piana emphasizes that phenomenological reduction does not lead back to an isolated ego[8]. As Paci already observes in the preface of this oeuvre, objectivity can be scientific only if it begins with the constitution of the other; the objective world is always intersubjectively founded (Piana 1965: VIII–IX).

This claim resonates with Husserl's analyses of intersubjectivity in the manuscripts, where the world appears as the correlate of a plurality of monads bound together within a shared horizon (Husserl, A V 7). Subjectivity thus emerges as always already situated within a totality of monads and human societies, unified through relations of mediation, inheritance, and transmission. On this basis, Piana reformulates the very beginning of subjectivity. The origin of transcendental life is not conceived as the awakening of a fully constituted ego, but as a process of becoming-awake within an already operative horizon. Subjectivity begins not as an "ego that is awake," but as "an ego that awakens"

8 In his lectures on Husserl's *Crisis*, Piana repeatedly insists on the need to distinguish the legitimate pursuit of objectivity from what Husserl himself calls "objectivism". While objectivity aims at intersubjectively valid knowledge, objectivism designates the hypostatization of scientific results detached from their intuitive and historical conditions of formation. This slippage, Piana argues, risks turning science into a merely technical or algorithmic enterprise, estranged from its original telos and from the scientists' own responsibility toward meaning (Piana 2013: 19–21).

(*un io che si desta*), whose awakening presupposes an always inherited world of sense (Piana 1965: 58; Husserl, C 8 I). The beginning of experience is therefore mediated by a pre-personal and pre-reflective historicity that is affectively and corporeally transmitted. What matters here is not the punctuality of origin, but the continuity of an inherited horizon within which awakening becomes possible. The generative character of this historicity becomes especially clear in Piana's analyses of birth and corporeality. Drawing on Husserl's manuscripts, he insists that the born body is not merely the product of generation but itself bears a generative orientation: "the body that is born is born in the corporeal encounter of father and mother, and it is a body that is not only generated but ultimately generative" (Piana 1965: 61). Birth therefore cannot be relegated to the empirical margins of transcendental analysis. It marks instead a threshold at which corporeality, intersubjectivity, and historical transmission converge. The subject enters experience as one who has already been generated within relations and horizons that precede its own acts of constitution, while at the same time acquiring the capacity to participate in their continuation and transformation. Husserl's E III 5 becomes decisive at this point. Piana reads the analyses of generativity developed there as disclosing an originary relational configuration in which continuity arises through corporeal encounter without suppressing differentiation. What is at stake is not an undifferentiated unity prior to individuation, but a generative nexus in which the emergence of distinct subjects is itself the condition for the continuation of sense. This makes it possible to understand teleology as spanning what is "not yet constitutive" and what is "already constituted" within a shared temporal horizon. The intersubjective present in which the awakening monad finds itself is thus not self-grounding: it explicates an implicit temporality whose conditions precede any individual present and are transmitted through generative relations (Piana 1965: 62).

What is decisive in Piana's move is that inheritance is no longer treated as a secondary cultural phenomenon, but as a constitutive structure of subjectivity itself. The Latin *tradere* (to hand down, transmit, or deliver over) names this structure particularly well. *Tradition* does not consist of the preservation of fixed contents across time. It designates the process through which subjects become what they are by receiving a historically formed world of sense and necessarily reshaping it in the act of taking it up. Tradition is not conceived as the transmission of fixed contents, but as the process through which identity is constituted historically[9]. Referring to Husserl's analyses of temporality and habituality, Piana defines identity as a process rather than a state: to be within tradition means to belong to a nexus in which one becomes what one is through a necessary reshaping of inherited meaning (Piana 1965: 64; Husserl, A V 5, 3;

9 Piana explicitly connects this account of tradition to Husserl's analysis of writing in the *Origin of Geometry*. While technical mediation and sedimentation are necessary for the transmission and validation of idealities, they also introduce the risk of objectivism, namely the loss of contact with intuitive origins. In his view, scientific concepts and written formulations must remain open to *Rückfrage* if they are not to become fetishized and instrumentalized (Piana 2013: 47–49; 57–58).

C 17 V). Generativity thus designates the human capacity both to be generated within a possible personal constitution and to transmit, in turn, meaningful and characterological traits. This generative nexus unfolds as infinitely iterable. Finite subjects are inserted into a chain of generation that exceeds individual lifespans, participating in what Piana describes as an "infinite generativity" (Piana 1965: 65; Husserl, C 17). The infinitude at stake here does not refer to the indefinite persistence of particular subjects, nor to the reproduction of an identical historical community. It characterizes instead the open horizon within which finite subjects receive, reshape, and transmit a world of sense that precedes them and will survive them. Generativity is "infinite" because no individual act of constitution can exhaust the historical nexus in which it takes place: what is inherited always remains available for further reassumption, correction, and transformation. The finitude marked by birth and death is therefore not opposed to this infinitude but constitutes its very mode of realization. Historical continuity exists only through a succession of finite lives whose discontinuity prevents transmission from becoming mere repetition.

This is the function of what Husserl and Piana call *Brückenglieder*, "bridging members" or "connecting links," through which continuity is maintained across the discontinuous temporalities of successive generations (Piana 1965: 68; Husserl, C 17 V). Such mediation does not abolish temporal distance. On the contrary, it allows an inherited sense to remain effective precisely because it must be taken up again from another position and within another present. The continuity of history is therefore neither substantial nor immediate: it is constituted through acts of transmission that preserve a relation to what came before while opening it to what can no longer be determined by its origin. Within this framework, education and formation acquire a generative significance. The subject intentionally carries within itself its "human educators," belonging to the same humanity across temporal distance (Piana 1965: 69; Husserl, C 11 III). Formation is thus not merely socialization into an already constituted world. It is one of the practices through which inherited sense becomes available for renewed constitution. In this respect, Piana's "infinite generativity" already contains the structural logic that the present paper designates as maternal: to generate is not simply to reproduce what one has received, but to sustain a continuity that requires the emergence and separation of another bearer of sense[10]. Phenomenology itself is therefore understood as an inherited task rather than a doctrine to be applied[11]. As Piana emphasizes, phenomenology is

10 Piana insists that scientific progress must be understood as intrinsically procedural and fallible. Fallibility is not a defect to be eliminated, but a positive trait inseparable from the very content of scientific practice. Through Rückfrage, science can critically reassess its own presuppositions and resist the improper extension of mathematization to domains that require intuitive and lifeworldly grounding, a point that directly echoes Husserl's critique of Galileo in the *Crisis* (Piana 2013: 60–65; 78).

11 A distinctive aspect of Piana's interpretation lies in the explicit link he establishes between epistemological rigor and an eudaimonistic horizon. The clarification of scientific meaning is not an end in itself, but contributes to what he describes as a richer

a "humanization of the world," and its scientificity is not presupposed but must be continuously clarified and reappropriated (Piana 1965: XV). It is against this background that the maternal acquires its specifically phenomenological significance. Rather than designating a private relation, a gendered subject, or a biological substrate, it names the generative structure through which inherited sense becomes capable of passing beyond those who instituted or transmitted it. The maternal therefore does not coincide with one term within the generative chain. It characterizes the relational configuration in which generation entails both dependence and separation: what comes after receives a world that it did not constitute for itself, yet it can inherit that world only by taking it up from a position that is irreducibly its own. Continuity is consequently maintained neither through fusion nor through the reproduction of identity, but through a mediated passage in which the emergence of difference is itself constitutive of historical persistence. In this sense, the maternal provides a concrete phenomenological articulation of Piana's infinite generativity: it names the structure by which finite subjects can sustain a history that exceeds them precisely because what they transmit is released from their possession and entrusted to further acts of constitution.

Generation implies separation, and separation is the condition of *relation*. Taken together, Paci's and Piana's readings of Husserl reconfigure phenomenological rationality not by abandoning transcendental validity, but by revising the mode in which such validity exists. In Paci, reason ceases to appear as an achieved possession and becomes an open-ended task of presentification, critique, and renewal. In Piana, this task is shown to presuppose a generative and intersubjective structure that no individual subject institutes from the beginning: every act of rational constitution takes place within an inherited horizon that must be received and reshaped. The shift is therefore from self-sufficient constitution to generative constitution, from the preservation of already secured meanings to their recurrent reactivation, and from an abstract universality to a validity capable of enduring only through historically situated acts of transmission. This does not amount to reducing reason to historical contingency. On the contrary, Paci and Piana make it possible to understand historicity as the operative form through which transcendental claims remain available across time. Rationality is historical not because its validity is exhausted by a particular context, but because validity can persist only insofar as finite subjects repeatedly assume responsibility for what they inherit. The maternal gives this structure its most concrete articulation: it names a mode of continuity in which what is handed down can survive only by becoming separable from its origin and available for a renewed constitution. The maternal is neither a purely empirical condition nor a formal transcendental principle. It occupies an intermediate level. It is historically variable, embodied, and relational, yet

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and "happier" life, oriented by desires and hopes rather than by mere factual accumulation. When science loses sight of this projective dimension, it risks becoming alienating both for its practitioners and for society at large (Piana 2013: 19, 79).

structurally constitutive of experience. Precisely for this reason, it can be approached as a quasi-transcendental field in which the conditions of possibility of historical experience take shape. At this point, the first part of the argument reaches its conclusion. Through Paci's and Piana's engagement with Husserl's late manuscripts, the paper has established the generative and intersubjective structure of transcendental historicity and identified the maternal as its most concrete phenomenological articulation. Yet, the task that remains is to clarify the conceptual status of this articulation. The following section will therefore examine how the maternal and generativity can be understood as a historical a priori and as a quasi-transcendental condition, without abandoning the critical ambitions of transcendental phenomenology.

Natality, Fecundity, and the Generative Field of Historical Constitution in Arendt and Levinas

The generative structure that has emerged through the Husserlian and Milanese framework can be further clarified by turning to two distinct philosophical articulations of beginning, continuity, and alterity: Hannah Arendt's account of natality and Emmanuel Levinas's analyses of fecundity and maternity. Their role in the present argument is comparative rather than genealogical. Neither Arendt nor Levinas is invoked as extending the Husserlian analyses reconstructed above, and their concepts should not be assimilated to one another. Rather, they make explicit two dimensions of generativity that the phenomenological account developed in §§2–3 leaves structurally open: the capacity for beginning and plural initiative in Arendt, and the diachronic transmission of life and responsibility through separation in Levinas. Arendt does not thematize the maternal in the specific sense proposed here; Levinas, by contrast, explicitly invokes maternity in *Otherwise than Being*, although primarily as a figure of substitution, vulnerability, and ethical exposure. The purpose of the comparison is therefore not to identify natality, fecundity, and maternity, but to ask how each discloses a different modality of a generative field that exceeds the self-sufficiency of individual subjectivity.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt famously displaces the philosophical primacy of mortality (contra Heidegger) by placing natality at the centre of human action and historical life (see Champlin 2013; İlhan Demiryol 2023 and Totschnig 2017 on the concept of natality). Natality names the fact that "new people are continuously coming into the world," each of them unique and capable of initiating processes that interrupt established chains of events (Arendt 1958: XXIX–XXX). Against any conception of history governed by necessity or automatic repetition, Arendt insists that *action* is always bound to the possibility of beginning anew. Action, in contrast with labour and work, as she writes, is "the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter" and corresponds to the condition of *plurality*, i.e., "to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit

the world" (Arendt 1958: 7; see Menga 2021: 86-105)[12]. Here, the capacity to act is thus inseparable from the fact of birth: "the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting" (Arendt 1958: 9; see Diprose and Ziarek 2018: 32-51). Natality, in this sense, does not designate a biological event, but articulates the structural possibility that history may remain open. Arendt's concept does not itself provide an account of the maternal conditions of beginning. Read from the generative perspective developed in the preceding sections, however, it raises a further question: under what conditions can beginnings be received, sustained, and handed over without being absorbed into automatic repetition? The maternal, as reconstructed here, names precisely this dimension of reception and transmission. It complements rather than grounds Arendtian natality: natality emphasizes the irreducibility of the new, whereas the maternal foregrounds the relational and historical conditions through which the new can enter a shared world and acquire a history (Arendt 1958: 8–9; see Guenther 2006: 32-43). Indeed, action always exposes itself to irreversibility and risk, yet it also bears what Arendt describes as a *boundless* capacity to initiate relations and to reconfigure constellations of meaning, such that "the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness" (Arendt 1958: 190–191; see Vatter 2006)[13]. For this reason, natality functions as the positive condition of political life par excellence, opposing any attempt to master history through fabrication or technical control. History remains open because it is continuously "invaded by strangers," newcomers whose actions and reactions cannot be fully anticipated by those already present (Arendt 1961: 61–62; see Butler 2015: 99-122). Read in light of the phenomenological reconstruction developed in §§2–3, Arendt's notion of natality can be understood as a political articulation of a more general generative structure. What Paci describes as

12 By *plurality*, Arendt does not mean a mere numerical multiplicity of individuals, but the irreducible condition that human beings are simultaneously equal and distinct: each is capable of acting and speaking, yet no one can replace another. Plurality thus names the ontological condition under which action, beginning, and history are possible. Within the economy of this paper, plurality is significant insofar as it designates a generative field in which meaning and history emerge only through relations that neither collapse into identity nor dissolve into anonymity. In this sense, Arendt's concept of plurality resonates with the phenomenological emphasis on generativity and transmission developed in §§2–3, while providing a political articulation of the same structural openness.

13 Arendt's subtle idea of boundlessness does not imply eternity or an infinite substance of action. It refers instead to the structural excess of action over the moment of its occurrence: an act, once initiated, enters a web of relations whose temporal extension cannot be fully anticipated or delimited by its agent. Boundlessness thus names a form of supra-temporality grounded in finitude, whereby finite initiatives acquire open-ended historical consequences. In the context of this paper, this in-finitizing structure resonates with the generative logic of transmission and renewal, rather than with any metaphysical conception of the eternal.

the phenomenological task of "rendering the past alive" through finite acts of reactivation (Paci 1961: 59), and as the "explicitation of potentiality" within historical time (Paci 1961: 103), here finds a concrete expression. Indeed, natality names the structural possibility that sense, action, and history do not merely persist, but can be taken up again and redirected. In this respect, natality converges with the Husserlian and Milanese emphasis on renewal (*immer wieder*) as the very form of rational and historical life.

A different articulation of generativity emerges in Levinas. It is important, however, to distinguish two moments of his analysis. In *Totality and Infinity*, the decisive concepts are fecundity, paternity, and filiation. Fecundity names a form of transcendence in which existence continues without reproducing itself as identity: the son is neither the repetition nor the possession of the father, but the very "relationship" with the "Other" (Levinas 1969: 267; see Hutchens 2004; Poirié 1996). Continuity is consequently inseparable from separation[14]. The future opened by fecundity belongs to the self and yet exceeds its powers, since what continues it does so by becoming irreducibly other. This is why Levinas can describe fecundity through a "rupture" of continuity and "continuity" of rupture (Levinas 1969: 270–273). Separation does not interrupt generativity from the outside; it is the condition through which generativity escapes repetition. In this respect, Levinas's account closely resonates with Piana's analysis of *tradere*. In both cases, what is transmitted remains historically effective only by passing into a subject or generation that cannot be reduced to its origin[15]. Yet Levinas radicalizes this structure by giving it an explicitly ethical temporality. Fecundity opens up a future that the present cannot possess, and thus exposes the subject to a continuity whose meaning will be assumed by others.

The significance of the maternal becomes explicit in *Otherwise than Being*. Here Levinas no longer approaches generativity principally through the father–son relation, but introduces maternity as a privileged figure of substitution and vulnerability. Maternity is described as the bearing of the "other" in the "same" (Levinas 1998: 75): a structure in which subjectivity is constituted through exposure to what it cannot assimilate or master. This image belongs

14 In Levinas, filial separation is not a deficiency of continuity but its very condition. Fecundity implies that the son both continues and exceeds the father: sense advances precisely because it is not preserved through identity, but through a separation that allows for renewal. The disappearance of the father is therefore not merely a loss, but an enabling withdrawal that opens the future. Read phenomenologically, this structure corresponds to a logic of emergence: meaning comes to presence by detaching itself from its origin, and continuity is maintained only as a discontinuous continuity. In this sense, fecundity resonates with the phenomenological motif of wakeful life, in which sense persists not through uninterrupted presence, but through repeated acts of awakening, reactivation, and presentification across temporal breaks.

15 This Levinasian understanding of responsibility toward those who cannot reciprocate will later be developed by Bernhard Waldenfels through the notion of *responsivity*, which emphasizes the asymmetry of ethical response to claims that precede intention, reciprocity, and mastery, especially those arising from absence, alterity, and the not-yet-given.

to Levinas's broader account of diachrony, in which responsibility precedes freedom and the self is constituted as answerable for an alterity that cannot be synchronized with its own present (Levinas 1998: 111–114; see Bergo 2011)[16]. Levinasian maternity should therefore not be identified without remainder with the maternal field proposed in this paper. Its primary function is ethical: it gives radical expression to substitution, vulnerability, and responsibility for the other. Nevertheless, it illuminates a decisive feature of the generative structure reconstructed here. Continuity does not require the incorporation of the other into the same; it can be sustained precisely through exposure, non-coincidence, and the relinquishment of mastery. In this respect, fecundity and maternity together provide an ethical articulation of the same problem that Paci and Piana approached through transmission and intersubjective historicity: how something can continue beyond itself without determining in advance what will come after it.

What maternity exemplifies is a mode of temporality in which continuity is sustained by giving place to the other, rather than by securing identity. Taken together, Arendt and Levinas disclose different dimensions of generative temporality without collapsing them into a common conceptual vocabulary. Natality gives political form to the capacity for beginning: history remains open because newcomers can initiate processes that cannot be deduced from what precedes them. Levinasian fecundity, and later maternity, disclose the complementary problem of continuity through alterity: what persists does so by passing into relations and temporalities that escape the mastery of the present. The maternal field proposed here is not identical with either of these concepts. It names the broader generative configuration in which beginning, reception, separation, transmission, and renewal become mutually implicated. Arendt illuminates its dimension of novelty and plurality; Levinas clarifies its diachronic and ethical structure of non-possession. Read together with Husserl, Paci, and Piana, these analyses make it possible to understand historical constitution as a process in which continuity is sustained neither through immutable identity nor through sheer rupture, but through the capacity of sense to be handed over to others whose appropriation of it remains irreducibly open. It is in this restricted sense that the maternal can be approached as a quasi-transcendental field: historically and corporeally instantiated, yet constitutive of the processes through which meaning becomes transmissible beyond the finite subjects who institute and inherit it.

16 In Levinas, substitution designates neither a functional replacement nor a moral heroism, but the originary exposure through which subjectivity is constituted as answerable before itself. The self is "substituted" insofar as it bears the other in advance, in a diachronic structure irreducible to intentional synthesis. Read phenomenologically, substitution names a generative discontinuity: subjectivity emerges by taking upon itself what precedes and exceeds it, thereby allowing sense to persist beyond individual presence. In this way, Levinas radicalizes the phenomenological task, shifting it from the mastery of meaning to the responsibility of receiving, carrying, and handing over sense.

Conclusion. The Maternal as a Quasi-Transcendental Field of Historical Responsibility

This paper has argued that the maternal provides a conceptual key for rethinking the relation between transcendental constitution and historical becoming. The central claim is not that maternity should become a new thematic object of phenomenology, but that generativity discloses a dimension of constitution that cannot be understood apart from transmission. Husserl's late analyses of teleology, intersubjectivity, and historicity show that meaning persists only through the processes of institution, sedimentation, reactivation, and renewal. Validity is therefore not detached from history: it remains operative only insofar as finite subjects can inherit sense, return to its conditions of formation, and hand it on within new historical horizons. The critique of objectivism in *The Crisis* can accordingly be read not only as a critique of abstraction, but as a demand that reason assume responsibility for the historical processes through which its own meanings remain alive.

The Milanese reception developed by Paci and Piana makes the consequences of this claim explicit. In Paci, rationality becomes an infinite and fallible task of presentification rather than an achieved possession; in Piana, this task is grounded in an intersubjective generativity through which every subject receives a world that precedes it and participates in a history that exceeds it. Their contribution is therefore not simply to add historicity to transcendental phenomenology, but to show that historical transmission is one of the modes through which transcendental validity exists. The maternal names the structure of this passage at the point where inheritance and separation become inseparable: what is transmitted can endure only by becoming available to subjects who will not simply reproduce the intentions of those who came before them. The comparative engagement with Arendt and Levinas has differentiated two implications of this generative structure. Arendtian natality shows why historical continuity must remain open to beginnings that cannot be deduced from the past, while Levinasian fecundity and maternity show why continuity through time depends upon separation, non-possession, and responsibility for an alterity that exceeds the present. These concepts do not collapse into the maternal field proposed here. They instead clarify its political and ethical dimensions: generative continuity requires both the possibility of the new and the relinquishment of mastery over what is handed on.

Understood phenomenologically, the maternal does not refer to a biological substrate or to a symbolic archetype, but to the historically operative conditions under which sense can be instituted, handed over, and renewed. The maternal can consequently be characterized as a conditioning field in a precise sense. It is a field because the relevant conditions of meaning do not reside in a single subject or principle, but in a relational configuration of embodiment, dependency, temporal succession, mediation, and separation. It is conditioning because these relations make possible the institution and transmission of sense without determining the specific meanings, practices, or forms of life that

will emerge from them. Its quasi-transcendental character lies precisely in this combination: the field has constitutive force, yet it does not stand outside the historical processes it conditions. As a historical a priori, it exists only through institution, inheritance, and reactivation; as quasi-transcendental, it marks the fact that these historically variable relations nevertheless participate in determining what can count as meaningful, transmissible, and historically, the notion of a conditioning field also resonates with Merleau-Ponty's later account of institution. Institution does not impose a fixed form upon what follows; it inaugurates a field of possibilities that subsequent events can resume only by transforming it. What has been instituted remains operative without functioning as a determining cause, and historical continuity is sustained through reprises that are neither repetitions nor absolute beginnings. The parallel is instructive for the present argument: the maternal likewise conditions a future by making transmission possible while leaving the form of its continuation fundamentally open. This affinity does not make the maternal reducible to Merleau-Pontian institution, but it situates the proposed quasi-transcendental field within a broader phenomenological attempt to think conditions of possibility as historically instituted rather than timelessly given. This reconstruction may also provide a basis for dialogue with contemporary accounts of embodied dependency, vulnerability, and non-sovereign subjectivity, but such extensions exceed the scope of the present inquiry. Phenomenology can therefore address the conditions of its own historicity without either mastering them from an ahistorical standpoint or surrendering validity to historical institution. Reason lives historically insofar as it can be handed down, critically taken up again, and transformed by others. Generativity, on this account, is not a limit placed upon transcendental reason from outside, but one of the conditions through which reason can have a history at all.

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Rikardo Valenti

Prenošenje smisla. Generativnost, istoričnost i materinsko kao kvazi-transcendentalno polje

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad predlaže fenomenološku rekonfiguraciju odnosa između transcendentalne konstitucije i istoričnosti, posebno kroz pojmove „materinskog", „nataliteta" i „plodonosnosti". Umesto da se ovi aspekti razmatraju kao tematski objekat, simbolička figura ili empirijsko područje, u radu se oni rekonstruišu kao generativno polje u kojem se smisao ustanovljava, prenosi i obnavlja kroz vreme. Polazeći od kasnih analiza teleologije, intersubjektivnosti i generativnosti Edmunda Huserla (posebno u delu *Kriza evropskih nauka* i rukopisima o intersubjektivnom nasleđivanju), rad zastupa tezu da važenje smisla ne zavisi od bezvremenih formalnih uslova, već od istorijski delatnih procesa prenošenja i reaktivacije. Ovaj okvir dalje se razvija kroz recepciju Huserla u Milanskoj školi. Enco Pači svojim tumačenjem fenomenološke racionalnosti kao beskonačnog, etički prožetog zadatka reaktivacije otkriva vremenske i intersubjektivne uslove uma, dok analize *tradere*, generativnosti i intersubjektivnog nasleđivanja Đovanija Pijane pokazuju da istoričnost nije spoljašnja transcendentalnom životu, već konstituiše sam njegov način postojanja.

U tom kontekstu, materinsko se pojavljuje kao strukturna konfiguracija koja artikuliše kontinuitet bez identiteta, nasleđivanje bez automatizma i obnavljanje bez raskida. Rad dodatno pojašnjava ovu generativnu strukturu kroz dijalog sa pojmom nataliteta Hane Arent i analizama očinstva, plodonosnosti i dijahronije Emanuela Levinasa. Iako Arent ne tematizuje materinsko u smislu koji se ovde predlaže, a Levinas materinstvo razvija prvenstveno kao figuru etičke supstitucije, zastupam tezu da njihova shvatanja početka, pluralnosti, plodonosnosti i odgovornosti artikulišu komplementarne dimenzije generativnog polja rekonstruisanog u ovom radu. Na toj osnovi, materinsko se konačno određuje kao istorijski a priori i, preciznije, kao kvazi-transcendentalno polje: istorijski promenljivo i otelovljeno, a ipak strukturno konstitutivno za mogućnost smisla, odgovornosti i istorijskog kontinuiteta. Rad se zaključuje tvrdnjom da ova rekonceptualizacija omogućava fenomenologiji da tematizuje sopstvenu istoričnost, a da pritom ne odustane od svojih kritičkih ambicija, otvarajući put ka generativnoj kritici transcendentalnog uma.

Ključne reči: fenomenologija, generativnost, istoričnost, kvazitranscendentalno, materinsko

UDK: 17.018.22
DOI https://doi.org/10.2298/FID2603469O
Original Scientific Article
Received 31.12.2025. Accepted 17.06.2026.

PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIETY
VOL. 37, NO. 3, 405–700

To cite text:
Ossino, Vanessa, and Damian Nussbaumer. 2026. "A Logic within Contingency: Merleau-Ponty on the Historical A Priori." *Philosophy and Society* 37 (3): 469–494.

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A LOGIC WITHIN CONTINGENCY: MERLEAU-PONTY ON THE HISTORICAL A PRIORI

ABSTRACT
This paper develops a systematic reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's implicit conception of the historical *a priori* within the scope of his philosophy of existence. We argue that Merleau-Ponty reconfigures the historical *a priori* as grounded in facticity, temporalized within lived time, and inseparable from socio-historical, linguistic, and embodied conditions of experience. Drawing on his notions of radical situatedness, generative phenomenology, and history, the paper continues to show that the notion of historical *a priori* functions in his philosophy as a node that mediates between embodied subjectivity and historically contingent horizons of sense. Understood as a 'logic within contingency,' it structures experience without assuming the form of timeless or apodictic necessity.

KEYWORDS
Historical a priori, Historicity, Generative Phenomenology, Radical Situatedness

In recent debates on the notion of the historical *a priori*, Edmund Husserl and Michel Foucault are often taken to mark two distinct philosophical poles. As Dermot Moran observes, both thinkers investigate conditions of possibility, forms of sense-institution, and patterns of historical transformation, yet they do so within different frameworks (cf. Moran 2016: 13). While Husserl eventually identifies the historical *a priori* with invariant essential structures of the historical world, Foucault employs the concept to designate the historically specific conditions and limits under which knowledge is constituted and legitimized, thereby opening the way for an analysis of the relation between knowledge and power (cf. ibid.). Between these two positions, Maurice Merleau-Ponty is rarely discussed as a systematic interlocutor — even though his philosophy repeatedly engages questions of history and the sedimentation of meaning. His account is especially compelling because it avoids the two opposed theoretical impasses operative in Husserl and Foucault. On the one hand, it resists Husserl's de-historicization of the historical *a priori*; on the other, it resists Foucault's insistence that the historical *a priori* names specific epistemic conditions that

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cannot be surpassed. If the former ultimately abstracts phenomenology from its historical conditions, the latter risks reducing epistemic horizons altogether to historically determinate conditions. Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the historical *a priori* is particularly significant in this context insofar as it takes its point of departure from Husserl's phenomenological-generative analysis, yet turns toward a historically specific *a priori* without reducing it to epistemic horizons that function as strictly determining conditions.

This paper, however, does not offer a direct comparative reading of Husserl's, Foucault's, and Merleau-Ponty's respective approaches to the historical *a priori*. Instead, it argues that Merleau-Ponty shares a decisive interest in the problem of the historical *a priori*, even if he does not *explicitly* formulate it as a concept in its own right. His concern lies foremost in the question how subjectivity is entangled with a socio-historical horizon that is at the same time permeated by power structures — for example, in the form of specific economic or political conditions — while this social and historical horizon remains bound to subjectivity as its experiential field. Within the scope of his philosophy of existence, which we frame as a generative phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty is neither primarily interested in the justification of knowledge (even though he does address this issue), nor does he focus explicitly on the relation between knowledge and power. Rather, he asks to what extent the subject–world relation is always already socially and historically *saturated*, and how this 'saturation' can be phenomenologically elucidated. In this sense, we argue that his work can be productively read through the lens of the concept of historical *a priori*, more specifically understood as a conceptual tool for examining how experience and subjectivity are always already shaped by and entangled with historical and social formations.

The paper unfolds in four steps. The first section reconstructs Merleau-Ponty's reconfiguration of the *a priori* as a decisive methodological reorientation of his phenomenology. By situating the *a priori* within the facticity, historicity, and embodied situatedness of experience, we show how Merleau-Ponty dissolves the traditional hierarchy between *a priori* and *a posteriori* and replaces it with a co-original relation grounded in existence. We here establish three guiding premises of our argument: the grounding of the *a priori* in facticity (i), its temporalization within lived time (ii), and the historical condition of all sense-genesis (iii).

The second section situates this reconfiguration within Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of 'radical situatedness.' Here, we argue that phenomenological reflection is always already embedded in concrete socio-historical and linguistic conditions, and that this embeddedness is not a limitation but a constitutive feature of its praxis. By framing Merleau-Ponty's approach as a form of generative phenomenology, we show how his thought extends phenomenology beyond static and genetic analyses toward an account of the historical, intersubjective, and instituting genesis of sense.

The third section turns to Husserl's notion of the historical *a priori* in the context of his generative phenomenology, focusing in particular on the tension

between universal claims and the linguistically mediated processes of sense-genesis. We argue that this tension provides the crucial background against which Merleau-Ponty's appropriation and transformation of the concept must be understood.

The fourth section develops Merleau-Ponty's own implicit notion of the historical *a priori* by bringing together his reconfiguration of the *a priori*, his philosophy of existence, and his engagement with Husserl. Through close readings of his reflections on history, we argue that Merleau-Ponty conceives the historical *a priori* as a symbolic, expressive, and linguistic matrix that mediates between embodied subjectivity, contingent elements of a cultural milieu, and intersubjectively shared sense horizons. The historical *a priori* here functions as a generative yet contingent horizon of sense-formation, allowing us to read Merleau-Ponty as articulating a distinctive account of the concept.

Reconfiguring the A Priori: Facticity, Historicity, and the Methodological Reorientation of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

Merleau-Ponty's reworking of the concept of the *a priori* lies at the heart of his attempt to rethink the very method and scope of phenomenology. What is at stake in this reformulation is not merely a technical revision of transcendental philosophy, but a broader effort to liberate phenomenological reflection from the abstract formalism as well as ahistorical foundationalism of its Kantian and Cartesian legacies. In questioning the idea that the conditions of experience must be sought in a realm of pure, ahistorical necessity, Merleau-Ponty opens the *a priori* toward the contingency, historicity, and embodied facticity of lived experience.

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty postulates that the phenomenological method entails a "new definition of the *a priori*" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 229). This reconfiguration places the *a priori* in a renewed relation to the *a posteriori*, without, however, allowing either term to "dissolve or [be] cancelled," as Sidra Shahid demonstrates (Shahid 2022: 400). Merleau-Ponty's argument begins by emphasizing the role of experience in relation to our knowledge of the *a priori*. As he explains:

> From the moment in which experience – that is, the opening onto our factual world – is recognized as the beginning of knowledge, there is no longer any means of distinguishing a level of *a priori* truths and a level of factual ones, or between what the world ought to be and what the world actually is. The unity of the senses, which was taken as an *a priori* truth, is no longer anything but the formal expression of a fundamental contingency: the fact that we are in the world. The diversity of the senses, which was taken as an *a posteriori* given, including the concrete form that it takes in the human subject, appears as necessary to that world, that is, to the only world that we could think of with any importance; the diversity of the senses thus becomes an *a priori* truth. [...] these *a priori* truths amount to nothing other than the making explicit of a fact: the fact of sensory experience as the taking up of a form of existence [...]. (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 229–30)

Of particular importance here is that Merleau-Ponty conceives of experience in terms of a *factual* relation to the world. His argument, then, starts with the premise that Kant did not fully follow through on his own insight that the *a priori* is not knowable prior to experience, "for he [Kant] sets out to define our powers of knowledge through our factual condition, and that should have obliged him to place every conceivable being against the background of this factual world" (ibid.: 229). Emmanuel Alloa reinforces this point when he observes that what Merleau-Ponty "criticizes in Kant is less his transcendental approach than, more precisely, the fact that he did not follow his program — namely, to define cognition in terms of the factual condition of the knowing subject — to its conclusion" (Alloa 2017: 29). The specific factual — that is, existential — relation to the world that Merleau-Ponty introduces must be understood in light of his reading of Martin Heidegger. As is well known, Merleau-Ponty's notion of the lived body draws upon and expands Heidegger's concept of *being-in-the-world*, insofar as embodiment designates the medial and sensible anchoring of subjectivity beyond any strict dichotomy of subject and object – also read in the horizon of the phenomenological *noesis-noema* structure.[1] In line with this, Merleau-Ponty develops a conception of subjectivity attuned to existential dimensions that seeks to move beyond the Cartesian dictum of an egological philosophy of consciousness. He describes the lived body accordingly as "the vehicle of being in the world and, for a living being, having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 84).

This implies, first, a reconceptualization of subjectivity through a certain notion of *existence*, and second, a characterization of *being-towards-the-world* as a practical and habitual mode of engagement within a concrete situation. We will return to this existential dimension in more detail in the next section. For now, it suffices to adopt a provisional definition of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of existence: "Existence [...] does not admit any pure facts in themselves, because *it is the movement by which facts are taken up.*" (Ibid.: 173; our emphasis)

The first premise of our argument is therefore that Merleau-Ponty's reformulation of the *a priori* must be understood within the Heideggerian scope of his philosophy, and more specifically as determined by the facticity of experience.[2]

1 The relation between Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger is, of course, more nuanced in this respect. For a more detailed account of their distinct arguments in the context of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, see Taylor Carman (2020: 106 ff.). A more extensive treatment of the relation between Merleau-Ponty's notion of the lived body and Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world exceeds the scope of the present paper; for further discussion, see: (Aho 2005; Vallega-Neu 2019; Wehinger 2025).

2 As Taylor Carman puts it: "What Merleau-Ponty inherited from Heidegger, and what he could plausibly claim to be preserving through further elaboration of his own, is an idea that was anathema to Husserl, namely, that our immersion in our environment, our being in the world, renders impossible any reference to consciousness or subjectivity as an isolated or self-sufficient sphere or region of being." (Carman 2020: 44)

The reconfiguration of the *a priori* that emerges from Merleau-Ponty's engagement with Heidegger signals at least three rearticulated dimensions in the relation between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*. This shift entails, *first*, a reconsideration of the relation between necessity and contingency, *second*, a rethinking of the temporal dimension of the *a priori*, and *third*, a concretization of the situatedness of experience, which increasingly shapes Merleau-Ponty's elaboration of the phenomenological method.

With regard to the relation between necessity and contingency,[3] we would like to revisit the extended passage from *Phenomenology of Perception* cited above.[4] Here, Merleau-Ponty argues that, once experience — understood as our concrete opening onto the factual world — is recognized as the true point of departure for knowledge, the traditional distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* collapses. The two are no longer opposed as necessity and contingency but rather emerge as interwoven dimensions of a shared field of sense. What had previously been conceived as an *a priori* truth — such as the unity of the senses — now appears as the expression of a fundamental contingency, namely the fact that we are in the world. Conversely, what was formerly regarded as an *a posteriori* given — the diversity and concreteness of sensory experience — proves to be necessary for the very structure of this world-relation. In this reversal, Merleau-Ponty dissolves the hierarchical opposition between *a priori* and *a posteriori*, showing that both *co-arise* from embodied and changing conditions of existence.

Secondly, this suggests that any reflection on conditions of possibility for experience and world-relatedness remains inseparably tied to the embodied situatedness of the reflecting subject and its conditions of reality. Accordingly, the *a priori* no longer refers to timeless structures imposed upon experience,

3 It is crucial to distinguish here between contingency understood as mere factual circumstance — the commonsense notion that empirical situations "could have been otherwise" — and contingency as the irreducible facticity through which sense-formation comes about. Merleau-Ponty's reconfiguration operates precisely at this latter level: facticity functions not as external constraint but as the very medium of sense formation.

4 Due to space constraints, we are unfortunately unable to provide a detailed analysis of this novel relationality between necessity and contingency — an analysis which would require a further elaboration of Merleau-Ponty's concepts of transcendence, the transcendental field, and the temporal dimension of his notion of institution. The notion of contingency plays a formative role in Merleau-Ponty's field-logic, extending from his conception of the field of experience, through the phenomenal and transcendental field, and culminating in his concept of institution as an operative category for the temporal-processual structure of the existential field. We refer here to Shahid's article, which offers a preliminary discussion of these issues, particularly where she argues against Andrew Inkpin that: "The suggestion that Merleau-Ponty's claim to contingency neutralized or replaces necessity, however, is unwarranted (as in Inkpin 2017: 49). For Merleau-Ponty, the transcendental a priori is both necessary and contingent. It is necessary insofar as it structures experiences, but this necessity is itself indexed to contingency, to the openness of the phenomenal field and to the facticity of lived experience. Though indexed in various ways, transcendental claims for Merleau-Ponty are a priori and necessary [...]." (Shahid 2022: 401)

but is itself embedded within a lived temporality.[5] For generally speaking, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is marked by a sustained interest in the *actual* appearance of the world in its phenomenal givenness — which implies an analysis of the conditions of reality that precede any determination of allegedly universal conditions of possibility. The discovery of the world through experience, and its subsequent reflective articulation, is therefore neither a "passing to the infinity of the possibles" nor a "leaping into absolute objectivity," (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 105) but rather an *existential movement* oriented along an open, situated, and historically mediated field of phenomena.

Thirdly, these considerations must be situated within the broader context of Merleau-Ponty's methodological reorientation of phenomenology. Central to this reorientation is the radical embedding of knowledge within the facticity of experience and, more precisely, within the lived dynamics of perceptual experience. Merleau-Ponty decisively breaks with the idea that thought can lay claim to a timeless or apodictic foundation. Instead, he insists that the validity of our ideas is historically and existentially conditioned, tied to concrete moments in individual and collective life. As he writes in *The Primacy of Perception*:

> But in reality the ideas to which we recur are valid only for a period of our lives or for a period in the history of our culture. Evidence is never apodictic, nor is thought timeless, though there is some progress in objectification and thought is always valid for more than an instant. (Merleau-Ponty 1964c: 13)

This insight reveals the extent to which Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is bound to the irreducible temporality and situatedness of existence. The method of phenomenological reflection can no longer proceed from a position of transcendental detachment; rather, it is rooted in the historical, embodied condition of the subject. As such, the reconceptualized *a priori* in Merleau-Ponty's work is no longer a timeless or purely formal condition of experience, but one that is itself temporalized — shaped by, and responsive to, the concrete, lived realities through which meaning emerges. Facticity, far from being a limit to reflection, becomes its very ground, and any *a priori* structure must now be understood as co-constituted within the flux of lived time and cultural history. In a similar vein, Gerhard Thonhauser articulates the point as follows:

> [It] is no longer assumed that transcendental reflection can expose ahistorical conditions. Rather, the phenomenological way of raising the transcendental questions (which, after this transformation, might more adequately be called quasi-transcendental) is about making manifest the historically contingent conditions that underlie not only our everyday comportment, but also our possibility of transcendental reflection. According to Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is concerned with making visible the conditions that are determinative of our existence, while at the same time making us aware of their fundamental

5 For detailed discussions of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of temporality and its consequences for his accounts of subjectivity, phenomenological method, and the subject–world relation, see, for example: (Al-Saji 2009; Kelly 2010; Ossino 2025b).

> contingency and specific becoming. In this way, the phenomenological approach to the transcendental question radically historizes transcendental conditions of possibility. (Thonhauser 2023: 10)

We propose this temporal dimension as the second premise of our argument: insofar as the reformulation of the concept of the *a priori* is bound to the facticity of lived existence, it necessarily entails a temporality that unfolds within an expanded horizon of history. Before developing this premise further in relation to Merleau-Ponty's project of a generative phenomenology, we aim to situate it more specifically within his philosophy of existence, which emerges from his methodological reorientation of Husserlian phenomenology.

Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Existence and the Radical Situatedness of the Subject

Merleau-Ponty's orientation toward Heidegger's concept of facticity carries far-reaching implications for his methodological understanding of phenomenology. As Thonhauser convincingly argues, Merleau-Ponty "explicitly opposes the idealistic understanding of the phenomenological method," (ibid.: 1) because "when conducting the phenomenological reduction and proceeding with the analysis of our being-in-the-world that it enables, we are confronted with a radical situatedness that underlies all our efforts at reflection and can never be fully recovered by them" (ibid.: 13).

The notion of "radical situatedness" that Thonhauser introduces refers to the ultimately inescapable embeddedness of subjectivity within its concrete, lived conditions of existence and marks Merleau-Ponty's decisive shift away from the idealist presupposition that phenomenological reflection can fully transcend its own experiential context. Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the phenomenological reduction marks a decisive methodological shift within the phenomenological tradition. While he adopts the *epoché* as a necessary gesture of philosophical reflection — namely, the suspension of habitual assumptions about the world — he simultaneously challenges Husserl's belief in the possibility of carrying this reduction through to completion. As he writes in the *Phenomenology of Perception*: "The most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction." (Merleau-Ponty 2012: lxxxvii)

The phenomenological act of bracketing presupposes a position of a detached observer of the world that consciousness can never fully attain, since reflection is always already situated within the temporal, embodied, and affective life it seeks to analyze. Thus, the *epoché* remains a methodological *telos* rather than an achieved standpoint and moreover reveals a certain opacity and resistance of the world rather than overcoming them. Thus, the phenomenologist can never *truly* become an undetached observer that would "create a universe of absolute freedom from prejudice," (Husserl 1960: 35) because the reflecting subject remains a radically situated subject that cannot detach itself fully from its situatedness, nor should this be its methodological goal. In accordance with

Eugen Fink's characterization of the reduction as beginning from *thaumazein* — the philosophical wonder before the world — Merleau-Ponty conceives of the reduction not as a methodological detachment from, but rather as an effort to renew our wonder before the world (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2012: lxxvii). In this sense, the phenomenological reduction is reinterpreted as a movement of immersion rather than withdrawal. It does not grant the philosopher a sovereign vantage point outside the happenings of the world but instead illuminates the irreducible fact of our entanglement in it. The task of reflection is not to transcend this embeddedness but to clarify it and thus to thematize the ways in which our lived involvement in the world, our bodily orientation, and our historical and linguistic situatedness shape the institution of sense.

In this view, the phenomenological reduction does not grant access to a pure, presuppositionless standpoint, but rather exposes the limits of reflection by revealing the ineliminable fact of our being-in-the-world. Thonhauser's notion of radical situatedness stresses that for Merleau-Ponty being situated does not merely imply a background condition to be bracketed but is understood as a constitutive structure of experience itself. Every gesture of reflection is already situated in an embodied, affective, linguistic and intersubjective horizon. Crucially, this means that phenomenological insight arises not through a methodological purification of experience, but through a deepened responsiveness to the concrete ways in which meaning is sedimented in practices, histories, and embodiment. Radical situatedness thus redefines the scope of phenomenology: it demands an attunement to the conditions that precede and exceed intentional consciousness. It affirms that reflection always begins in the midst of a world that it cannot fully master, and in so doing, grounds phenomenology not in ideal structures, but in the dynamic, lived texture of reality itself.

Building on the notion of radical situatedness, Merleau-Ponty's departure from Husserl's epistemological project of phenomenology as a "pure science" becomes increasingly apparent. By positing the theoretical passage through the *actual* as an uncircumventable condition of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty elevates the concrete situatedness of both the reflecting subject and the phenomena under investigation to a constitutive element of phenomenological analysis. It is the everyday experiences of "this world, of others, of human history [...] and of culture" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 94) that phenomenology must take as the beginning and horizon of its reflection. Accordingly, his phenomenological method does not abstract from language and history but begins from within them. This marks a decisive shift in phenomenological research: its focus turns toward the existential conditions of subjects embedded in a world that is always already shaped by language, history, and culture. These situating factors — spoken language, lived history, and social practice — are moreover understood as a form of "living generative sociality" (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 107, referencing a letter Husserl has written in 1935 to Lévy-Bruhl; translation modified).

It is precisely this shift that leads Merleau-Ponty to develop what he calls a "philosophy of existence," (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1992) one that no longer seeks

to analyze formal invariants of experience in abstraction, but rather undertakes an analysis of the genesis of sense within a *generative* historical horizon. By generative phenomenology, we refer to a form of phenomenology that extends both static and genetic analyses by examining how sense is constituted, transmitted, and transformed within historical, intersubjective, and cultural horizons. Whereas static phenomenology focuses on the synchronous structures of sense and genetic phenomenology investigates the temporal development of sense within the life of an individual subject, generative phenomenology moves beyond both by attending to the *transgenerational* and originary *intersubjective* dimensions of sense-constitution. In this register, generative phenomenology asks how sense is sedimented, handed down, and reactivated across generations, how traditions and shared practices emerge, and how the lifeworld acquires historical continuity. It explores the ways in which cultural, social, and historical formations shape the possibilities of experience, while also showing how these formations are continually transformed through the ongoing practices of individuals and communities.

At the same time, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of existence — which cannot be reduced to existentialism in the sense developed by Jean-Paul Sartre — marks a discursive expansion of his thought beyond the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, insofar as it also engages with thinkers such as Georg W.F. Hegel, and, particularly, Karl Marx. Overall, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of existence is centrally concerned with three thematic domains: the situation of embodied being, intersubjectivity, and history. What is distinctive about his approach is that he conceives these three dimensions as primordially intertwined and elaborates this in terms of a field-logic. Thus, he speaks of a *field of existence*.

Generally speaking, existence designates neither an anthropological nor a purely subjective category; rather, it concerns the entire structure of our relation to the world and to others. This structure is characterized by its intrinsic situatedness, mediated through affectively–embodied as well as socio-historical horizons. Subjectivity is thus conceived as *always already* embedded within a field of coexistence, history, and institutions. We accordingly read in the *Phenomenology of Perception*:

> If existence is the permanent movement by which man takes up and assumes a certain factual situation for himself, then none of his thoughts will be completely detached from the historical context in which he lives and, in particular, from his economic situation. The external becomes internal and the internal becomes external precisely because economics is not a closed world and because all motivations intersect at the center of history, and no part of our existence can ever be wholly transcended. (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 177)

The quote indicates that the concept of existence is linked to a certain dynamic that — following Thomas Bedorf — can be understood as a form of subjectivation (cf. Bedorf 2025: 38–40). To approach subjectivity through the concept of existence means to trace how the lived reality of a factual situation

(radical situatedness) binds every act of reflection to a historical context, while Merleau-Ponty links the historical context of a lived reality repeatedly to *concrete* dimensions of a given historical situation, such as its economic conditions. The analysis of the field of existence marks, for Merleau-Ponty, the decisive step by which he carries his phenomenological analysis beyond a transcendental philosophy of consciousness and transforms it into a philosophy whose focus is extended to '*concrete'* social and historical situations. What is at issue here is not the query into a transcendental ego, but the endeavor of describing a subjectivity that always already finds itself within a field of pre-given meanings, relations, institutions, and historical developments. The existential field understood in this way, so we argue, is not static but dynamic and generative: it opens spaces of possibility, shapes the horizons of action and perception, and bears the traces of past practices.

Central to understanding the field of existence in Merleau-Ponty's work is, furthermore, the influence of Marx' thought, particularly in its critical impulses. Merleau-Ponty is inspired by Marx' research into the concrete reality of human relations, because what stands at the center in Marx' analysis of society is not a set of ideas a society articulates about itself, but the actually lived social and material conditions within which human life takes place (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2023: xviii). Although Merleau-Ponty does not, in the manner of Michel Foucault, undertake concrete historical analyses of specific historical or philosophical contexts, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that he demands of his phenomenological method that it takes a certain concrete framework — the framework of radical situatedness — as the point of departure for analyzing the subject–world relation, intersubjectivity, and the embeddedness of experience in historical contexts. In other words, a philosophy of existence must, he argues, operate on the basis of acknowledging its own situatedness within concrete socio-historical and socio-material milieus. In this sense, Annabelle Dufourcq highlights that "the willingness to develop a philosophy of existence or of the concrete, [is] an undertaking that is riskier than classical rationalist philosophy precisely because it refuses to anchor itself on the basis of reason that is assumed to be absolute" (Dufourcq 2024: 13).

With reference to Merleau-Ponty's implicit concept of the historical *a priori*, we propose — building on the first premise, that the *a priori* must be conceived in relation to the facticity of existence, and the second premise, that it possesses a temporal dimension dependent on historical horizons — a *third premise*, according to which the *a priori*, now already understood as a temporalized *a priori*, is bound to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of existence and thereby implies both a *concrete* and a *generative* dimension. In what follows, we aim to expand this third premise through a closer analysis of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of central arguments of Husserl's generative phenomenology.

Our argument, then, is that although Merleau-Ponty is profoundly influenced by Husserl's 'historization' of phenomenology, he does not endorse the rationalistic and universalizing tendencies that continue to shape Husserl's transcendental framework. In this light, and taking Husserl's notion of the

historical *a priori* as a point of departure, it becomes possible to show how Merleau-Ponty simultaneously marks a distance from Husserl's position while further developing and reconfiguring crucial aspects of the generative analysis.

Recourse to Husserl's Notion of the Historical A Priori in the Context of his Generative Phenomenology

For Husserl, the question of historicity becomes increasingly central in his later phenomenological writings, particularly in *The Crisis of European Sciences*, where he seeks to clarify how meaning and ideality can retain validity despite being historically situated. While earlier works were primarily concerned with establishing a foundation for knowledge through static phenomenological analysis, Husserl later acknowledges that all philosophical reflection necessarily arises within a genetic and, more specific, generative constituted historical life-world [*Lebenswelt*], as the total horizon of sedimented meanings and traditions (cf. Husserl 1970: 124–25). Yet rather than embracing historicity as an interpretive context — as for example Wilhelm Dilthey does in his hermeneutic conception thereof — Husserl aims to phenomenologically grasp the *essence of historicity itself*, finally treating it as a transcendental structure to be regained (cf. Myers 2021: 114). For Husserl, then, historicization must be analyzed by means of the transcendental reduction that makes the very structure of historicity available to reflection. This methodological position puts him at odds with Dilthey's "critique of historical reason," which treats reflection as an understanding that is a socially and historically embedded activity itself (cf. Dilthey 1989: 500–501, 2010: 110).

Even though we will not reawaken the Dilthey–Husserl debate here — particularly the question of the danger of skepticism — it is nevertheless helpful to recall that Dilthey's hermeneutic account of historicity maintains that "the interpretation of our historical situatedness is potentially endless insofar as our sense for history is recognized as historically situated itself" (Myers 2021: 114). In contrast, as Christopher R. Myers points out, Husserl's seemingly paradoxical approach remains within a foundationalist transcendental setting in the sense that "the answer [to historicity] lies in the task of understanding our historical situatedness *in such a way that is not* historically situated" (ibid.: 115; our emphasis). In other words, Husserl seeks a level of reflection that goes beyond the process of historicizing in the sense that it aims instead at an understanding of the *universal* structure of historicity *as such*.

An ambiguity emerges here in Husserl's treatment of historicity. On the one hand, he acknowledges the necessity of methodological distancing, referring retrospectively to himself as an "'ahistorical Husserl,' who had to have at times distanced himself from history [...] in order to come so far in method as to pose scientific questions in regard to it" (Husserl, quoted in: Scharff 2018: 38). On the other hand, as Myers notes, the 'historical Husserl' was always aware "that consciousness is *factually* situated in historical circumstances" (Myers 2021: 116). This tension, between bracketing history for the sake of transcendental

analysis, on the one hand, and recognizing historicity as an irreducible feature of the facticity of subjectivity, on the other, remains a productive site of inquiry for contemporary phenomenology. We argue that Merleau-Ponty was aware of this tension and that, although he acknowledges that Husserl's later thought recognizes the importance of history for philosophical inquiry, his own understanding of history and historicity nonetheless diverges from Husserl's, insofar as it remains methodologically tied to his own conception of subjectivity as a radically situated existence. In this sense, we agree with Burt C. Hopkins when he states that

> Husserl's epistemological commitment to pure cognition, together with his metaphysical commitment to pure subjectivity as the source of all objectivities and the meaning of all being, precludes the kind of radical confrontation with the finitude of human understanding that is necessary to do philosophical justice to this understanding's intrinsic historicity. Not only does Husserl's a priori mode of phenomenological cognition *in principle* exclude the attunement to the historical context of all understanding [...], but, because of this, his appeals to history in the *Crisis*-texts [...] at worst are contradictory. (Hopkins 2005: 179)

Our agreement with Hopkins, from a Merleau-Pontian perspective, therefore, concerns the decidedly epistemological orientation of Husserl's phenomenology, which, at the methodological level, repeatedly points to the possibility of a transcendental ego that can be established through a stance of disinterested observation and that, in principle, can detach itself from the lived facticity of the natural attitude. By contrast, already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the necessity of developing the phenomenological analyses — especially of time — considering the finitude and facticity of subjectivity. In this turn and throughout his later writings, he continues to eschew the reduction to a transcendental subject and productively reevaluates the intersection of historicity and situativity, an intersection that Husserl limits to personal subjectivity.[6]

In this section, we further elaborate the tension in Husserl's historicization of phenomenology by tracing it through his concept of the historical *a priori*. Since much of the research on the concept already highlights this tension (cf. Aldea and Allen 2016; Hopkins 2005; Myers 2021), we will here only indicate

6 The topic of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the transcendental is too broad to be discussed adequately here; for an overview, see the special issue edited by Andrew Inkpin and Jack Reynolds (2017) . As Inkpin shows, if measured against the standard of Husserl's transcendentalism Merleau-Ponty does not meet the necessary requirements of a transcendental philosophy, even though he still maintains transcendental arguments (Inkpin 2017). Our own argument is most closely aligned with positions that emphasize Merleau-Ponty's premise of a chiastic relationship between the factual/empirical and the transcendental (cf. Inkpin 2017; Morris 2017; Reynolds 2017). Based on the equivocality between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, the transcendental itself becomes dependent on that of which it seeks to provide the necessary conditions of possibility. The decidedly situated character of the historical *a priori* thereby leads to a phenomenological position that understands transcendentality itself as mediated through *a posteriori* conditions.

those aspects that are crucial for Merleau-Ponty's reappropriation of the notion. One central issue appears to lie at the intersection of Husserl's postulation of, and sustained interest in, the linguistically mediated communal dimension of communities, on the one hand, — Husserl speaks of a "community of communication" (Husserl 1970: 360) — and the universal dimension of the historical *a priori*, on the other. Husserl refers to the concept of the communicative community on multiple occasions in his manuscripts on intersubjectivity (cf. Husserl 1973: 194) and in the appendices of *Crisis* (cf. Husserl 1970: 328ff., 358ff.), and it can be considered an important prerequisite for the methodological reflections in the *Crisis* (ibid.: 70ff.). Patricia Meindl and Dan Zahavi identify three key interests in Husserl's notion of the community of communication: its role as a requirement for transcendental claims, its relevance for personhood, and its general importance for the constitution of the social world (cf. Meindl and Zahavi 2023). In *The Origin of Geometry*, these concerns are approached by Husserl with a particular emphasis on the generative dimension of community. Here, the notion of communicative, linguistic community serves to describe the manner in which *cultural traditions* are being passed down across generations through language, most notably in documented — that is, written — form (cf. Husserl 1970: 358ff.). The main tenor here is that cultural traditions become accessible to subsequent generations only through a successive process of communication among subjects. Community is thus understood as historical in the sense of a generative intertwinement of the sense horizon of personal subjects. Husserl argues that while cultural traditions are embodied in concrete linguistic forms, they are never fully determined by them, since their sense must be taken up and actualized by subjects and thus stay open to transformation.

In this sense, language functions as the medium in which original acts of sense constitution are reiteratively sedimented and rendered capable of reactivations across intersubjective and historical dimensions. Husserl additionally writes: "In the unity of the community of communication among several persons the repeatedly produced structure becomes an object of consciousness, not as likeness, but as the one structure common to all" (ibid.: 360). He maintains that "human beings are necessarily members of generative communities and thus necessarily live in every communal surrounding world as their own surrounding world, in which, in this respect, a universal historicity holds sway" (ibid.: 331). In this regard, the historical *a priori* assumes the function of guaranteeing the *a priori* 'unity' that makes a universal historicity possible. We further read:

> [The] whole of *the cultural present*, understood as a totality, 'implies' the whole of the cultural past in *an undetermined but structurally determined generality*. To put it more precisely, it implies a continuity of pasts which imply one another, each in itself being a past cultural present. And this whole continuity is a *unity* of traditionalization up to the present, which is our present as [a process of] traditionalizing itself in flowing-static vitality. (Ibid.: 371; our emphasis)

Husserl famously characterizes this processual unity as "the concrete, historical a priori which encompasses everything that exists as historical becoming and having-become" (ibid.: 372). Importantly, the term 'concreteness' should not be mistaken for a reference to empirical or merely factual historical events; rather, it denotes the underlying structural unity that conditions the very possibility for such events to appear and be understood as historical. In this sense, the concrete historical *a priori*, for Husserl, functions as the ground for historicity itself. This indicates that historical conditions are only accessible on the basis of a structural unity that remains implicit as "the general ground of meaning" [*allgemeiner Sinnesboden*] (ibid.: 371), understood as the dimension through which historical meaning can become intelligible. At the same time, this unity is encountered evidently only from within a specific historical situation in which a horizon of sense is passed down. The concrete historical *a priori* thus does not merely encompass the givenness of the historical unity – which would only imply its static framework – but rather the ongoing becoming of history's concatenated unity through the mediation of a particular present. It is in this sense that Husserl can speak of a "historical present in general" (ibid.: 372) and understand the situatedness of subjectivity as an invariant that is given through a historically sedimented lifeworld.

From this point of departure, the historical *a priori* emerges as the concept that embroils a subject's – and specifically its *spiritual* – activity within its historical horizon. However, as part of his critique of historicism, Husserl clearly argues against allowing this historical entanglement to entail a facticity of the historical *a priori* itself, for any attempt to ascribe facticity to the historical a priori would already presuppose the very structural conditions of historical intelligibility that the historical *a priori* is meant to account for (cf. ibid.: 349). He likewise advances, in *The Origin of Geometry*, a critique of historicism insofar as it attempts to historicize the historical *a priori* itself. He argues that any historicization of the historical *a priori* already presupposes history as a universal horizon of historical intelligibility (cf. ibid.: 373). Accordingly, he maintains that historicity *itself* can only ever be universal, since "it lays claim to a strictly unconditioned and truly apodictic self-evidence extending beyond all historical facticities" (ibid.). This ultimately allows him in the *Crisis* to develop an apodictic historical method that has "perfect insight" (ibid.: 71) into the "total unity" (ibid.: 72) of the primal institution [*Urstiftung*] of sense.[7]

At this point, however, the internal tension of Husserl's concept of the historical *a priori* comes fully into view. While the notion is introduced precisely to secure the universal unity of historicity, it simultaneously relies on and refers to contingent, linguistically and materially mediated processes of sense-institutions [*Sinnstiftungen*]. In this double commitment to universal, apodictic validity on the one hand, and to historically contingent conditions of linguistic and socio-material dimensions of sense-production, the conceptual

7 On Husserl's motivation for the concepts of *Stiftung* and *Urstiftung*, and their connection to his idealist framework, see, for example: (Marsico 2023).

problem of the status of the contingent and universal dimensions of the historical *a priori* arises.

This tension has been taken up and further articulated by several commentators. Andreea Smaranda Aldea and Amy Allen, for instance, point out that the notion of the historical *a priori* has given rise to an analysis in which pre-theoretical and theoretical levels must remain inseparably entangled (cf. Aldea and Allen 2016: 3). Dermot Moran similarly elaborates the tension by arguing that Husserl's account of the concrete historical *a priori* entails the recognition that human life is inescapably bound to its own temporal horizon, while at the same time conceiving this historicity as an "invariant essential structure" (Moran 2016: 23).

We here do not aim to resolve this potential difficulty within the scope of Husserl's own phenomenological project. For the purpose of the following discussion of Merleau-Ponty's reconfiguration of the historical *a priori*, however, it is crucial to acknowledge that the concept is intrinsically marked by a tension between, on the one hand, a contingent dimension of generative traditions that concerns its linguistic and material conditions — which Merleau-Ponty calls, differing from Husserl's description, its *concrete* historical dimension — and, on the other hand, the claim that these traditions rest upon a unitary and universal ground that is not itself subject to historical contingency. In the background of the Merleau-Pontian perspective on the tension within Husserl's concept of the historical *a priori* lies, moreover, a critical stance toward Husserl's tendency to reintegrate the concept into the domain of transcendental consciousness oriented toward *transparent* insight. Against this tendency, Merleau-Ponty departs from Husserl by refusing both to refer history back to consciousness and to fully exclude its contingent aspects.

Reconfiguring the *Historical A Priori* through Merleau-Ponty

In the first step, we will examine Merleau-Ponty's explicit reference to the concept of the historical *a priori* to establish the orientation of his reconfiguration of, and interest in, this notion. In the second step, we will then return to the three premises of his original conception of the *a priori* as identified in the first part of our argument and articulate their relevance to the specifically '*historical*' *a priori*. The three premises can be summarized as follows: first, the reformulation of the *a priori* is understood within a Heideggerian horizon of the facticity of existence; second, the understanding of the *a priori* does not refer to timeless structures, but is embedded in a lived temporality; and third, Merleau-Ponty's claim that the validity of our ideas is historically and existentially conditioned, and thus tied to concrete epochs of collective life.

Already in the *Phenomenology of Perception* we find a reference to the historical *a priori*, not in a systematic or conceptually isolated manner, but embedded within Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological analysis of embodiment, existence, and history. The context in which he uses the term is therefore decisive: it concerns the question of the existential world-relation of our subjectivity

that always already involves a history. Against this background, he introduces a distinction between two 'histories' to analyze the temporality of human existence. On the one hand, there is a "banal" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 90) cyclical and repetitive history, which corresponds to the level of habitual embodiment and reflexes. This banal history unfolds according to relatively stable rhythms and regularities; it is characterized by repetition rather than innovation and by a temporal structure that is closer to recurrence than to eventfulness. At this level, subjectivity carries a past that is sedimented in embodied dispositions and habitual patterns of responsiveness, forming a kind of pre-personal 'memory' that continues to operate pre-reflectively. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes an open and singular history, which he understands as a more 'genuine' notion of history. This second notion pertains to "a second order of phenomena if history were a series of events that not only have sense, but provide themselves with that sense" (ibid.). This second notion of history is not governed by mere repetition, but by the emergence of events that transform the field of possibilities itself. It is this second order of history in which subjects and collectives act, decide, and reinterpret their situation, thereby producing new configurations of sense. Unlike the 'banal' notion of history, this second form is oriented toward the future and is marked by creativity. Crucially, Merleau-Ponty insists that these two 'histories' do not simply coexist side by side, nor can they be cleanly separated. They are internally related and partially overlapping, even if they never fully coincide. Human existence is the site of their constant intertwining: embodied repetition provides the sedimented background against which historical novelty can emerge, while historical action, in turn, reshapes embodied habits and modes of comportment.

For Merleau-Ponty, the notion of historical *a priori* designates precisely this *zone of mediation*, in which historically formed structures of sense guide action without rigidly determining it, and in which 'freedom' operates only against the backdrop of sedimented sense-horizons and habitual embodiment. Accordingly, he emphasizes that:

> The subject of history does not create his role from scratch. Faced with typical situations, he makes typical decisions [...]. These stereotypes are not for that matter a destiny, and just as clothing, jewelry, and love transform the biological needs from which they are born, so too, within the cultural world, *the historical a priori is only consistent for a given phase and provided that the equilibrium of forces allows the same forms to remain*. History, then, is neither a perpetual novelty nor a perpetual repetition, but rather the *unique* movement that both creates stable forms and shatters them. (Ibid.; our emphasis)

Merleau-Ponty's interest in the "role" of the subject in history can be understood, in a Husserlian sense, as an inquiry into the entanglement of subjectivity with its historicity. We learn here, first, that this 'entanglement' is permeated by typifications and "stereotypes" that do not operate in a strictly deterministic manner. Rather, Merleau-Ponty compares them to cultural phenomena such as clothing or even love which possess the *transformative capacity* to act

upon our most fundamental needs. What is particularly striking in the quote above is that the historical *a priori* is explicitly situated in relation to the cultural world. In this sense, it is not the description of a universal, ahistorical structure, but instead is understood as possessing *a specific consistency relative to particular historical phases*.

While Husserl's generative phenomenology is somewhat present in the concept, insofar as it serves to elucidate the historicity of a 'communicative community,' Merleau-Ponty's concern stays specifically directed toward the cultural and intersubjective dimension of the notion. Moreover, from this important passage in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, we learn that the concept is intended to describe a "unique movement" that mediates between dimensions of ideality and empiricism, and that articulates a processual structure beyond both mere repetition and absolute novelty. An example of a concrete historical *a priori*, understood in this specifically Merleau-Pontian sense, is the phase of puberty. We read in his lectures on *Child Psychology*:

> The problem [of puberty] consists in carrying out a welding between the psychic element of affection [...] and the increased reality of sexuality and instinct. The child creates this development under the conditions of the ambient culture. [...] Development is not inscribed a priori in a static nature, nor does it arise *ex nihilo*. Rather, it progresses from *Gestaltung* to *Gestaltung*, as a writer slowly creates his language. (Merleau-Ponty 2010a: 224)

In the example of puberty we can discern, on the one hand, the convergence of an 'empirical' dimension of sexuality and an 'ideal' dimension of affection. These two dimensions stand in a relation of mediation and are, moreover, situated within a broader relation to the "conditions of the ambient culture," which exert an influence on this medial structure and thereby introduces an element of contingency into it. The development of puberty does not inscribe itself into a structure of static *a priori*; rather, it works in analogy to the genesis of Gestalt-like perception. It is noteworthy, in this regard, that Merleau-Ponty compares this form of development — its "unique movement" — to the creation of a language. This circles us back to Husserl's horizon of language as part of the historicity of generative communities.

What is particularly striking is that, in his lecture on institution — where Merleau-Ponty engages with Husserl's concept of *Stiftung* as developed within his generative phenomenology — he returns to the phenomenon of puberty and explicitly describes it as an institution. Puberty as an institution of sense is here understood as a "symbolic matrix," (Merleau-Ponty 2010b: 18) in the manner of a "formative event or institution [that is not] merely corporeal, not merely psychical, but a nexus of the one with the other" (Merleau-Ponty 2010b: 22). Without entering here into a detailed discussion of Merleau-Ponty's notion of institution itself we will instead focus, in light of the preceding argument, on the extent to which the historical *a priori* has a symbolic and linguistic dimension that Merleau-Ponty describes as a "matrix" and which establishes a "nexus" that proceeds according to the logic of perception and

thus creates an originary in-between of empiric and ideal dimensions of our being-in-the-world.

In his lecture on *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty engages directly with Husserl's generative phenomenology, particularly with his fragment *The Origin of Geometry*. Here, Merleau-Ponty takes up Husserl's interest in the transmission of sense across generations and engages closely with Husserl's thematic focus on the specific ideality of generative sense. In doing so, he offers the following reception of Husserl's line of thought:

> The structures of the ideal and of the construct are still structures of lived experience: horizon and sedimentation — *Sinnbildung* and *Sinnentleerung* and their *Beweglichkeit*. Eidetic variation as horizon in principle. Science as praxis. [...] Hence universal historicity. The a priori of history as universal history. This a priori is *Sinnesboden* ['ground of sense']. The historicity of philosophy. The problem of reason: is there a universal a priori and a total reactivation [or a speech within Being]? [...] Thus pure ideality is an *Idealisierung*. This does not mean that it is uncertain, but that the evidence of our idealized capacities and of the idealized *constructum* is particular. [...] Logical activity is specifically tied to language (HUA 374). [...] For Husserl, it is impossible to distinguish in this way the theory of knowledge from history, the epistemological from the genetic origin (HUA 379). [...] What is at issue is an a priori of history, a structural a priori (HUA 380). Is this a priori the return of the Kantian notion found in the period of *Ideas*? (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 62)

What emerges here, above all, is Merleau-Ponty's distinct appropriation of Husserl's thought, which foremost reveals how he understands the historical *a priori* — namely, within the horizon of his own reconfiguration of the *a priori*. First, it becomes evident that he conceives of ideality as a structure of lived experience, more specifically in terms of horizon and sedimentation. The universality on which Husserl insists is, moreover, explicitly tied by Merleau-Ponty to the conception of science as praxis. Husserl's universal historical *a priori*, understood as *Sinnesboden*, thus becomes the lived horizon and the specific sedimentations of sense that emerge from lived practice.

At the same time, Merleau-Ponty somewhat relativizes the very notion of universality by understanding "pure ideality" as a *practice* of idealization that is *bound to language*. In doing so, he aligns himself above all with the 'historicizing' Husserl, for whom language constitutes a necessary condition of ideality — *qua* communicative communities. Of particular importance for Merleau-Ponty's own account of the historical *a priori* is the final question he poses, which indicates a reservation to the universalizing component of the historical *a priori* and his uncertainty as to whether this should be conceived in a Kantian manner — an option that would run counter to his own reconfiguration of the *a priori*.

Merleau-Ponty ultimately interprets Husserl against the Kantian notion of the *a priori* and emphasizes that Husserl's historical *a priori* must be understood as the "ground or horizon of sense," as a "bearer of a horizon of history," and as the "unity of traditionalization up to the present" (ibid.: 63). What emerges from this reading is that Merleau-Ponty does indeed endorse a form

of *structural pervasiveness* of the historical *a priori*, insofar as it constitutes the horizon and ground of sense of historical sedimentation within a 'unified' framework. At the same time, however, he repeatedly stresses that this structural unity is bound to our knowledge of it, and that this knowledge itself remains embedded in a specific praxis articulated through a specific language and thus tied to contingent forms of culture. This recurring insistence on contingent aspects of the historical *a priori* — grounded in its embeddedness in cultural praxis and spoken language — should not, however, be misunderstood as a return to factual history [*Tatsachenwissenschaft*] or to "ontic history as a series of facts" (ibid.). On the contrary, by conceiving history itself as the historical *a priori*, Merleau-Ponty binds it to the very movement of history.[8] This movement, however, cannot be reduced to a series of factual events, and neither unfolds according to teleological schemas nor is reducible to genetic structures of consciousness; instead, it remains anchored in socio-material and cultural formations of practice and language, thereby inscribing a degree of inertia to the movement of history.

We can link this line of thought back to Merleau-Ponty's reference to the historical *a priori* in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. There, he aims to describe a "unique movement" of history that accounts, on the one hand, for the sedimentation and repetition of sense, while, on the other, leaving open the possibility of creative transformation of its horizon. In understanding the historical *a priori* as the very movement of history itself, this movement does indeed possess a certain generality, insofar as it functions as the processuality of horizons of sense that comes with a degree of stability and inertia. At the same time, however, this generality is understood as itself temporalized — and, in a certain sense, historicized — by virtue of its dependence on contingent dimensions. This brings us to the second part of this section, which is concerned with reconsidering the '*historical*' *a priori* in light of the three premises of the reconfiguration of the *a priori* in Merleau-Ponty's thought.

1) *A priori structures are anchored in the facticity of our existence.* The first point we developed regarding Merleau-Ponty's conception of the *a priori* concerns its Heideggerian scope, insofar as Merleau-Ponty binds subjectivity to a notion of existence understood as an 'opening onto the world,' which he further elaborates on in terms of a facticity. In this way, a fundamental contingency is inscribed into our relation to the world — one that first signifies that we are in the world at all but also concerns the radical situatedness in a *specific* world with concrete cultural, economic and political conditions. The fact that we are perceptually and existentially thrown into the world, and that a sense of reality is constituted through this specific world-relation, designates the inescapable facticity of existence. Merleau-Ponty further binds the concept of

8 Consequently, his concept of the historical *a priori* is closely connected to his broader notion of history. Since the latter is rather complex, we refer here to relevant literature on the topic and wish to emphasize that Merleau-Ponty developed his own philosophy of history to a significant extent through a critical engagement with the thought of Karl Marx and his notion of praxis.

history — as outlined above — to contingent factors such as language and cultural praxis. Merleau-Ponty furthers this in that he argues for the *a posteriori* (contingent dimensions of experience) and the *a priori* (necessary structures) as not standing in a hierarchical relation, but rather as co-original and mutually implicating structures.

When this framework is applied to the concept of the historical *a priori*, it becomes evident that the *a priori* truth of the unity of history remains an expression of a fundamental contingency: namely, the fact that we are in the world, and that the contingency of our world-relation itself constitutes a necessary structure of that relation. From this it follows that even though Merleau-Ponty indeed implies a structural logic to the historical *a priori*, this unitary logic is a logic within contingency. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

> History is therefore a logic within contingency, a reason within unreason, where there is a historical perception which, like perception in general, leaves in the background what cannot enter into the foreground but seizes the lines of force as they are generated [...]. (Merleau-Ponty 1970: 9)

The historical *a priori* thus constitutes a necessary structure insofar as it functions as the generative horizon of sense-genesis; yet this horizon remains bound to the contingency of the facticity of our existence. The commonsense understandings of contingency and necessity are thereby significantly modified. Contingency is radically reconfigured in that it is no longer the simple opposite of necessity but rather its intrinsic condition.

2) *A priori structures are not timeless but embedded within lived temporality*. By repeatedly tying both the *a priori* and the historical *a priori* back to the actual perception of the world and to our habitual, embodied relation to it, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that *a priori* structures themselves can no longer be conceived as timeless forms but must instead be understood as embedded within lived temporalities. We have elaborated on this point in particular through the notion of the "radical situatedness" of subjectivity, which also binds Merleau-Ponty's philosophy methodologically to specific experiences of time, including temporal formations in the sense of historical epochs. One may recall, for instance, his description of the historical *a priori* as being "consistent with a given phase." What becomes evident here is that Merleau-Ponty's very concept of the historical *a priori* is itself, in a certain respect, historicized. We therefore suggest that his account can be read in proximity to hermeneutical conceptions of history, insofar as "the interpretation of our historical situatedness is potentially endless insofar as our sense for history is recognized as historically situated itself," (Myers 2021: 114) as Myers observes.

This argument is furthermore connected to Merleau-Ponty's specific understanding of the horizon. Within his philosophy, the historical *a priori* is conceived as the generative horizon of sense-institution. He characterizes this structural horizon primarily in terms of "typic" and "style" and as a "horizon *a priori*" (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 35). Crucially, this 'horizon *a priori*' is not an "endogenous condition of possibility," but rather a "possibility as *Möglichkeit*

an Wirklichkeit" (ibid.). By binding the horizon *a priori* — here synonymous with the unity of the horizon structure of the historical *a priori* — to the notion of *actuality*, Merleau-Ponty once again temporalizes the *a priori*, insofar as actuality ties every horizon back to embodied subjectivity. For this reason, he concludes unambiguously that

> In reality, the ideas to which we recur are only valid for a period of our life or for a period in the history of our culture. Evidence is never apodictic, nor is thought timeless, though there is some progress in objectification and thought is always called for more than an instant. (Merleau-Ponty 1964c: 13)

3) *A priori structures are tied to praxis and language*. As we have argued above, Merleau-Ponty understands the radical situatedness of our subjectivity as a constitutive structure of our relation to the world. As a result, concrete modes in which sense sedimentation occurs are always already inscribed in this relation – namely, through praxis, habitual embodiment, language and culture. If the historical *a priori,* understood as the generative horizon of sense-genesis, is likewise a constitutive element of our field of experience, then 'constitution' must here be thought along perceptual, linguistic, imaginative, and symbolic horizons. For Merleau-Ponty not only describes the "unique movement" of the historical *a priori* in analogy to the movement of language and as a "symbolic matrix," but also emphasizes that our knowledge of any notion of *a priori* remains bound to these symbolic and linguistic elements. In this sense, we argue that the symbolic, expressive, and linguistic 'matrix' itself describes Merleau-Ponty's own notion of the historical *a priori*, specifically in its mediating dimension.

While one might argue that the historical *a priori* constitutes the most basic structure of our entanglement with history, this is not to be misunderstood as an apodictic and universal (in the strict sense) notion, since our entanglement with it is tied to contingent aspects of our lived reality. Moreover, what we can say about the historical *a priori*, and the manner in which we articulate it, remain correlated with a specific historical epoch and our situation as speaking philosophers.

Conclusion

In this paper we argued that Merleau-Ponty can be read as articulating a distinctive conception of the historical *a priori* that neither coincides with Husserl's transcendental universalism nor collapses into a purely empirical account of history. By reconstructing Merleau-Ponty's reconfiguration of the *a priori* within his philosophy of existence, we have shown that what is at stake in his concept of the historical *a priori* is a logic within contingency. We understand this logic as a historically effective structure that institutes experiences without assuming the form of timeless or apodictic dimensions of this structure.

Our analysis proceeded by establishing three core premises. First, that Merleau-Ponty anchors the *a priori* in the facticity of existence. For him, the

conditions of possibility of experience emerge from our embodied, situated being-in-the-world. The historical *a priori* thus expresses a structured contingency: the fact that we are always already engaged in a world shaped by social, cultural, economic, and political conditions; while simultaneously functioning as a *necessary* horizon of sense. Second, Merleau-Ponty temporalizes the *a priori*, for rather than constituting an ahistorical structure, it unfolds within lived time and is consistent only "for a given phase." From this temporalization we deduced that the historical *a priori* is subject to transformation, sedimentation, and reactivation, without thereby losing its structuring function. Third, our knowledge of any *a priori* structure is mediated through praxis, language, and symbolic forms. We showed that the historical *a priori* specifically functions as a symbolic and expressive matrix, in that it binds sense-formation to historically specific practices and communicative communities, making any philosophical articulation of it necessarily situated.

Against this background, Merleau-Ponty's position can be productively situated between Husserl and Foucault. Like Husserl, he maintains that history is not a mere succession of empirical facts but presupposes a structural horizon of sense-genesis. Yet unlike Husserl, he refuses to locate this horizon in a transcendental subject capable of apodictic insight. Instead, the historical *a priori* is understood as inseparable from contingent conditions of the social field as well as from embodied existences that carry it forward. In this respect, Merleau-Ponty moves decisively toward Foucault's understanding of the historical *a priori* as a set of concrete, historically specific conditions that make certain forms of knowledge, practice, and subjectivity possible at a given time.[9] More precisely, Merleau-Ponty already articulated this understanding prior to Foucault. While Merleau-Ponty does not undertake an archaeological or genealogical analysis of discursive formations in Foucault's sense, his concept of institution provides a phenomenological account of how concrete socio-historical and socio-material conditions are symbolically, corporeally, and temporally inscribed into lived experience.

Seen in this light, his account preserves the insight that history has a structural logic, while radicalizing it by binding this logic to contingency, embodiment, and praxis. The historical *a priori* thus names neither an eternal form nor a merely empirical configuration, but a dynamic, generative horizon — one that both constrains and enables historical transformation. This conception not only clarifies Merleau-Ponty's place in debates on historicity but also underscores the relevance of his phenomenology for contemporary critical and historical philosophies concerned with the situated conditions of meaning, normativity, and power.

9 Although the present paper does not engage with the intersections between Foucault's analyses of power structures within the horizon of the historical *a priori* and Merleau-Ponty's critical social philosophy, we wish to signal this as an important direction for future research. A more extensive engagement with this topic would require careful examination of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of history as it unfolds within his critical engagement with Marxism, communism, and liberalism. Relevant scholarship on this issue includes, among others: (Crossley 1994; Dru 2021; Feron 2022; Ossino 2025a).

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Vanesa Osino, Damijan Nusbaumer

Logika unutar kontingencije: Merlo-Ponti o istorijskom a priori

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad razvija sistematsko tumačenje implicitne koncepcije istorijskog *a priori* kod Morisa Merlo-Pontija u okviru njegove filozofije egzistencije. Tvrdimo da Merlo-Ponti rekonfiguriše istorijski *a priori* tako što ga utemeljuje u faktičnosti, temporalizuje unutar proživljenog vremena i pokazuje njegovu nerazdvojivost od društveno-istorijskih, jezičkih i otelovljenih uslova iskustva. Oslanjajući se na njegove pojmove radikalne situiranosti, generativne fenomenologije i istorije, rad dalje pokazuje da pojam istorijskog *a priori* u njegovoj filozofiji funkcioniše kao čvorište koje posreduje između otelovljene subjektivnosti i istorijski kontingentnih horizonata smisla. Shvaćen kao „logika unutar kontingencije", on strukturira iskustvo, ali ne dobija oblik bezvremene ili apodiktičke nužnosti.

Ključne reči: istorijski *a priori*, istoričnost, generativna fenomenologija, radikalna situiranost

UDK: 165:519.2
1 Хусерл Е.
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DOI https://doi.org/10.2298/FID2603495P
Original Scientific Article
Received 31.12.2025. Accepted 27.7.2026.

PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIETY
VOL. 37, NO. 3, 405–700

To cite text:
Pérez León, Rebeca. 2026. "Reconstituting *Différance* as *History* through Derrida's Reduction of Husserlian Phenomenology." *Philosophy and Society* 37 (3): 495–518.

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RECONSTITUTING *DIFFÉRANCE AS HISTORY* THROUGH DERRIDA'S REDUCTION OF HUSSERLIAN PHENOMENOLOGY

ABSTRACT
This article advances three arguments. First, understanding Derrida's *différance* and the qualification 'quasi-transcendental' requires retracing the path leading to Derrida's *historical* methodological schema. Second, it is methodologically and *historically* necessary to begin this path with the reactivation of Husserl's criticism and reduction of all forms of empiricism, including historicism. This reactivation grants phenomenology a structural role in Derrida's philosophy and challenges historicist interpretations of Derrida's work. Third, the irreducibility of writing at the core of phenomenology's ultimate transcendental experience of *phōnē* reduces the tradition of metaphysics, distinguishing its inessential elements – presence in all its forms as absolute beginning and end of sense – from its essential elements – writing as the essential production of signification to infinity unrestricted by truth and objectivity. This irreducibility is quasi-transcendental because it makes the phenomenological edifice possible only as a symbolic representation representing nothing, but impossible as the fulfilment of the subject's intention in an intuition.

KEYWORDS
Différance, *history*, historical phenomenology, quasi-transcendental, reduction, Husserl.

Introduction

In "'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview with Derrida," Derrida states, "I consider myself very much a *historian* [...] Deconstruction calls for a [...] '*historian*'s' attitude" (Derrida 1992: 54, italics added) and a "*historical* responsibility" (Derrida 1992: 55, italics added). These claims are rather straightforward in stating how Derrida sees himself and the work of deconstruction: he identifies himself as a *historian*, and deconstruction demands the attitude of the *historian* and the assumption of a *historical* responsibility. Yet this straightforwardness is very quickly problematised in the lines immediately following these claims, for he says, "this *historicity* or this *historical* responsibility is not necessarily linked to awareness, knowledge, or even the themes of history" (ibid, italics added). These latter remarks indicate that what

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Derrida associates with the terms *history*, *historian*, and *historicity* is unrelated to what they mean in historicism, historiography or philosophy of history (see also Derrida 1976: xc). Elsewhere, he even affirms that the *history* he refers to is "unrecognisable" (Derrida 1992a: 27).

Contrary to a certain authoritative interpretation, this is not deliberate obfuscation on Derrida's part (Searle 1983). Rather, Derrida is making a distinction between *history*, which he and the work of deconstruction are concerned with and which I italicise throughout, and history related to a certain common knowledge, awareness, and themes associated with this term. This distinction is, I argue, a deliberate *historical*-methodological step, which is intended to bracket any passively received concept of history in order to question its *origin* and track an *other history*, which Derrida terms *différance*, and characterises as quasi-transcendental. Yet this latter term, defined as a "condition of possibility [...] [and] impossibility" (Derrida 1996: 84), remains unclear in both its provenance and implications. In cultural studies, it is often used without regard for Derrida's distinction between *history* and history, and its methodological purpose, hastily assimilating it into forms of radical historicisms (of various denominations) committed to naïve empirical presuppositions. For example, Guenther (2021) affirms that the distinctiveness of quasi-transcendental as opposed to empirical inquiries rests on the use of the phenomenological method "to bracket the natural attitude and uncover apodictic structures" (Guenther 2021: 12), and "to bracket [...] sexism, racism, colonialism and classism" (ibid) with the aim of "follow[ing] the traces of these contingent, historical structures *in the world*, in the habits of embodied consciousness [...]" (ibid, italics added). Her description mixes objectives and methods of phenomenology and radical historicism without clarifying how they can be reconciled[1]. Another example is Kramer (2014), who uses the phrase 'quasi-transcendental structures' in order to analyse 'constitutive exclusion'. In her conclusions, she states that her analyses are "historical" (Kramer 2014: 549) but fails to raise the question of how to understand the concept of history after 'the analysis of the quasi-transcendental' challenges the empirical-transcendental distinction, making both sides of the opposition equally suspicious. Among philosophers, by contrast, the quasi-transcendental quickly adopts ahistorical and metaphysical undertones. For instance, Habermas affirms that Derrida does not break with the reflective theory of the subject, but only makes the subject "dependent on the still profounder [...] basis of an originative power" (Habermas 1987: 178-179). Although Dews uses metaphors of height rather than depth, he holds an analogous view to Habermas, for Dews sees Derrida "mov[ing] 'upstream,' in a quest for the ground of transcendental consciousness itself" (Dews 1987: 19).

1 Guenther explicitly says that her use of the term quasi-transcendental "is closer to Sartre's (2004) practico-inert [...] than it is to Derrida's account of the quasi-transcendental" (Guenther 2021: 6n3). However, she does not explain why she prefers to use a Derridean term to mean something that the Sartrean term would more accurately describe.

This article aims to clarify Derrida's use of the terms *history* and quasi-transcendental by tracing the trajectory that led Derrida to develop his unique understanding of, and methodological approach to, *history*. This clarification yields an interpretation of Derrida's work as a non-empirical, non-idealist, and non-transcendental *historicism* where *différance* is understood as the distinctive *history* of signification requiring a two-register *historical* "methodological schema."[2] I argue that Derrida developed his *historicism* as parallel to, and reduction of, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Although there are interpretations of Derrida's work attentive to the extent to which Husserl's phenomenology informs it, the interpretation I outline here differs in that it does not take one or another term or methodological tool of phenomenology as explanatory of Derrida's work. Rather, it argues that Derrida's philosophy is structurally intertwined with Husserl's phenomenology, for although Derrida effectively reduces phenomenology, the latter is not negated. As with any reduction, phenomenology is at once retained, "'like the bracketed in the bracket'" (Husserl cited in Derrida 1973: 73), and transformed. This means, as I explain below, that phenomenology (and metaphysics more generally) has a structural role in Derrida's philosophy just as, vice versa, Derrida's philosophy has a 'constituting' role in phenomenology.

The article is structured as follows. Section II justifies the interpretive approach I adopt in contrast to alternative Husserlian interpretations of Derrida's philosophy. Section III reconstructs the *historical* and methodological arguments underlying Derrida's repetition of phenomenology, argues against the assimilation of Derrida's philosophy to forms of radical historicism, and rejects empirical interpretations of *différance* and the term quasi-transcendental. Section IV retraces the argumentative path leading to the reduction of phenomenology and the disclosure of *différance* as *history*, and clarifies the sense of quasi-transcendental through a discussion of Dews's criticisms of Derrida's work as an unconfessed transcendental philosophy.

Reconstituting a Chain in Motion

Derrida claims to have "fashion[ed] [...] a novel 'strategic device' for 'reading, writing, and interpretation' between '1963 and 1968' ('TT' 40)" (Kates 2005: 105). These years correspond to the period between the publication of the *Introduction* (1989) and *Speech and Phenomena* (1973), making it clear that it is during his study of Husserl's phenomenology that Derrida worked out his strategic device or 'methodological schema.' Marrati (2005) infers that "if it is through an interpretation of Husserl that Derrida formulates his own questions, [...] he does so because there is *something* in Husserl's phenomenology that lends itself or gives rise to just such an elaboration" (Marrati 2005: xiv,

2 I use the phrase "methodological schema" throughout the text following Derrida's own usage when, regarding his philosophy, he states, "there is no method but there are some methodological schema" (Derrida 2001d: 110).

italics added). The use of the indeterminate word 'something' in her claim reveals the lack of agreement regarding what Derrida takes from Husserl. For the most part, interpreters of Derrida's philosophy through his engagement with Husserl assume that this 'something' is one of phenomenology's methodological tools or Husserl's reflections on time. How exactly Derrida incorporates these borrowings into his own project differentiates these interpretations. Marrati and Hägglund (2008) agree that Husserl's reflections on internal time-consciousness are at the core of Derrida's temporalisation, and Marrati also regards transcendental questions as another Husserlian resource in Derrida's philosophy. Lawlor (2002) convincingly argues that Derrida's deconstruction, like Husserl's phenomenology, is guided by the question of genesis, although Derrida, he says, largely sets this concern aside during the 1990s when his work becomes explicitly political. Kaarto's main thesis in his impressive *Jacques Derrida and the Question of Interpretation* (2008) is that Derrida's methodological schema resembles Husserl's reduction. Dews (1987, 1988) states that Derrida maintains Husserl's criticism of empiricism, transcendental phenomenology's vocabulary of 'necessities' and 'structures', and even, he argues, the intentions of his transcendental philosophy. Finally, Kates (2005) advances his developmental thesis and emphasises Derrida's appropriation of Husserl's "philosophical responsibility."

The resources these interpreters claim that Derrida borrows from Husserl are numerous and important: Husserl's reflections on internal time-consciousness, transcendental questions, the question of genesis, the reduction, the criticisms and reduction of empiricism, some of phenomenology's vocabulary, the task of philosophical responsibility, and possibly also transcendental aims. If taken together, as I believe they should, they lend plausibility to the interpretation that Derrida might be doing more than simply borrowing one or two elements from Husserl's phenomenology. For one, the cherry-picking approach to criticism is something Derrida himself questions. In "The Double Session," Derrida states, "a reading here should no longer be carried out as a simple table of concepts or words, as a static or statistical sort of punctuation" (Derrida 2004: 208). Rather, it should engage with the very movement of a thought. He affirms, "one must reconstitute a chain in motion, the effects of a network and the play of a syntax" (ibid). Indeed, Derrida does not simply take one or another methodological tool or reflection from Husserl's phenomenology but rather engages with it as a whole, and patiently "follow[s phenomenology's trajectory] to the end" (Derrida 1976: 50).

Although Derrida points to an operation absolutely external to philosophy, he insists on the necessity of proceeding from within the discourse of philosophy (cf. Derrida 2001c: 354), lending it a structural role within Derrida's work. Thus, in developing his methodological schema, Derrida does not 'follow phenomenology' as a distant and critical observer. Instead, he effectively repeats Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and transcendental history from the inside, as it were, and later reduces and transforms them in order to unveil another kind of *history* and another mode of studying *history*. Significantly, it is

only in this way that Derrida claims to be able to undertake an effective critique. He states, "The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures" (Derrida 1976: 24).

Unsurprisingly, this is a lesson Derrida learns from Husserl himself. In the *Origin of Geometry*, Husserl poses the question of the originary production of geometrical sense. Yet Husserl cannot go back directly to this originary creative intention, for there are layers of sedimentation covering it over, as I explain more extensively in subsequent sections. Instead, he starts from geometry as he encounters it and reduces its empiricity to reveal its essence, which functions as a guide for reconstructing the intentional acts that produced the geometry that he encounters. Only thus can he re-produce the originary production of geometrical sense (cf. Derrida 1989: 38). In other words, Husserl undertakes the reconstruction of the internal and intentional history of geometry with the help of its end-product, which, though reduced, is retained. This mode of proceeding is, I argue, analogous to Derrida's own in developing his methodological schema.

In what follows, I trace the development of Derrida's methodological schema in order to clarify the notions of *history* – *différance* – and quasi-transcendentality.

The Reduction of Empiricism and Transcendental History

In "Derrida's 'Antigonanette': On the Quasi-transcendental," Kramer analyses the way Derrida "interrogates the relationship between the transcendental and the empirical" (Kramer 2014: 535) in *Glas*. She carefully presents Derrida's problematisation of Hegel's eidetic sister, Antigone, by attending to his empirical sisters, Nanette and his wife. The *eidos* of the brother-sister relation consists in the recognition of difference without opposition, on account of their being related by blood, and in their seeing themselves as equals and without desire. Such an *eidos* appears arbitrary and limiting. Kramer asks, "Why are some differences taken as necessary rather than contingent?" (Kramer, 2014: 537). Her conclusion, however, is empirical, and therefore leads to relativism and scepticism, both of which Derrida rejects. Kramer states, "the transcendental would have to be viewed as *provisional* [...] [and as] a matter of interpretation [...] [S]uch an interpretation of what is transcendental and what is empirical would need to be undertaken again and again" (Kramer 2014: 538).

Although Kramer does not describe her analysis as radical historicist, her mode of proceeding, which is common among politically inclined applications of Derrida's work, bears a similarity to radical historicism. Radical historicism aims to unveil the hidden power relations and the corresponding material contradictions conditioning social phenomena; in Kramer's case, the phenomenon in focus is constitutive exclusion. In particular, the radical historicist's "analysis focuses exclusively on unearthing its [object of analysis] hidden patriarchal, Eurocentrist, identitarian or other 'bias'" (Žižek 2000: 101), for the historicist sees all objects not merely as social constructs but as inherently oppressive

ones that need to be revealed as such and dismantled. Like classical historicism, radical historicism results in historical relativism that rejects absolutes on the basis that all objects are relative to historical conditions. If, as Žižek affirms, "'to deconstruct' a certain notion equals demonstrating how its universality is secretly marked [by] [...] actual social and ideological antagonisms" (ibid), then Derrida's deconstructive methodological schema is indeed a form of radical historicism. This is, however, a grave misrepresentation of deconstruction which spills into its key notions, *différance* and quasi-transcendental. Žižek says that it "is [...] crucial to distinguish the strict deconstructionist stance from [...] historicism" (ibid) in order to prevent the hasty identification of the two.

Žižek is not alone in holding this view. Dews (1987, 1988), one of Derrida's most careful interpreters and critics, writes that Derrida's thought "is heavily reliant upon a reactivation of the *anti-relativist* impulse of Husserl's phenomenology" (Dews 1987: 5). Moreover, this anti-relativist impulse "is by no means merely a feature of Derrida's early work, a temporary residue of his phenomenological formation" (Dews 1987: 7). On the contrary, Derrida's critique of the naivety of empiricism runs throughout his work as does his differentiation between empiricism and his own approach (cf. Derrida 1981: 64-65; Derrida 1988b: 127; Derrida 1989: 50, 10, 162; Derrida 1992: 54-57; Derrida 1996, 84; Derrida 2001a, 173-174, 189-190, 199, among others[3]). Yet Derrida's explicit self-characterisation as a "*historian*" (Derrida 1988b: 127; also Derrida 1992: 54, italics added) is difficult to square with his criticism of historicism: how can he question historicism *while* regarding himself a *historian*?

There is no contradiction here, but dispelling the appearance of contradiction requires clarifying what Derrida means by *history* and how it differs from the view of empirical historicism, including radical historicism. For this purpose, the term 'reactivation' in Dews' citation above is highly appropriate – although he did not intend it as such. Derrida effectively reactivates Husserl's criticism of empiricism, including historicism, making it both a step in his methodological schema and a *historical* moment in *différance*. This section has two aims: first, to challenge the identification of deconstruction with radical historicism and historical relativism; second, to begin clarifying (a) Derrida's necessary traversing of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, which leads to his quasi-transcendental philosophy, (b) deconstruction as a unique form of *historicism*, and (c) Derrida's methodological schema as a *historical* one. Section IV builds on and refines this initial clarification.

Reactivation aptly describes Derrida's relation to Husserl's criticism of empiricism in particular and his phenomenology generally because, as a technical term in phenomenology, it refers both to a methodological approach to studying history *and* a participation in history, which, significantly, are intrinsically intertwined. As Ricoeur states in relation to Husserl, "Not content to think

3 See Kates (2005: 30) for a sample of Derrida's explicit endorsements of Husserl's criticisms of empiricism, historicism, psychologism, and the relativism and scepticism that ensue from them.

about history, to think himself into history, the phenomenologist assumes the surprising task of founding a new age" (Ricoeur 1967: 143). Indeed, reactivation is a methodological approach to 'think' history *and* a founding historical act. Husserl brings reactivation to its climax in his historical investigations, from which Derrida learns and later transforms during his fifteen-year proto-deconstruction engagement with phenomenology. For Husserl, 'reactivation' has three principal significations: ethical, methodological and practical-historical.

Reactivation is first of all the ethical task of Husserl's historical phenomenology. Faced with the crisis of the sciences, philosophy, and Europe, understood as a "pathology" that "has the profound *ethical* sense of a fall into 'passivity,' of an inability to be rendered 'responsible' for the sense [of the world and our existence] in an authentic activity" (Derrida 1989: 80n81, italics added), Husserl undertakes a *Reaktivierung* in order to reawaken the primordial act of sense-formation. "*Reaktivierung* is [...] the very act of all *Verantwortung* [responsibility] and of all *Besinnung* [sense-investigation]" (Derrida 1989: 99). *Reaktivierung* is an act of responsibility and a sense investigation because it "permits bringing to life [...] sense" (ibid), which is "reanimated by the fact that I restore it to its dependence on my act and reproduce it in myself such as it had been produced for the first time by another" (ibid). Whereas crisis names the ego's passive acceptance of tradition, reactivation means taking responsibility for re-producing the sense of the world as if for the first time.

Second, reactivation is the methodological approach of Husserl's historical phenomenology, one of whose necessary steps is the reduction of empiricism. The purpose of historical phenomenology is to reawaken the origin of the sense of tradition. This origin, however, is not a factual historical event accessible to empirical history. Derrida says, "no more than the history of its transmissions grounds the value of gold, can worldly history give the sense of this circulation [of sense] as common coin, since, on the contrary, history supposes it" (Derrida 1989: 51). The problem with the factual or empirical study of history is that it presupposes what is in question, that is, the senses of origin, fact, history, science, and tradition, which it unquestioningly employs in its own investigations. Furthermore, historicism can "teach us nothing about the truth of [the tradition] or its sense of origin" (Derrida 1989: 35). The reason is that by making sense dependent on external conditions like worldviews, power relations, or material conditions, empirical history cannot account for truth, which is, Husserl maintains, universally valid regardless of historical epochs. On the contrary, empirical history leads to a "relativism incapable of ensuring its own truth" (Derrida 2001b: 199) because it cannot justify its claims if every claim is historically relative.

To circumvent the relativism of empirical or factual history, Husserl "suspend[s] the ontological and theoretical commitments of the 'natural attitude,' up to and including the very belief in a world independent of consciousness – an operation Husserl terms the 'transcendental *epoche*' or 'reduction'" (Dews 1987: 5). This reduction, which is never fully complete, "neutrali[ses] the act by which I posit, affirm, or deny the existence of the world as I do in the [...]

attitude [...] of the scientist" (Derrida 2003: 112). The facticity of the world, the sciences, and all their products are not negated or doubted but simply set aside by the phenomenologist. This also brackets historicism and empirical history, which does not mean that Husserl disregards history *in general*. His *Reaktivierung* is a historical endeavour, but the history he is interested in is "transcendental and not empirical" (Derrida 2003: 110).

The reduction gives Husserl access to the transcendental correlation in which consciousness encounters and produces the sense of the world; the sense whose origin he seeks to reproduce. The first step in reaching that origin is Husserl's "*static* analysis" undertaken in *Ideas I*. Part of the historico-methodological significance of that text is, Derrida says, that it is where sense is 'fixed' (cf. Derrida 1989: 50n55), that is, where the distinctiveness of sense – its ideality, namely, its independence of all empiricity and empirical subjectivity, and its correlation with the noetic acts of a transcendental subjectivity – is determined. This is a crucial step because the sense fixed in static phenomenology will guide the reawakening of the acts that correlated with and produced it (Derrida 1989: 50-51, 55n50). These acts are precisely the originary acts of sense-production that historical phenomenology seeks to reactivate.

Third, reactivation is also a historical act that partakes in and advances transcendental history. In the *Crisis*, Husserl affirms that transcendental history has a sense, a direction, or *telos*. It is directed to truth, which is valid for all, always, and everywhere. Empiricism cannot contribute to this kind of history, for it leads to relativism. Galileo's mathematisation of nature, by contrast, contributed to it because it idealised nature (turning its objects, shapes and forms into ideal objects, shapes and forms that are infinitely repeatable as the same). Descartes did as much by singling out the cogito as the foundational methodological basis of philosophy. Husserl also aims to reinstitute the *telos* of transcendental history, although not 'blindly' (cf. Derrida 1989: 36), as Galileo and Descartes did. Rather, he seeks his reawakening act to "assum[e] greater possession of its [historicity's] own essence" (Derrida 1989: 115) by taking up the ethical task of *Reaktivierung*, and developing novel methodological tools for the study of a history of sense. Unlike factual or empirical history, "intentional and intrinsic history" (Derrida 1989: 51) – or transcendental history – does not establish causal relations, nor does it "tell [...] a story" (Derrida 1989: 65). It is also not an idealist history as is Hegel's, which unfolds an absolute independently of the subject's activity.[4] Intentional and intrinsic history, says Derrida, "is not an Absolute that *first* exists in the plenitude of its essence and then descends into history or becomes disclosed in a subjectivity whose acts would not be intrinsically indispensable to it" (Derrida 1989: 142). On the contrary, subjective acts are essential to intentional and intrinsic history, though not those of an empirical subject, but of a transcendental, sense-producing

4 David Carr says, "For Hegel the teleology of Europe is a process that happens outside of us individuals, and goes on whether we are for it or against it" (Carr 2016: 134).

subject. By reawakening the originary production of sense, Husserl's historical investigation partakes in the making of transcendental history.

The three significations of Husserl's *Reaktivierung* – ethical, historico-methodological and historico-practical – are retained *and* transformed in Derrida's work. Here, however, I focus only on the latter two[5].

First, like Husserl's *Reaktivierung*, Derrida's reactivation is a *historico*-methodological approach. In the "Origin of Geometry," Husserl seeks to reawaken the originary production of the geometrical sense by first reducing the facticity of geometry in order to determine its essence, its *eidos*. This *eidos* functions as the guide leading him back to the intentional acts that produced it. This means that Husserl reproduces or repeats the internal and intentional history that produced geometry only backwards – hence 'reactivation'. Derrida proceeds analogously, though not with geometry, but with phenomenology which, as I explain below, represents for Derrida the essence of the tradition of metaphysics. He repeats phenomenology in order to reach its originary production, which Derrida terms *différance*. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida states, "to think play radically the ontological and transcendental problematics must first be seriously *exhausted*; [...] the critical movement of the Husserlian and Heideggerian questions must be effectively *followed to the very end*, *and their effectiveness and legibility must be conserved*" (Derrida 1976: 50, second italics added). Immediately after these lines, he explains the reasons for following through to the very end, conserving, and exhausting the Husserlian and Heideggerian critical movements[6]: "Even if it [the ontological and transcendental problematics] were crossed out, without it the concepts of play and writing to which I shall have recourse will remain caught within regional limits and an empiricist, positivist, or metaphysical discourse" (Derrida 1976: 50). Derrida's first reason for 'following' and 'conserving' transcendental phenomenology is that Husserl's critique of empiricism and 'degenerate' metaphysics ensures his own *historical* concepts of play and writing are free from any remnants of empiricism, and the particular kind of metaphysics Husserl questions. Derrida undertakes this conservation or, more precisely, repetition of Husserl's phenomenology in his Introduction to Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*, which, Derrida explicitly states, is *not* intended to question phenomenology, but is rather "guided by his [Husserl's] own intentions" (Derrida 1989: 27).

The second reason for following and conserving Husserl's phenomenology is both the *de facto* and *de jure historico*-methodological necessity of beginning from the tradition as Derrida encounters it. Just as Husserl could not directly reawaken the originary sense-giving acts of transcendental subjectivity because they lay beneath layers of sedimentation, and therefore had to begin

5 See Pérez León (2024) for a discussion of the specifically ethical sense of *Reaktivierung* as *philosophical responsibility* in Derrida's work.

6 I deliberately bracket Derrida's relation to Heidegger. For Derrida, Husserl's phenomenology holds juridical priority over Heidegger's ontology, but justifying this requires a separate treatment that goes beyond this article's scope.

from the natural attitude and inherited tradition, which he reduced, Derrida likewise begins from, moves through, and completes phenomenology's trajectory in order to move beyond it. For Derrida, Husserl's phenomenology paradigmatically represents the tradition of metaphysics, for it is both a powerful criticism and reduction of empiricism and "historically degenerate" (Husserl cited in Derrida 2003: 105) idealism and metaphysics, *and* the restoration of philosophy's *original* mission: "the Platonic ideal of philosophy as [episteme] and [...] the Aristotelian project of [first philosophy]" (Derrida 2003: 105). By reducing empiricism and degenerate metaphysics *and* reawakening the 'original mission' of philosophy, Husserl's phenomenology embodies, by Husserl's own criteria, the *eidos* of philosophy. Just as Husserl's static investigations first fixed the distinctiveness of sense that later guided him to its originary constitutive acts, Derrida's repetition of Husserl's phenomenology fixes the essential sense of the metaphysical tradition whose deeper *historical possibility* he seeks.

Repeating phenomenology, however, is not simply a first step on the way to *différance*, a ladder to be discarded. On the contrary, Derrida explicitly states the necessity of 'conserving' phenomenology. The repetition of phenomenology is best understood as a reduction operating as retention. The reduction is a "temporal act" (Derrida 2003a: 64) that at once begins anew *and* retains the past; it "conserves what it suspends" (Derrida 2003a: 71). Referring to the reduction of inherited geometry, Derrida says, "This reduction needs as its starting point the constituted result it neutralises. There must always already have been the fact of a history of geometry, so that the reduction can be performed" (Derrida 1989: 38). The retained history becomes necessary to the new beginning. The same holds for Derrida's relation to phenomenology and for the relation between transcendental history and *différance*: Derrida's philosophy *has* to negotiate with the tradition it reduces just as *différance has* to negotiate with the *telos* of Reason. However, this necessary negotiation does not leave the tradition unchanged, for its reduction entails its transformation.

Understood as a reduction in the relevant sense, Derrida's repetition of phenomenology is a *historical* and internal critique of the tradition of metaphysics of which phenomenology is the originary form. Unlike Derrida's *historico*-methodological approach, radical historicism, like empiricism, attacks philosophy externally by challenging its claims to universality with factual and material constraints. In doing so, empiricism undermines itself, as it cannot justify its claims without relying on philosophical presuppositions and concepts (cf. also Žižek 2000: 102). While radical and traditional historicisms begin with a naïve view of philosophy, Derrida's *historical* methodological schema adopts Husserl's reduction of this naïve view and empiricism in order to determine the essential sense of the tradition of metaphysics. Derrida thus proceeds much as Husserl does in establishing the distinctiveness of sense in static phenomenology. Further, for radical and traditional historicisms, history consists of causally connected historical facts and events. For Derrida, as for Husserl, *history* is neither empirical nor ideal, both of which Husserl's phenomenology brackets.

The following section examines where Derrida diverges from phenomenology to articulate an *other history*, which he terms *différance*, and transform transcendentality into the 'quasi-transcendental.'

The Reduction of Phenomenology, *Différance* and the Quasi-transcendental.

Derrida's reactivation of Husserl's reduction of empiricism and historicism risks being misinterpreted as as negating history in general and advancing another metaphysics, thus compromising his critical intent and supposed radicality. This is the interpretive route Dews takes, offering a sharp criticism of Derrida's philosophy as a form of metaphysics. He claims, "Derrida's deconstruction does not seek to *challenge* or *transform*" (Dews 1987: 37) transcendental philosophy, "but rather seeks to lay bare its structure" (ibid), and thereby "occup[y] a position of superior insight" (ibid). In this way, it "*preser[ves]* the security and priority of philosophical discourse" (ibid; cf. also Dews 1988: 167-169).

Dews recognises, however, that Derrida is aware of the metaphysical impression his *historical* methodological schema may evoke. He cites Derrida's claim that his critical text "'will so closely resemble the pre-critical text as to be indistinguishable from it'" (Derrida cited in Dews 1987: 24). This awareness, I argue, attests to the deliberate nature of the resemblance. This resemblance results from the methodological and *historical* necessity of beginning from the tradition in order to undertake an internal critique of phenomenology, gather its critical gains against empiricism and degenerate metaphysics, and step into transcendental history. This *historical* necessity certainly gives phenomenology and metaphysics more generally a structural role in Derrida's philosophy. Still, this is only a resemblance. Although Dews is right that Derrida aims to uncover the structure of the tradition of metaphysics, this does not mean climbing up to the heights of an absolute with the intention of securing the priority of philosophy as Dews affirms. It consists rather in taking an unprejudiced look at phenomenology as a "*discourse of method*" (Derrida 2003: 111) as such, namely, as a *discourse* determined by a tradition "which subordinates a reflection on the sign to a logic" (Derrida 1973: 7) and "gives a theory of knowledge the authority to determine the essence and origin of language" (ibid). Taking phenomenology as a *historical* discourse involves reducing phenomenology to signification *and* extracting the concept of 'sign' from the tradition that overdetermines it as secondary. Far from encumbering philosophy, these two methodological movements lower it to the level of language (cf. Derrida 1976: lxxxix).

The following sections reconstruct the argumentative steps leading to Derrida's reduction of phenomenology and the disclosure of its deeper *historicity* or *différance*. The final subsection returns to Dews' criticisms through a discussion of the quasi-transcendental.

a) The *telos* of Reason and phōnē

In the *Introduction*, Derrida undertakes a 'synoptic retrospection' of Husserl's phenomenology up to the originary act that reawakens the *telos* of Reason. This experience is, I claim, *phōnē* or the experience of hearing(understanding)-one-self-speak(think) whose possibility Derrida questions in *Speech and Phenomena*. The *telos* of Reason was originarily instituted by the philosopher's theoretical attitude, "which authorises a move beyond finitude and opens the horizon of knowledge as that of [...] an infinite project or task" (Derrida 1989: 127). The theoretical attitude is an idealisation or passage to the limit, which, like the phenomenological reduction, discards all sensibility, empiricity and subjectivity in order to attend to objects as ideal objects. Although ideality admits of different levels (cf. Derrida 1989: 69-72), logical and mathematical idealities are exemplary of universal transcendental historicity because, being independent of all empiricity or subjectivity, they can be repeated as the same *ad infinitum*. Infinity is the temporality of ideal objectivities, which means that idealisation is at the same time an infinitisation, an opening to the infinite project "of a universal Telos" (Derrida 1989: 131). Idealisation is, Derrida says emphatically, "the openness of history *itself*" (ibid). Husserl aims to re-produce this founding act as if for the first timebut with full awareness of it as an infinitising historical act prescribed by the universal *telos*. Such awareness has to rest on the evidence of the *telos* as an Idea in the Kantian sense, that is, as the regulative idea uniting and directing all future idealisations and reactivations.

The Idea in the Kantian sense, however, "never phenomenalises itself" (Derrida 1989: 137) and its evidence cannot abide by phenomenology's principle of principle whose "archetypal form of evidence [is] the immediate presence of the thing itself 'in person'" (Derrida 1989: 137-138). Although the Idea cannot be given to the gaze, it has "'a *type of evidence that is its own*'" (Derrida 1989: 139), which is "absolutely exceptional in phenomenology" (ibid). Derrida says, "[t]he Idea is the pole of a pure intention, empty of every determined content. It alone reveals, then, the being of the intention: *intentionality* itself" (ibid). Intentionality is the Idea's unique evidence because it is, like transcendental history, a directedness to an object regardless of whether the object is apprehended. Since intentionality itself is the evidence of a norm or a formal prescription, rather than of an object, "for once, nothing appears" (ibid). The Idea "can never be given in a philosophy of seeing, but (like all Speech) can only be heard or understood through the visible" (Derrida 1989: 141) – that is, through a 'diaphanous' expressive sign which is "visible, and yet not visible in itself" (Derrida 1989: 138).

This evidence is given in what Husserl terms "*phōnē*" (Derrida 1973: 10), "pure expression" (Derrida 1973: 40) or "solitary mental life" (Derrida 1973: 22). Pure expression is a distinctive experience because consciousness ex-presses without speaking, communicating, using signs, or abandoning the sphere of what is its own. It is an 'externalisation' within 'immanence.' Husserl goes to great lengths to demonstrate its possibility. The crux of his demonstration

rests on the subject's absolute proximity and immediacy to itself, such that its intention "is immediately present to the subject in the present moment" (Derrida 1973: 48).

According to Husserl, sense is constituted in "intellectual thought processes" (Derrida 1989: 133n155), and it is essentially "pre-expressive" (Derrida 1973: 74). Only later is sense "expressed in the fixed meaning of the definitory expression" (Derrida 1989: 133n155), readying it for further communication. Pure ex-pression ensures the identity and "transmissibility" (Derrida 1973: 81) of sense by imbuing phonetic signs with the subjective intention to mean it[7]. *Phōnē* can reflect sense back to consciousness unspoiled because "phonic signs [...] are heard [...] by the subject who proffers them in the absolute proximity of the present" (Derrida 1973: 76). Moreover, the instantaneous character of pure expression reduces the sign's body or signifier so that only its spiritual content is conveyed: "the signifier [is] in absolute proximity to the signified [...] [thus] becom[ing] perfectly diaphanous" (Derrida 1973: 80). By reducing signifiers, *phōnē* or the phenomenological voice reduces all space, "accomplish[ing] this operation 'in time'" (Derrida 1973: 75). Pure expression is, thus, "an 'unproductive' 'medium' which 'reflects' (*wiederzuspiegeln*) the pre-expressive stratum of sense" (Derrida 1973: 74). For Husserl, writing performs "the same role" (Derrida 1973: 81) at the level of history as *phōnē* does within consciousness: transmitting a self-identical sense.

b) The irreducibility of signs and the incompletion of phōnē

Derrida calls into question the instantaneousness of this experience and, by extension, the self-identity of sense and self, drawing on Husserl's own descriptions. Derrida emphasises that sense is "temporal in nature" (Derrida 1973: 85), so its perception must also be temporal; it must endure. Husserl affirms, "'it belongs to the essence of lived experiences that they must be extended [...], that a punctual phase can never be for itself" [*ITC*, § 19; ET, p. 70]" (Husserl cited in Derrida 1973: 61). As extended, immanent temporality requires that the now "'continually accommodat[es]'" (Husserl cited in Derrida 1973: 65) to the not-now of retention and protention, whose synthesis makes the object appear as an identical unity. *Despite this recognition*, Husserl attempts to preserve the priority of present evidence by describing retention and protention as modifications of presence. He thus disregards his previous description in order to maintain that retention is actually a "perception" (Derrida 1973: 64). Moreover, he draws an essential distinction between retention or primary remembrance, which preserves present evidence, and representation or secondary memory, which does not (cf. Derrida 1973: 66).

7 Derrida notes that, for the most part and unlike Frege, Husserl used the words sense and meaning interchangeably. But, for clarity purposes, he did dissociate these terms: "*meaning* is reserved for the content in the ideal sense of *verbal* expressions, spoken language, while sense (*Sinn*) covers the whole noematic sphere right down to its non-expressive stratum" (Derrida 1973: 19)

This is Husserl's key move, for only by treating retention as perception can pure expression be an unproductive medium occurring in 'the present'. Pure expression functions as retention because its purpose is to receive and reflect sense back to the subject in a single present so that no signs and, therefore, no space separate the sense-producing subject from the sense-expressing subject. Only in this way can the identity of sense and the self be secured. If retention is perception, expression likewise preserves the present evidence and ensures the identity of both sense and self. If, as Derrida argues, retention is *not* perception, expression cannot transmit sense and secure the self-identity of the subject's intention. Instead, it repeats or represents a non-present intention in an*other* now. As such, there can be no radical difference between retention and representation, for both have a "common root" in "the possibility of re-petition in its most general form" (Derrida 1973: 67). As re-petition, neither retention nor representation merely reflects. Both are "modifications of nonperception [...] ways of relating to the irreducible nonpresence of another now" (Derrida 1973: 65).

Defining expression as repetition restores signifiers to the immanent space of consciousness. Pure expression made the signifier diaphanous because of its supposed proximity to the signified: "This effacement of the sensible body and its exteriority is *for consciousness* the very form of the immediate presence of the signified" (cf. Derrida 1973: 77). It is on this basis that Husserl describes *phōnē* as "the absolute reduction of space in general" (Derrida 1973: 79). If, however, retention is repetition rather than perception, the spaceless intimacy of *phōnē* collapses, and the signifier can no longer be effaced. On the contrary, it is at the core of consciousness and it occupies space, which is the space of indication, for, as Husserl states, "only indication takes place [...] across space" (Derrida 1973: 40). In this way, Derrida "assimilat[es] the necessity of retention and the necessity of signs" (Derrida 1973: 66).

The necessity of signs, or, put differently, the irreducibility of writing – "the common name for signs" (Derrida 1973: 93) – prevents the actualisation of pure expression and thereby reduces the entire phenomenological edifice: its method, the structure of consciousness, transcendental history, and the metaphysical concept of writing or sign. Against a common interpretation (cf. Doyon 2014: 138; Marrati 2005: 2; Lawlor 2002: 47-48), this reduction does *not* entail a return to factual history or empiricism, for Derrida's reactivation of Husserl's reduction of empiricism is not cancelled after the collapse of phenomenology. Furthermore, in *Of Grammatology* and "Signature, Event, Context," Derrida effectively undertakes an eidetic reduction of writing aimed at fixing its essence. "Signature, Event, Context" is explicitly guided by the question "what [...] is the essential predicate of this *specific* difference [of writing]?" (Derrida 1988a: 6). The essence of writing is its ability to repeat itself and produce significations in the absence of subject, object and context of production and reception. This does not mean that subjects, objects, or contexts are *in fact* absent, or infinite significations are *in fact* produced. Rather, this absence and infinite production define writing's essential structure. Later, I explain why Derrida's reduction, despite its resemblance to Husserl's, is not phenomenological.

c) *Différance*: the reduction of consciousness and the concept of sign

As *Speech and Phenomena* makes clear, *phōnē* is not one experience among others but the possibility of consciousness. Derrida says, "[N]o consciousness is possible without the voice. The voice is the being which is present to itself in the form of universality, as con-sciousness; the voice *is* consciousness" (Derrida 1973: 79-80). *Phōnē* is supposed to make consciousness possible by reflecting the identity of its intention back to itself, allowing the subject to "understan[d] his own expressive intention" (Derrida 1973: 78) as it is produced. Drawing on Husserl's own descriptions, Derrida argues that pure expression is repetition, carrying no present evidence of subjective intention. Without the reflection pure expression was supposed to perform, consciousness cannot experience itself as self-identical. Derrida says, "[t]here is no constituting subjectivity" (Derrida 1973: 84n9), and "without it [subjectivity]," Derrida says, "no world *as such* would appear" (Derrida 1973: 79). Neither consciousness nor sense can be experienced in the present.

But if consciousness was not complete from the beginning, how was *phōnē* supposed to reflect it back to it? If sense was not originally identical to itself, how was *phōnē* meant to fix it into words (cf. Derrida 1982: 16)? Derrida's answer to these questions extracts the concepts of sign, consciousness and sense from their metaphysical milieu; he dis-places them. Traditionally, the sign is treated as a secondary medium tasked with transmitting a ready-made subjective intention to mean. Presupposed in this concept is the self-identity and self-sufficiency of both the subject and the meaning. Yet this is *precisely* what the irreducibility of signs calls into question. Derrida says, "auto-affection is not a modality of experience that characterises a being that would already be itself (*autos*). It produces sameness as self-relation within self-difference; it produces sameness as the nonidentical" (Derrida 1973: 82). The identity of the self and the object does not precede but rather emerges as a representation constituted in a continuous interplay of retentions gathering past experiences and protentions projecting future ones, which themselves were retentions in an anterior past, and so forth *ad infinitum*. Derrida says, "the self … is primordially a trace… [and] [s]ense [...] is always already engaged in the 'movement' of the trace, that is, in the order of 'signification'" (Derrida 1973: 85). The irreducibility of writing thus reduces the metaphysical conception of consciousness as full possession of itself, and of sense as issuing from consciousness.

Without antecedent consciousness and sense, the naïve concept of sign is also reduced, for it can no longer be defined as a secondary means for the transmission of a self-identical intention. Derrida says, "we are faced with mimicry imitating nothing: faced [...] with a double that doubles no simple, a double that nothing anticipates, nothing *at least* that is not itself already double" (Derrida 2004: 217; cf. Derrida 1973: 83). Derrida defines signs as mimicry, imitation, representation preceded by nothing other than mimicry, imitation, and representation. This highly unorthodox view of signs, Derrida says, "amounts

to destroying the concept of 'sign' and its entire logic" (Derrida 1976: 7)[8]. Yet, sign's essential emptiness is not sterile. On the contrary, it is "pure production" (Derrida 1973: 83). Husserl already defines signs as "signifying relations" (Derrida 1973: 20): expression means by relating to consciousness's intention, indication signifies by relating to other signs. The reduction of consciousness and meaning reduces expression also, but not indication. Insofar as indication is not limited by either consciousness or sense, signs can produce infinitely new significations; a characteristic Derrida terms 'overwhelming. He states, "this *overwhelming* supervenes at the moment when the extension of the concept of language effaces all its limits [...] [T]his overwhelming and this effacement have the same meaning, are one and the same phenomenon" (Derrida 1976: 7). This does not mean that signs *actually* generate infinite differentiations, only that this possibility of overwhelming and effacement of limits belongs to their essence.

The operation of signification defined as "the indefinite drift of signs, as errance and change of scene (*Verwandlung*), linking re-presentations (*Vergegenwärtigung*) one to another without beginning or end" (Derrida 1973: 103), describes the structure of *différance*[9], which, I argue, is the *historicity* of signification. In "Différance," Derrida describes this operation as "*spacing*, the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space (*temporisation*)" (Derrida 1982: 13). This formulation captures the operation I just described. Space or signs become time because their emptiness is the possibility of producing ever new differentiations, indefinitely deferring the possibility of self-identity. As such, no self-identity appears or phenomenalises itself. The emptiness or finitude of signs is therefore an essential openness or infinity, which is a form of temporality. Time in turn becomes space because this deferral is productive of significations, of more space. Again, *différance* names not a factual process but the essence of signification or writing.

d) *Différance* as *history*, and the reduction of the reduction

The resemblance between *différance* and Husserl's description of transcendental historicity is significant. As argued throughout this essay, it shows *historical* and methodological necessities. For Husserl, idealities are the possibility of the repetition of the same to infinity (cf. Derrida 1973: 9). The flow of consciousness comprises all possible experiences extending back and forth to infinity (cf. Derrida 2003a: 97-98). The *telos* of Reason gathers and sanctions these infinities in a universal history of reactivations that bring higher levels of idealisation to infinity (cf. Derrida 1989: 137). Yet infinity cannot as such be phenomenalised as a totality in the present: its *Endstiftung* is "indefinitely deferred in

8 Derrida does not stick to one single word to indicate the operation of signification, which itself shows that "words and concepts receive meaning only in sequences of differences" (Derrida 1976:70)

9 Derrida uses the word *differance* interchangeably with others like "arche-writing, arche-trace" (Derrida 1982: 13).

its content but always evident in its regulative value" (Derrida 1989: 138). Its regulative value, as discussed earlier, is the Idea in the Kantian sense, whose exceptional form of evidence is *phōnē*. *Différance* likewise names an essential deferral to infinity in which no consciousness, object, or content appears. Despite their resemblance, a fundamental difference separates these two 'histories,' although they are, like parallels, 'alongside' each other. Explaining the reduction of transcendental history and phenomenology can clarify their relation.

The failure of *phōnē*, brought about by the irreducibility of signs, also reduces transcendental history and phenomenology, disclosed at the end of its itinerary as a transcendental historical act. Within historical phenomenology, *phōnē* has two functions. First, it reactivates the *telos* of Reason in 'full possession of its essence' by making the Idea evident as the regulative directedness to truth. Secondly, it grounds phenomenology in "original self-giving evidence" (Derrida 1973: 5), even if this evidence is heard rather than seen. The impossibility of this experience means that transcendental history can neither complete itself nor can phenomenology ground itself in present evidence. The essential incompleteness of transcendental history is analogous to the incompleteness of *phōnē*, for both are movements intended to re-capture sense. In the *Introduction*, Derrida explains that writing secures "the absolute traditionalisation of the object" (Derrida 1989: 87) by making "communication become virtual" (ibid). Yet this is *not* a recognition of writing as historically constitutive, since this role "is only possible precisely from the *moment* truth *can* in general be said or written" (Derrida 1989: 90). This 'moment' is the instant of *phōnē*, which is supposed to prepare the self-identity of sense for oral and written communication. Once *phōnē* fails, however, the historical restriction placed on writing as a medium of transmission is reduced, and writing's full rights as a condition for traditionalisation are fully restored. What remains after the "death of speech (of *so-called* full speech)," says Derrida, is "*history* as writing" (Derrida 1976: 8, second italics added): the essential openness and productivity of the operation of signification. It is this operation which, "should the occasion arise, produces 'philosophy'" (Derrida 1973: 25).

The reduction of phenomenology also reduces its foundational methodological tool: the reduction itself. Phenomenology stands on the possibility of drawing an essential distinction between the *de facto* and the *de jure*, the empirical and the transcendental, exteriority and interiority. For Husserl, 'essence' or *eidos* is an ideality, which is the being-for-consciousness that can be repeated as the same *ad infinitum* and, as such, precedes and sanctions *de jure* everything the reduction suspends. But it is precisely the closedness of interiority, of being-for-consciousness that *différance* bursts open. *Différance*, says Derrida, "is the intimate relation of the living present with its outside, the openness upon exteriority in general [...] *the temporalisation of sense is, from the outset, a 'spacing'*" (Derrida 1973: 86). *Differance* is the essential *Verflechtung*, the contamination of interiority and exteriority. Yet Derrida insists, "it does not follow [...] that there is now only one term, a single one of the differends [...] It is the difference between the two that is no longer functional [...]

it eliminates the exteriority or anteriority, the independence, of the imitated, the signified, or the thing" (Derrida 2004: 220). Instead, the emptiness and relationality of signs results in an essential superabundance of possible differences with differential force or ability to repeat.

The reduction of phenomenology should not be interpreted as its negation or exclusion. As discussed earlier, Derrida insists on the *historical* and *historico*-methodological necessity of *repeating* phenomenology to the end in order to reveal its profound *historicity* or *différance*. Now, this necessity can be better understood as *historical*. Earlier I said the reduction was a 'temporal act,' functioning not as exclusion but as retention. Derrida says, "to the degree that this act lasts, it must negotiate with the determinate temporality that it 'retains', with the history that it assumes, in order to know itself as a free act. Its impurity is originary because it is *a priori* temporal" (Derrida 2003a: 64-65). Although this free act is for Derrida "the freedom or 'candour' [...] of language" (Derrida 1973: 97) rather than of the subject as in phenomenology, the necessity of negotiating with, and conserving, the past that the reduction understood as retention entails is at work throughout Derrida's deconstructive philosophy, too.

From *Of Grammatology* onwards, this necessity no longer takes the form of repeating phenomenology as such. Rather, it takes the form of the necessity of using the metaphysical language to question metaphysics. Derrida emphasises its *historical* force: "*There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics*. We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is foreign to this history" (Derrida 2001c: 354, italics in the original). This does not mean that phenomenology in particular or the language of metaphysics in general is maintained without change, for, like Husserl's reduction, Derrida's reduction seeks to reveal the essence of what it reduces. Derrida says, "The age already in the *past* is in fact constituted in every respect as a *text*" (Derrida 1976: lxxxix). This also applies to the reduction itself, and the vocabulary of essences and necessities that Derrida continues to employ. The method of the reduction in Derrida's work draws textual differences with differential force with the intention to show *différance* as *history*. "[W]riting," Derrida says, "is the 'critical epoch'" (Derrida 2001b: 208). The *truth* of this critical epoch is the essential emptiness of subject, object, perception, and self-identical sense that makes the infinite openness and productivity of differences possible.

e) Quasi-transcendental and a response to Dews' criticisms

Derrida describes *différance* as quasi-transcendental, defining it as a condition of possibility that is simultaneously a condition of impossibility. The secondary literature generally interprets this phrase as the constitutive contamination between opposites. Gasché, for instance, defines the quasi-transcendental as "the necessary corruption of the idealities, or transcendentals of all sorts, by what they are defined against, and at the very moment of their constitution"

(Gasché 1986: 274; see also Doyon 2014: 135; Kramer 2014: 522). This interpretation applies to *différance* viewed as an operation of representation of representations whose essential emptiness and productivity reduce metaphysics' essential distinctions. It does *not*, however, apply to the term quasi-transcendental, not least because it does not explain how to understand a condition of possibility which is simultaneously a condition of impossibility.

Bennington comes close to the correct interpretation, though it is ultimately mistaken on account of being empirical. He says, "my finitude makes (im) possible my transcendence. I think, therefore I am, and before you know it I'm essentially an immortal thinking substance, though only the possibility of my death makes this possible and thus impossible" (Bennington 1988: 102). In other words, finitude makes the subject (and everything it implies in modern philosophy) both possible and impossible. As a formula, this is the correct interpretation. The problem is that, like Llewelyn, Bennington understands finitude empirically, "'as factual anthropological limit'" (Llewelyn cited in Bennington 1988: 101). The meaning of finitude is actually a point of disagreement between Gasché and Bennington. Gasché explicitly argues that 'quasi-transcendentals' are not finite (Gasché 1986: 317) on account of "Derrida's persistent critique of the notion of finitude" (ibid). Bennington, by contrast, recalls Derrida's 'enigmatic' claim in *Speech and Phenomena* that "infinite *différance* is itself finite" (Derrida 1973: 102), and asks "Are we dealing with two different notions of infinity here?" (Bennington 1988: 95). He leaves the question unanswered, but the answer could not only resolve their disagreement on this point, but also contribute to the clarification of the term quasi-transcendental.

Derrida employs at least three senses of finitude. First, finitude as the character of having a beginning and end, with both an empirical variation (factual death and birth (see Derrida 2003a: 95, also 110)), and an essential or existential one, broadly Heideggerian (see Derrida 2003a: 98, 98n89). The second is formal finitude, exemplified by the set of mathematical axioms generating an infinite series of deductions (see Derrida 1989: 127-129). The third is the finitude of *différance*, which is the essence of writing, namely, the essential absence of object, subject, and context of production or reception of signs, which makes an infinite production of differentiations unrestricted by truth or objectivity possible. This finitude is the absence of metaphysical origin and *telos* that makes the infinity of *différance* possible.

Différance's finitude is extensively discussed in the final chapter of *Speech and Phenomena* as the non-necessary fulfilment of the subject's intention in an intuition of the object, and as the absolute absence, or death, of the subject. It is there that Derrida first formulates the phrase "possibility is [...] impossibility" (Derrida 1973: 101). This chapter's argumentative structure provides the interpretive key to this phrase and, with it, to the meaning of the term 'quasi-transcendental.' The same structure reappears in "Signature, Event, Context."

The argumentative structure becomes clearer if we ask, 'in what sense does *différance*'s finitude make sense possible?' Sticking with *phōnē* as phenomenology's foundational experience, *différance* makes *phōnē* possible only *symbolically*,

as "a representation of a representation" (Derrida 1973: 103), as "*a scene, a theatre stage*" (Derrida 1973: 86). *Différance*, says Derrida, is "a primordial 'supplement' [...] *mak*[*ing*] *up for* a deficiency, [...] compensat[ing] for primordial nonself-presence" (Derrida 1973: 87). The supplement functions "by delayed reaction[:] *a possibility produces that to which it is said to be added on*" (Derrida 1973: 89, italics added). The operation of signification takes the place of consciousness in the sense of *Räpresentation*: "the for-itself of self-presence [...] arises in the role of supplement as primordial substitution, in the form of 'in the place of' (*für etwas*), that is, [...] in the very operation of significance in general" (ibid). Neither self nor sense arrive at the experience of *phōnē* as self-identical; rather, they require *phōnē* to become such. *Phōnē*'s failure reveals both sense and self as a trace: a representation of representation. It is *in this sense* that *différance* makes *phōnē* (and everything this experience implies) possible.

How does *différance*'s finitude make sense impossible? Because the representation of representation "function[s] [in] the total absence of the subject" (Derrida 1973: 93) and "the absence of perception" (ibid) of the object, the subjects' intention to recapture itself and the object cannot be fulfilled in an intuition. *Différance*, thus, makes *phōnē*, which consists in this fulfilment, impossible. Regardless of whether intention is actually fulfilled, for Husserl's phenomenology fulfillment remains the norm or regulative *telos* of both self-consciousness and transcendental history: "the telos which announces the fulfilment, [...], has already and beforehand opened up essence as a relation with the object [...]" (Derrida 1973: 98). Derrida continues, "The norm is knowledge, the intuition that is adequate to its object, the evidence that is not only distinct but also 'clear'" (ibid). This *telos* is precisely what *différance* reduces, thus making it impossible – other than as a representation.

The quasi-transcendental can now be read precisely: *différance* makes *phōnē* (and everything it entails) possible as a representation of representation. Yet, because subject and object are essentially absent in a representation of representation, it makes *phōnē*, the fulfilment of the intention to perceive, impossible.

I turn now to Dews' criticisms of Derrida's philosophy, to which the clarification of the quasi-transcendental helps respond. Two arguments support Dews' criticisms. First, Dews affirms that Derrida questions the idea of 'ground' "*only* insofar as he considers the concept of origin, in its philosophical function, to be inseparable from that of presence" (Dews 1987: 25). Without presence, *différance* "can no longer perform the *epistemological function* of an origin" (ibid.) but can still serve as the "unconditioned source of the structures of experience" (Dews 1988: 172). Second, although Derrida is generally presented as "the thinker of uncancellable difference" (Dews 1987: 26), Dews argues that *différance* "collapses into absolute identity" (Dews 1987: 27). He compares Derrida's argumentation to Schelling's, who maintains that metaphysical dualisms "ca[n] [...] be defeated [...] only by going beyond the duality" (ibid) into "a state of 'absolute indifference' (*absolute Indifferenz*) with regard to all determinations" (Dews 1988: 171). Dews highlights that Derrida "explicitly equates '*différance* within auto-affection' with the 'identity of identity and non-identity'"

(Dews 1987: 27). Moreover, in "The Double Session," "he [Derrida] speaks of the abolition of 'the difference between difference and nondifference'" (ibid). The conclusion Dews draws is that Derrida "is offering us a philosophy of *différance* as the absolute" (Dews 1987: 24).

Dews agrees that in Derrida's case, the term origin is not a simple presence or its opposite, and it is neither identity nor difference. For Derrida, he says, "the identity of meaning is no less a condition of difference, in other words, than difference is a condition of identity" (Dews 1987: 28). This means, as Dews rightly points out, that "identity and difference are not opposed to each other in the manner they have often been conceived to be" (ibid). Identity and difference are not opposed in the sense that the former cannot be said to precede and command, or exclude and suppress the latter *essentially*. In a certain sense, they are regarded as having equal value, and Derrida certainly reduces the essentiality – in Husserl's sense – of their distinction. Yet that does not mean that differences are now reconciled or unified, or that all differences are the same. On the contrary, *différance* indicates the essential multiplication of differences. The reduction of essential differences does not mean either that *différance* is the source of all differences. When Derrida describes *différance* as the nonoriginary origin, he is indicating that differences, including those organising the discourse of phenomenology and philosophy generally, 'start' *a priori in media historia*. The *a priori is* the always already of the *history* of signification that no metaphysical origin restricts: neither knowledge, truth, objectivity, nor self-consciousness. For the same reason, this *history* is essentially open to infinity and always to come.

Significantly, Dews himself entertains an alternative interpretation, one that sees Derrida not as seeking a stronger, higher foundation for metaphysics, but as destroying its foundations through the destruction of meaning. He says, "[f]or Derrida no term or text is the bearer of a self-evident meaning. This meaning must be instituted through a further term or text, and the meaning of this in turn by a further term or text" (Dews 1987: 30). The "logical consequence" of this view, Dews continues, "is not the volatilisation of meaning, but its destruction" (ibid). This interpretation is correct, I believe, provided that the 'meaning' destroyed is Husserl's, namely, meaning as preceding the sign and incapable of being lost. This destruction, however, is not catastrophic for two reasons. The first reason is that *différance* supplements the lack of an ever-present sense. Institutionalisations, conventions, consensuses and the like are supplements, that is, stabilisations of interpretations, "sometimes stabilisations of great duration, sometimes micro-stabilisations" (Derrida 1996: 86). Derrida's point in articulating *différance*, however, is that "it becomes necessary to stabilise precisely because stability is not natural" (ibid). Stability is not natural because the essential emptiness of signs is productive *ad infinitum*. The second reason why this destruction is not catastrophic is that "it is a chance, a chance to change, to destabilise" (ibid), and, thus, to re-create and begin again.

Conclusions

This article advanced three arguments. First, understanding Derrida's *différance* and the qualification 'quasi-transcendental' requires a structural reading of these concepts as issuing from a reduction of phenomenology: a reduction which entails both conservation and transformation of this tradition. Second, conserving Husserl's reduction of empiricism, including historicism, is factually and structurally necessary for the disclosure of *différance* for two reasons: it allows Derrida to step into the history of the tradition of metaphysics in order to undertake an internal and *historical* criticism, *and* it also allows him to avoid the flaws of empiricism and relativism. This necessary conservation helps differentiate Derrida's philosophy from historicisms of various denominations. Third, the irreducibility of writing at the core of the transcendental experience of *phōnē* reduces the entire edifice of phenomenology, including its foundational method, as well as the metaphysical concept of the sign. I argue that *différance* is quasi-transcendental in the sense of making consciousness (and its accompanying concepts) possible as 'representation of representation' which, as such, can never appear.

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Rebeka Perez Leon

Rekonstrukcija „*différance*" kao *istorije* kroz Deridinu redukciju Huserlove fenomenologije

Apstrakt

U članku se tvrde tri stvari. Prvo, razumevanje Deridinog koncepta „*différance*" i 'kvazi-transcendentalna' kvalifikacija zahteva da se rekonstituiše put koji vodi do Deridine *istorijske* metodološke sheme. Drugo, metodološki je i historijski nužno da se pođe putem reaktivacije Huserlove kritike i redukcije svakog empirizma, uključujući istoricizam. Reaktivacija omogućuje fenomenologiji strukturalnu ulogu u Deridinoj filozofiji i dovodi u pitanje istoricističko čitanje Deride. Treće, nesvodivost pisanja je u srcu krajnjeg fenomenološkog transcendentalnog iskustva *phōnē* redukuje metafizičku tradiciju, razlikujući njene nesuštinske elemente – prisustvo u svim svojim formama kao apsolutni početak i kraj svakog smisla – od onih suštinskih – pisanje kao suštinska proizvodnja značenja u nedogled, bez obzira na istinu i objektivnost. Ova nesvodivost je kvazi-transcendentalna jer čini fenomenološku strukturu mogućom samo kao simboličku reprezentaciju koja ne predstavlja ništa, ali nemoguću kao ispunjenje namera subjekta kroz intuiciju

Ključne reči: *différance*, istorija, istorijska fenomenologija, kvazitranscendentalno, redukcija, Huserl

UDK: 82:141.7
DOI https://doi.org/10.2298/FID2603519B
Original Scientific Article
Received 29.12.2025. Accepted 11.8.2026.

PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIETY
VOL. 37, NO. 3, 405–700

To cite text:
Brennan, Daniel. 2026. "The Comma and the Conditional: Lucy Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport* and the Performance of the Quasi-Transcendental." *Philosophy and Society* 37 (3): 519–538.

Daniel Brennan

THE COMMA AND THE CONDITIONAL: LUCY ELLMANN'S *DUCKS, NEWBURYPORT* AND THE PERFORMANCE OF THE QUASI-TRANSCENDENTAL

ABSTRACT
This paper examines how Lucy Ellmann's novel Ducks, Newburyport formally enacts the quasi-transcendental – conditions of possibility that are simultaneously conditions of impossibility. Following Derrida's turn to James Joyce, whose equivocal writing disclosed what Husserl's pursuit of univocity suppressed, I read Ellmann's novel as a literary figuration whose formal articulation makes a critical phenomenological analysis possible. The analysis centres on the two most conspicuous devices of the novel's poetics – the comma's perpetual deferral of closure and the nominalizing refrain "the fact that" – while attending to the wider complex of techniques (listing, accumulation, and the counterpointed, period-bound sections following a lioness) through which the text configures meaning. I argue that this syntax exhibits the impossibility of the classical *epoché* for a consciousness constituted by the structures of late capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy, while holding open the possibility of critical phenomenology in Lisa Guenther's sense: a mode of attending to how power and history shape lived experience, and of unbuilding those structures from within.

KEYWORDS
Lucy Ellmann; *Ducks, Newburyport*; Jacques Derrida; Edmund Husserl; quasi-transcendental; critical phenomenology; James Joyce; parataxis

Introduction

Lucy Ellmann's novel *Ducks, Newburyport* (2019) presents the interior monologue of an Ohio homemaker across roughly one thousand pages, and in that monologue there is no full stop. The monologue is articulated instead by commas and by the use of the phrase "the fact that," which recurs many thousands of times. This narrative is only occasionally interrupted by a second, counterpointed narrative about a lioness searching for her cubs. This much smaller narrative is told in the third person and in conventionally punctuated sentences. In this paper, I argue that the novel's formal choices (the extraordinary lengthy sentence of the main text, and the punctuated lioness story) enact what

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Jacques Derrida calls the quasi-transcendental: "the simultaneous condition of possibility as well as the impossibility of a system, a concept, a language, or a political body" (Kramer 2014: 522). Reading the novel through Derrida's early engagement with Husserl, as well as through Derrida's identification of James Joyce as the counterforce to Husserl's pursuit of univocal meaning, I show that Ellmann's comma-bound syntax demonstrates the impossibility of the classical *epoché* for a consciousness constituted by the structures of late capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy, while nevertheless holding open the possibility of what Lisa Guenther calls critical phenomenology: a phenomenology that "attend[s] to the ways that power and history shape lived experience" (Guenther 2021: 6).

The terms of this claim need care, and setting them out precisely is the first task of this paper. In Derrida's *Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry": An Introduction*, Joyce's writing is not itself a phenomenological treatise; it is the literary practice whose equivocity discloses what Husserl's pursuit of univocity must suppress, and it takes Derrida's reading to bring that disclosure into philosophical articulation (Derrida 1989: 102). The same division of labour structures this paper. Ellmann stands for us where Joyce stood for Derrida: her novel is not an analytic critique of phenomenology but a figuration of a consciousness saturated by its historical conditions. The critical phenomenology is performed in the reading, here, in this paper, which takes the novel's formal features as its material. When I say, then, that the novel "performs" or "enacts" the quasi-transcendental, I mean that its formal techniques articulate, at the level of syntax and structure, a condition that philosophical prose can describe but struggles to exhibit. The analysis that renders this articulation *as* phenomenology remains the reader's act.

Two further terms govern the argument. The quasi-transcendental, as I use it following Guenther, names historically contingent formations: global capital, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, idealizations of motherhood… that function like transcendental conditions in constituting experience while themselves being constituted historically, through the actions of the very subjects they constitute. The quasi-transcendental is therefore not simply another name for the Husserlian *Lebenswelt*. The lifeworld names the pre-given horizon of all experience. Quasi-transcendental structures, by contrast, are contingent products of power that could be otherwise, and are for that reason possible objects of critique and of what Guenther calls unbuilding: "there is no outside to capitalism, heteropatriarchy, or colonialism from which to critique these structures and forces from a distance; rather, we must diagnose, resist, and unbuild them from within" (Guenther 2021: 14).[1] Critical phenomenology, correspondingly, is

1 Václav Havel's account of "post-totalitarian" power in "The Power of the Powerless" (1978) offers an instructive contrast here. Havel's philosophy of resistance presupposes a "life in truth" available outside ideological structures. That is a natural world from which the falsity of an ideological system's claims can be discerned (Havel 1978: 9, 11). In this respect Havel's resistance aligns closely with the classical phenomenological

here understood positively: not as the denial of phenomenological description but as its extension to the conditions (historical, material, social), that classical phenomenology sought to suspend.

Derek Attridge connects Ellman's novel to Joyce (Attridge 2024). He argues that the novel inventively develops further the style of the unpunctuated, block-text monologue of the "Penelope" episode of *Ulysses* to capture the chaotic, rapid-fire flow of the contemporary mind (ibid: 92–95). In Attridge's view, this Joycean form uses arbitrary associations and lists to cultivate an empathetic readerly response to the protagonist's anxiety and dismay at contemporary culture, and also a recognition that such writing "brings home how much may be going on in one person's mind at a given moment." (ibid: 93). For critic John Day, the uniqueness of the text is not its length, but rather that no one has offered such a sustained account of this kind of mind, so deeply embedded in domestic life, before (Day 2019). Molly MacVeagh lifts this attention to demonstrate the salience of this novel for discussions of climate anxiety. She argues that the novel's fragmented structure constitutes a 'molecular form' uniquely suited to representing the porous nature of climate anxiety (MacVeagh 2024: 500–501); its maximalist text goes below the structures of the usual systems of narrative (at a molecular level) and can therefore upset them (ibid: 503). MacVeagh writes: "Ellmann's stream of consciousness takes habits and fears and apple pies and rolls them together, multiplies them by political–ecological crisis, and fires them at you erratically, until it's not exactly clear where the boundaries around such things used to be drawn" (ibid: 516).

What this scholarship already makes clear is that the novel's form exceeds any single device. My analysis of the comma and "the fact that" should accordingly be read as an account of the two most conspicuous devices within a poetics that configures meaning through a whole complex of means, nominalization, listing, accumulation, and the counterpointed punctuation of the lioness sections among them. The absence of the full stop does not, after all, mean the absence of sentences. What distinguishes Ellmann's practice, and what motivates the Derridean frame of this paper, is the specific horizontality of her syntax. Where Joyce's polysemy multiplies meanings vertically within the word, Ellmann's parataxis extends it horizontally along the sentence and it is this horizontal extension of delay (delay for Derrida is the deferral of meaning) that connects her form to Derrida's account of the quasi-transcendental. The paper proceeds as follows: section II reconstructs the philosophical frame: Husserl's confrontation with tradition in "The Origin of Geometry", Derrida's reading of that text, and the concept of the quasi-transcendental as delay. Sections III and IV analyse the novel's two most conspicuous devices, the comma and "the fact that", as syntactic articulations of delay and of facticity

aspiration to the *epoché*. I have argued elsewhere for the timeliness of Havel's resistance writing; the position developed in this paper, following Guenther, denies precisely the outside his formulation requires. Resistance, like consciousness, operates from within the structures it opposes.

respectively. Section V turns to Ellmann's essays published around the time of the release of *Ducks, Newburyport*, to establish that these devices belong to a deliberate formal strategy. Section VI takes up the novel's structural counterpoint, the period-bound sections following a lioness, and the human and animal world contrast; this counterpoint, and the question of the natural world it raises, prepares the reading of the novel's ending, where in section VII I conclude by considering the ending, a movement of care between mother and daughter, as they visit the lioness, and by asking whether care can function as a critical resource within quasi-transcendental constitutions.

From Pure Reduction to Quasi-Transcendental Structures

The classical phenomenological project depends on the *epoché*: the methodological suspension of the natural attitude by which the phenomenologist refrains from positing the world in order to describe how it is given to consciousness. Whether such a suspension could ever deliver a "pure" consciousness is a question Husserl himself confronted in the *Crisis of European Sciences* where the description of pure consciousness is acknowledged to be an abstraction rather than something given in experience (Husserl 1970: 256) – and it is the aspiration to this suspension, rather than any naïve achievement of it, that Derrida's early work presses upon. In Derrida's first published work, a translation of "The Origin of Geometry" (the English text of Husserl's chapter is published as an appendix to *The Crisis of European Sciences*), Derrida offered an introduction much longer than the essay he translated. Before we can look at Derrida's critique, we will briefly explain Husserl's position.

For Husserl, the phenomenological reduction aimed to secure apodictic foundations by achieving univocity, that is, a language capable of unambiguous designation. In "The Origin of Geometry", Husserl pursues this univocity not by examining consciousness in isolation but by investigating how ideal geometrical formations persist across historical transmission. A geometric truth, once established, becomes available to later geometers across different languages and cultures without loss of its ideal content. The question is how meaning constituted in one historical moment remains accessible and identical across traditions. Husserl seeks the conditions that make this persistence possible, the structures that allow ideal objects to transcend their empirical origins while remaining communicable. Yet even as Husserl pursued "presuppositionless knowledge", his late work increasingly confronted the paradox that ideal objects like geometric truths arise from and persist through historical tradition.

In "The Origin of Geometry," Husserl addresses this paradox directly:

> The geometry which is ready-made, so to speak, from which the regressive inquiry begins, is a tradition. Our human existence moves within innumerable traditions. The whole cultural world, in all its forms, exists through tradition. These forms have arisen as such not merely causally; we also know already that tradition is precisely tradition, having arisen within our human space through

> human activity, i.e., spiritually, even though generally know nothing, or as good as nothing, of the particular provenance and of the spiritual source that brought it about. (Husserl 1970: 354–55)

Importantly, even the *a priori* truths of geometry are discerned through the traditions in which the geometers of any age dwell. These traditions are not merely one generation mechanically passing information to the next, but rather spiritual accomplishments that arise through human activity. The ideal content of geometry depends on this traditional transmission for its very existence as accessible knowledge.

However, Husserl's project requires a regressive inquiry that would work backwards through this traditionary existence to access origins. The methodological tension is acute: how can phenomenology perform this regression when the "ready-made" geometry from which we begin is already fully embedded in "the whole cultural world"? Husserl's solution is the eidetic reduction which depends on the possibility of distinguishing what is essentially geometrical from what is merely traditional accretion. But if ideal formations exist through tradition and arise within our human space through human activity, can this distinction be maintained? The very conditions that make geometrical ideality possible (spiritual activity, traditional transmission, cultural embedding) also prevent access to pure, pre-traditional origins.

It is precisely this distinction that Derrida's reading of Husserl calls into question. In *Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry": An Introduction*, Derrida identifies James Joyce as the counterforce to Husserl's project (Derrida 1989: 102). Where Husserl sought to reduce language to univocal clarity through regressive inquiry, Joyce pursued maximum equivocity through linguistic multiplication. In John P. Leavey's Coda to Derrida's *Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry": An Introduction*, he describes Joyce and Husserl as "asymmetrical transcendental parallels" in Derrida's work; Husserl attempting to work backwards through tradition to grasp free ideality, and Joyce aggressively layering meanings to demonstrate language's irreducible historicity (ibid: 190). What geometry exemplifies for Husserl are "free" idealities, such as numbers, as distinguished from idealities "bound" to the lifeworld. Bound idealities are the bread and butter of literary discourse. But Derrida's turn to Joyce gives literature an epistemologically privileged voice for doing phenomenology. Derrida would later theorize this privilege explicitly, reading Joyce, and other literary figures, like Kafka, in a manner that differs in kind from his readings of philosophers and attending to literature's specific freedoms and demands (Derrida 1984; 1992; see also the writings collected in Mitchell and Slote 2013). Joyce's formal techniques do not simply represent the contamination of transcendental structures but actively disclose it in ways that philosophical prose cannot. The multilingual puns of *Finnegans Wake*, with their etymological depth and semantic multiplicity, show that the medium making ideality possible, language itself, simultaneously contaminates meaning with historical contingency and semantic instability. Derrida's own writing, of course, increasingly adopts

performative strategies for this same reason. If the medium of ideality is itself historical, then any bracketing performed in and through that medium is performed from a determinate historical position. That is, the attempt to bracket an ideology is made from a standpoint that ideology has helped to form.

Derrida's privileging of literary form as phenomenological disclosure opens the possibility that certain novels might make available what philosophy describes but struggles to exhibit. Lucy Ellmann's *Ducks, Newburyport* operates in this space. While, as described above, the unpunctuated flow of Molly Bloom's episode in *Ulysses* clearly anticipates Ellmann's style, *Ducks, Newburyport*, shifts from Joyce's vertical polysemy to a relentless horizontal parataxis. Where Joyce's semantic density, for Derrida, demonstrated the impossibility of univocal meaning, Ellmann's thousand-page sentence makes delay itself the object of formal display: the impossibility of bracketing is exhibited in the syntax. This offers the reader a critical phenomenology within the oppressive structures of this moment.

The insight relies on Derrida's concept of the quasi-transcendental, which Sina Kramer defines as "the simultaneous condition of possibility as well as impossibility of a system, a concept, a language, or a political body" (Derrida 2014: 522). The pure *epoché* is impossible because consciousness cannot extract itself from the linguistic and historical conditions that constitute it. As Kramer observes, "the transcendental and the empirical would be mutually implicated, mutually contaminated and contaminating, and vulnerable to each other" (ibid: 538). This mutual contamination is not a correctable deficiency but the structural condition of all meaning-constitution. Central to this contamination is what Derrida theorizes as delay.

> Here delay is the philosophical absolute, because the beginning of methodic reflection can only consist in the consciousness of the implication of another previous, possible, and absolute origin in general. ... In the lackluster guise of a technique, the Reduction is only pure thought as that delay, pure thought investigating the sense of itself as delay within philosophy. (Derrida 1989: 152–53)

Delay is not an obstacle to phenomenology but its structural condition. The reduction cannot access pure origins because any origin appears only through delay, only in the living present that is already contaminated by what precedes it. This delay connects to what Kramer identifies as the "fabulous retroactivity" of quasi-transcendental constitutions, where "the general economy will have been produced retroactively" (Kramer 2014: 548). Meaning is never simply present but is constituted retrospectively. Where delay points backward, as meaning is always lagging behind an origin it cannot recover, this retroactivity points forward. Constitution arrives from the future, installing what will have been the case. The two run in opposite temporal directions, and this counter-directionality will matter for the reading of the novel's ending. *Ducks, Newburyport* extends Derrida's insight in a crucial direction. Rather than multiplying meanings within the word, as Joyce does, the novel enacts the quasi-transcendental through formal mechanisms that perform delay. The comma,

for instance, in *Ducks, Newburyport*, perpetually defers the moment. Also, the nominalizing structure of "the fact that" that connects these delayed instances. These formal features articulate an alternative phenomenological material in which contamination figures as constitutive. Building on MacVeagh's analysis, where "[t]he borders between object and environment, life and non-life… start to become less distinct at the micro-scale of molecular attention", we might say that Ellman's novel doesn't even allow us to bracket a moment to a particular quasi-transcendental structure (MacVeagh 2024: 501).

The Comma: A Syntax of Delay

Another formal feature of the novel is the absence of the period. Its main discourse contains grammatical sentences nonetheless, but it withholds the mark that would close them on the page. The period marks the completion of a statement: an articulation of arrival, the typographic signal that a unit of sense has been achieved. Not every full stop delivers definitive meaning, of course, but as a mark it offers respite from delay, and it thereby enables what Derrida would call a "metaphysics of presence", a fantasy that meaning can be definitively fixed. The classical *epoché* depends on an analogous moment of arrest: the phenomenologist must stop the flow of the natural attitude, bracket empirical contamination, and access pure structures. The period performs this stopping on the page. Ellmann's refusal of the period is therefore legible as a refusal of bracketing. The comma, appearing thousands of times throughout the text, marks connection, continuation, the persistence of flow. The comma also separates, marking entities as entities of the same order, and so makes lists possible. Where the period would close off meaning and allow the isolation of a completed structure, the comma perpetually defers closure as things as added together.

The comma thus functions analogously to Derrida's concept of the trace, explained in *Of Grammatology*:

> The instituted trace cannot be thought without thinking the retention of difference within a structure of reference where difference appears as such and thus permits a certain liberty of variations among the full terms. The absence of another here-and-now, of another transcendental present, of another origin of the world appearing as such, presenting itself as irreducible absence within the presence of the trace, is not a metaphysical formula substituted for a scientific concept of writing. This formula, beside the fact that it is the questioning of metaphysics itself, describes the structure implied by the "arbitrariness of the sign," from the moment that one thinks of its possibility short of the derived opposition between nature and convention, symbol and sign, etc. These oppositions have meaning only after the possibility of the trace. (Derrida 1997: 46–47)

The trace is hence the structural mark of non-presence, the formal sign that meaning is always deferred, always contaminated by what comes before and after. Thus, the trace of what appears always carries within it the mark of

what is absent, what has passed, what is deferred. This is not just philosophical wordplay but rather describes how signification actually works once we recognize that signs are arbitrary. The connection between signifier and signified is unmotivated. Arbitrariness is, for Saussure, the first principle of the sign and the very condition of its signifying function. Meaning can therefore emerge only through differential structures, where absence is constitutive rather than secondary. Traditional oppositions like natural versus ideological presuppose a world where signs might achieve presence. Derrida argues that "the beginning of methodic reflection can only consist in the consciousness of the implication of another previous, possible, and absolute origin" (Derrida 1989: 152); each thought implicates another, each clause opens onto what precedes and follows.

The connection between Derrida and Ellmann is striking. Consider how the narrator's consciousness moves through a chain of associations:

> the fact that I found an index card with Abby's BBQ sauce recipe yesterday, in her own handwriting, and it fills me with, with, Yul Brynner, seed wheat, the fact that she says you need 1 lge. onion, 2 tbsp. butter, ¼ cup lemon juice, 2 tbsp. vinegar, 1 tbsp. Worcestershire, 2 tbsp. brown sugar, ½ cup water, 1 jar chili sauce, salt & pepper, the fact that maybe I'll use it on some drumsticks today, freezer, animal-shaped ice cubes, water samples, urine sample, PCBs, the fact that wild killer whales have PCBs in them, and pregnant whales transmit the PCBs to the fetus, the fact that I haven't got any chili sauce like Abby means, but I could use some Hunt's and add a little chili powder or paprika… (Ellmann 2019: 37)

The consciousness presented here moves ceaselessly between maternal inheritance ("Abby's BBQ sauce recipe… in her own handwriting"), domestic practice ("maybe I'll use it on some drumsticks today"), environmental crisis ("wild killer whales have PCBs"), and commercial substitution ("Hunt's"). No period arrives to close off this list, which the reader assembles into a network expanding into the text beyond my quotation. The comma ensures that grief, cooking, ecological catastrophe, and brand names remain inextricably linked through the structural impossibility of separation. The comma suspends the movement that the eidetic reduction would require by ensuring that another particular always arrives first. Each comma marks another empirical particular arriving to contaminate potential essence. The text accumulates delay and saturates the consciousness of the narrator.

Consider the following passage:

> the fact that all in all we're really just a normal Joy, Pledge, Crest, Tide, Dove, Woolite, Palmolive, Clorox, Rolaids, Pepto-Bismol, Alka-Seltzer, Desitin, Advil, Aleve, Tylenol, Anacin, Bayer, Excedrin, Vitamin C, Kleenex, Kotex, Tampax, Altoid, Barbazol, Almay, Revlon, Cetaphil, Right Guard, Old Spice, Gillette, Q-Tip, Johnson & Johnson, Vaseline, Listerine, Head 'n' Shoulders, Safe Owl, Eagle Brand, Jolly Green Giant, Land O'Lakes, Lucerne, Sealtest, Clover, Blue Bonnet, Half & Half, Snyder, VanCamp, Wish-Bone, French's, Skyline, Empress, Gerber, Nabisco, Heinz, Kraft, Quaker Oats, Sunkist, Purina, Vlasic, Oreo,

> Shredded Wheat, Arm & Hammer, Jell-O, Pez, Sara Lee, Chock Full o' Nuts, Libby's, Pepperidge Farm, Fleischmann's, Morton, General Mills, King Arthur, Bell's, Reese's Pieces kind of household like everybody else… (Ellmann 2019: 15)

The narrator cannot separate her sense of normalcy from consumer products. She cannot access "household" as a pure concept apart from the cascade of brand names that constitute contemporary American domesticity. Saturation, admittedly, can also serve purification: Husserl's own imaginative variation multiplies the "profiles" of a phenomenon in order to disclose its invariant essence. But imaginative variation is meant to end. The variations run until the essence shows itself, and then they stop. Ellmann's list does not stop. It discloses no invariant "household" behind the brands; it produces only more brands. Accumulation here outruns any eidetic yield, and the truth the novel renders is that consciousness under late capitalism cannot perform the epoché, because it is formed through commodity relations (and all the other saturating structures). Even my choice to end the quotation where I did imposes a closure that the text itself refuses. And this, perhaps, is what the novel's extraordinary length is for: a phenomenology of a consciousness that cannot bracket must, in principle, go on, and the thousand pages are the formal measure of that impossibility. run until the essence shows itself, and then they stop. Ellmann's list does not stop. It discloses no invariant "household" behind the brands; it produces only more brands. Accumulation here outruns any eidetic yield, and the truth the novel renders is that consciousness under late capitalism cannot perform the epoché, because it is formed through commodity relations (and all the other saturating structures). Even my choice to end the quotation where I did imposes a closure that the text itself refuses. And this, perhaps, is what the novel's extraordinary length is for: a phenomenology of a consciousness that cannot bracket must, in principle, go on, and the thousand pages are the formal measure of that impossibility.

"The Fact That": Facticity and Situated Consciousness

If the comma prevents closure, the repeated phrase "the fact that" enacts a different quasi-transcendental operation. The phrase nominalizes: it turns an event or thought into a static object ("the fact"), only for the comma to immediately set it back in motion. The operative opposition here is facticity and essentiality. Everything in the novel arrives marked as factual rather than essential. This runs counter to the aspiration toward apodictic certainty that directs Husserl's project, an aspiration phenomenology can pursue and be directed by without ever finally securing. The phrase performs what it names: these are facts, not essences; particularities, not universals.

It must be stressed, and here the Derridean logic cuts both ways, that facts and particularities enjoy no exemption from the deferral that undoes essences. To individuate a fact *as* this discrete fact would require precisely the demarcation, the pause, that the novel's parataxis withholds; each "the fact that"

is set back in motion by the comma before it can stabilize into a settled unit. The novel does not, then, replace essences with a new bedrock of particulars. It shows both poles of the classical opposition, essence and fact, caught in the same movement of delay. Ellmann's syntax refuses the arrest that either would require to stand alone. Additionally, 'the facts' themselves are rendered through the narrator's consciousness. They are as she understands them, and not as ideal concepts transferable across generations (as in Husserl's geometry example). Hence the facts of the novel are indistinguishable from impressions, and impressions are pressed upon, by and through quasi-transcendental structures.

The pattern of performing the quasi-transcendental is present implicitly as well as explicitly. For example, when the narrator recognizes that she does not possess certain knowledge, we see that even her ignorance, what she doesn't know, is constituted:

> The fact that I'm a grown woman and I don't know the difference between hay and straw, or linen or cotton, or calico, or flax, or muslin, or porcelain and china, and all kinds of other stuff I can't even remember right now… (Ellmann 2019: 34)

This passage operates on three distinct levels, each revealing the quasi-transcendental constitution of consciousness. First, there is the ignorance itself: the narrator cannot distinguish basic material categories that structure everyday life. But the passage does not present this as a neutral epistemic gap. The phrase "I'm a grown woman" marks the second level: a self-judgment. She evaluates her ignorance as a failing, as something shameful given her age, her position, and her responsibilities. The judgment that a grown woman *should* know these things is not a universal standard but a historically specific expectation. It emerges from her situation as a white, lower-middle-class American woman whose identity is bound to domestic competence.

The third level is more radical. For the narrator to overcome this ignorance would mean to finally learn the difference between hay and straw and achieve something like an authentic encounter with "the thing itself." Even this aspiration is unavailable to her in the form she imagines it. The point is not that a farmer possesses what she lacks: no subject position affords unmediated access to the "hay-ness" of hay, and on Husserl's own terms the thing itself is approached through, not around, its adumbrations. The point is rather that her particular route to any such knowledge would pass through the very structures that produced her ignorance: perhaps through lifestyle media, through nostalgic ruralism, through the commodified authenticity of farmers' markets. It is worth noting that the narrator harbours a recurring fantasy of escaping the busyness of her life to a perceived paradise in an Amish community, where she imagines life would be simpler; a fantasy whose vocabulary of simplicity is itself supplied by the culture she would escape. She cannot bracket her way to the essential difference because the desire for such a position is itself historically constituted.

This pattern of constitutive mediation extends to the narrator's experience of her own body and maternal identity through the American healthcare

system. The narrator's past experience of cancer treatment operates as another quasi-transcendental structure, permanently shaping how she experiences time, presence, and motherhood:

> the fact that toddlers don't criticize you so much, or at least not as artfully or hurtfully as teenagers do, the fact that toddlers show a little mercy, they really do, or maybe I've just forgotten what two-year-olds are like, the fact that I missed Jake's best years, being busy "embracing change," otherwise known as having chemotherapy, toothpicks, the fact that my oncologist told me to embrace change, maybe because she cost a chunk o' change... (Ellmann 2019: 25)

The passage reveals multiple layers of how consciousness is structured here. First, there is the temporal absence itself: she "missed Jake's best years." This is not a phenomenologically accessible past that could be recovered through recollection or imagination. It is a structural void, a permanent absence because she was "busy" with chemotherapy. The treatment itself was the containment of a lethal illness, which is no system's fault; what belongs to the American healthcare system is the way that treatment became inseparable from the family's financial ruin. The medical care that preserved her life simultaneously created an irreparable gap in the maternal experience, which is continued through her very presence in the kitchen, at once unable to escape domestic servitude, but also baking to find a way out of their financial predicament. She cannot bracket her way back to those years; they constitute a hole around which her current relationship to her children must navigate.

Additionally, medical discourse itself colonizes her temporal experience. The oncologist's instruction to "embrace change" becomes unbearably ironic in retrospect. The "change" she was meant to embrace was not a positive form of growth or transformation but the violence of treatment. The contamination is enacted in a narrative sequence: "embrace change" arrives already ironized, and the next clause, by association, adds the further ironic turn of 'cost', "maybe because she cost a chunk o' change", so that the deferral of sense this paper has been tracking is performed here in miniature, meaning revised retroactively clause by clause. The astronomical expense of treatment and the way medical care under late capitalism extracts financial value from biological crisis cannot be separated from the clinical relationship itself. The oncologist's words carry both therapeutic authority and economic exploitation simultaneously. The narrator cannot access the purely medical dimension of her treatment because that treatment was inscribed within commodity relations.

Finally, the passage demonstrates how healthcare systems produce specific forms of maternal guilt as quasi-transcendental conditions. The phrase "I missed Jake's best years" carries a regret that shades toward self-accusation within ideologies of intensive motherhood: she frames her absence as a personal failing even while acknowledging it was necessitated by life-saving treatment. This guilt cannot be resolved through phenomenological reflection because it emerges from the contradiction between two quasi-transcendental structures that American women inhabit simultaneously: a medical system which

bankrupts individuals, and an ideology of maternal presence that demands women be constantly available to their children, lest they suffer the irreparable harms the narrator believes her absence may have caused. The narrator could not have satisfied both imperatives; her consciousness must therefore carry this guilt as a constitutive feature.

The healthcare system thus functions as a quasi-transcendental structure, being both the condition of possibility for the narrator's continued existence and the condition of financial ruin and maternal guilt. Even the desire to be the ideally present mother (itself an oppressive trope) is shaped by the same structures that made such presence impossible.

Historical Violence and the Constitution of Consciousness

Guenther claims that quasi-transcendental structures like colonialism, anti-Black racism, and heteropatriarchy function by normalizing some habits of perception, cognition, and comportment while pathologizing others (Guenther 2020: 11–16). The narrator's consciousness operates within such structures. Her whiteness is never marked as a racial identity, precisely because it functions as an unmarked norm, and that very invisibility is a feature of white supremacy as a quasi-transcendental structure. However, Ellmann goes further than simply representing this condition; she formally enacts the complicity of this consciousness through the mechanism of the comma. The comma functions as a grammatical operator of equivalence, a flattening device that places all contents of consciousness on the same syntactic plane. This levelling is complementary to the horizontal parataxis: the same movement that defers closure also lays each item alongside the next, so that accumulation and equivalence are one operation seen from two sides. If we explore Ellmann's non-fictional essays, we can find evidence that the stylistic choices of *Ducks, Newburyport* constitute a deliberate formal strategy in her recent *oeuvre*. For example, in her essay collection *Things Are Against Us* (Ellmann 2021), across two essays she explicitly examines how consciousness is simultaneously determined by and determines the structures that constitute experience.

In the titular essay, Ellmann presents THINGS (repeatedly capitalized to mark their oppressive presence) as quasi-transcendental structures:

> So THINGS, it must be said, are against us. But it's mutual. Humans are hostile to many THINGS, maybe even most THINGS. Our relationship with THINGS is discordant and haphazard. Our attitude to THINGS is intrinsically ungrateful. (Ellmann 2021: 24)

THINGS press upon consciousness, demanding recognition and structuring perception. These are not neutral objects waiting to be bracketed but rather the conditions of possibility for consciousness itself. We cannot think without THINGS, yet THINGS perpetually exceed our attempts to master them conceptually. This phenomenological investigation of THINGS contrasts with

the next essay in the collection, "The Underground Bunker," where Ellmann shifts to "this"—the demonstrative that attempts to arrest the flow of THINGS into a singular, present object. Where THINGS proliferate and overwhelm, THIS tries to give a moment of specificity, albeit one defined by how things have catastrophically developed. The contrast between THINGS and THIS maps onto the formal distinction in *Ducks, Newburyport* between the comma's endless accumulation and the period's arrested presence. THINGS operate like the comma-bound consciousness of the narrator: multiple, excessive, resistant to closure.

> You mean we massacred the Indians, enslaved the Africans, cut down all the trees, poisoned all the rivers and imprisoned all the animals for THIS, this hellhole of bombast and hamburgers and opioid addictions and cardboard-box houses and pretend ideas? (Ellmann 2021: 30)

The demonstrative THIS marks the terrible present that historical violence has produced. The syntax is telling: "for THIS, this hellhole of bombast and hamburgers…" The repetition from capitalized THIS to lowercase "this" performs a deflation from the totalizing gesture that would grasp the whole catastrophic present to the degraded particularity of "hamburgers" and "cardboard-box houses." The comma puts genocide and hamburgers in the same syntactic space to say that this is the actual structure of consciousness under late capitalism: the capacity and necessity to process historical atrocity and consumer culture as equivalent data points.

Returning to the novel, this flattening is constant. School shootings, environmental collapse, and cinnamon bun ingredients occupy the same cognitive slot, separated only by the comma. This syntax performs the specific horror of the privileged, white, middle-class subject position: the capacity (and necessity) to process global tragedy and domestic trivia as structurally equivalent data points in the flow of "the fact that." The comma does not just connect; it democratizes in a way that reveals the violent banality of the narrator's world. The narrator cannot bracket her privilege because the ability for thought to slide from genocide to hamburgers is the formal expression of that privilege. Yet the flattening produces its own counter-effect: the list simultaneously deepens the reader's awareness of the human cost sedimented in consumer well-being, of the inhuman foundations of ordinary comfort. Both axes, the vertical and the horizontal, remain at work; this is the law of language, which the novel exploits rather than suspends. The critical charge of Ellmann's parataxis lies precisely in the tension between its levelling syntax and the unlevel history that syntax carries.

Ellmann's theoretical position in *Things Are Against Us* suggests this flattening is not merely a personal failing but a structural feature of consciousness constituted by late capitalist THINGS, which, in that relationship between the modern consciousness and the world, creates the horrific "this." The narrator's consciousness is both "against" these THINGS (recognizing their violence, resisting their logic) and constituted by them (unable to think except

through their mediation). As Guenther notes on the quasi-transcendental condition: "there is no outside to capitalism, heteropatriarchy, or colonialism from which to critique these structures and forces from a distance; rather, we must diagnose, resist, and unbuild them from within" (Ellmann 2021: 14). Ellmann's formal choices perform this within-ness: the text cannot step outside the structures it describes; it can only describe them from positions of immersion, letting the comma expose how consciousness flattens historical violence and domestic particularity into the same horizontal stream. The next step in connecting Ellmann's novel to Guenther's critical phenomenology is to show how the natural world fits into its depiction of one individual consciousness, and to demonstrate how the novel contributes to the unbuilding of quasi-transcendental structures from within.

The Lioness and the Fantasy of Closure

The novel's argument depends not only on the narrator's comma-punctuated consciousness but on its counterpoint: the recurring sections about a lioness, rendered in sentences punctuated by periods. While the narrator's discourse refuses to mark points of closure on the page, the lioness appears to achieve it in conventionally articulated discourse:

> Hers was a life of resentments, suspicions and alarms. She had her satisfactions though: an opossum swinging upside-down from a high branch, the whoop of an owl, indicating dusk and the time to hunt, the sight of a dead sheep's face, surrounded by tight woolen curls, a sip of clear cold water, nibble of grass, large white snowflakes disappearing into a black pond. And now, her infants asleep in the den. (Ellmann 2019: 307)

The periods here mark completed satisfactions. Each satisfaction arrives fully: the opossum, the owl, the sheep's face, the water, the snow, the sleeping infants. However, we must be careful not to reinscribe a romantic Nature/Society binary by reading the lioness as a truly "uncontaminated" subject. The very form of this discourse raises the question of who makes this vision of the lioness, and to what end within the novel's rationale. The lioness's closure is not an ontological report on animal consciousness but a *textual effect*: a projected fantasy of presence, of a separate natural world accessible if we could only think our way to it. It is a vision closer to Romantic and Enlightenment figurations of nature than to anything phenomenological, and one the novel stages, I will argue, as a projection. Even the notion of "satisfactions" suggests this. The lioness occupies a position, which is not the same position as, say, the dead sheep's.

This textual effect carries phenomenological weight for considering the place of the natural world in the narrator's consciousness. The novel opens with the narrator encountering raccoons at her door, crashing over rubbish bins, and this threshold establishes the natural world as a persistent horizon for human consciousness. The horizon is not, however, pure exteriority, as

what remains other is still embroiled in human structures. The raccoons appear at the boundary of the domestic; the lioness eventually enters the zoo. These encounters form an arc moving from the wild approaching human habitation to the wild captured within it. They are not an outside, or an alternative to ideological structure (a natural world as the ground of experience or the like). They are too integrated, as the natural world here is constituted by the human world. The interventions of the lioness narratives thus perform a double function: they present the fantasy of phenomenological closure while simultaneously marking the limits of the narrator's historically saturated consciousness. The natural world maintains an alterity that human consciousness can approach but never colonize. The text figures the lioness to perform the *possibility* of the period, serving as the necessary structural foil to the narrator's delay. "And now, her infants asleep in the den"—the sentence closes to mark that the satisfaction is complete. The narrator, by contrast, cannot close a sentence about her children because her maternal consciousness is inseparable from anxiety about school shootings, medical bills, and gendered expectations, and everything else (THINGS and 'this').

The parallel between the two mothers prevents the analysis from collapsing into either pure historicism or recovered transcendentalism. Both consciousnesses are organized by maternal orientation. Yet the lioness represents the *dream* of a consciousness that could rest, that is, a consciousness that could arrest the flow long enough to place a period. By attributing this capacity to the imagined animal, Ellmann highlights its unavailability to the human subject situated in the quasi-transcendental web of late capitalism. The period marks what closure would require: a consciousness not immersed in the historical conditions the narrator inhabits, even though the lioness's story is about being subsumed into the human world.

To be clear about the work the human/animal contrast is doing in this argument: the claim is not that an essential world exists to which the animal has access and the human does not. No consciousness, on the account developed here, achieves the closure the lioness sections typographically perform; the periods mark a projected capacity, it is the narrator's world, and the novel's discourse, that furnish the lioness with her presence. The contrast is supplying the comma-bound discourse with the image of the arrest it cannot perform rather than reinstating the human/animal divide on which phenomenology has so often, and so problematically, traded. That the novel's most complete sentences belong to a captured animal is not a claim about animal minds; it is a diagnosis of what the narrator's own consciousness lacks and longs for.

Conclusion: Can Care be Closure?

Ellmann's novel does not merely illustrate phenomenological insights but articulates them through formal mechanisms adequate to quasi-transcendental structures. As the preceding sections have shown, it does so through a wider poetics than the comma and the conditional alone: nominalization, listing,

brand-name accumulation, and the counterpointed punctuation of the lioness sections all contribute to this understanding. Where Derrida used Joyce's vertical semantic density to critique phenomenology's metaphysical foundations, Ellmann employs horizontal techniques (the comma's perpetual deferral, the nominalizing refrain's provisional framing) that make available to the reader what can only be descriptive in philosophical prose. By refusing syntactic closure, Ellmann prevents the bracketing that would allow genocide to be separated from hamburgers, slavery from consumer brands, ecological destruction from medical debt. The formal refusal of the period serves critical phenomenology's goal of making visible how oppressive structures normalize some habits of perception, cognition, and comportment while pathologizing others (Guenther 2020).

Yet the novel's conclusion performs something crucial for critical phenomenology: the possibility of working within quasi-transcendental structures not only to diagnose them but to find points of human connection that gesture beyond them (or, as Guenther says, "unbuild" them from within). The novel's ending demonstrates what this within-ness might achieve:

> ..., the fact that she's being swell about everything, the fact that I hope all her rebelliousness hasn't been completely quelled by trauma, or by her new role as our savior, big responsibility, There's always tomorrow, sweet and salty, black-and-white movies, galoshes, the fact that we're going to let Gillian do the Indian Mud Run too, and in the meantime, just to cheer everybody up, we're going to see the runaway lioness at the zoo this weekend, the fact that Stacey seems to feel some kind of rapport with that woebegone creature, the fact that whether this is because she feels fierce and free, or caged and cowed, doesn't bear thinking about (Ellmann 2019: 998)

This passage arrives after nearly a thousand pages of horizontal delay. The narrator plans to take her daughter to see the lioness, after following the story of the animal in the local news (the fantasy element of the animal). The visit is not innocent: its object is an animal just recaptured, and its motive is partly the family's own cheer. But the visit is motivated by the narrator's attention to Stacey's need for connection with "that woebegone creature." The ambiguity of whether Stacey identifies with the lioness's fierceness or her captivity "doesn't bear thinking about" because what matters is the vertical movement of attention itself: the mother looking toward her daughter, the daughter looking toward the lioness, consciousness moving through structures of care that momentarily cut across the flattening syntax of late capitalist equivalence. More than that, the decision to do something together hints at the possibility of connection in spite of the structures creating their possibilities. The point is reminiscent of Arendtian natality: the capacity, grounded in the fact that each of us is born and so enters the world as a beginning, able to initiate action whose outcome is not determined by what precedes it (Arendt 1958: 177–78). Who knows what mother and daughter might do together; the fact that they are together makes possible a trajectory other than the one the story has so far determined.

It might be objected, and the objection follows from my own argument, that care cannot function here as an uncontaminated normative resource. If the comma denies every content an exemption from the quasi-transcendental constitution, then care enjoys no exemption either: the narrator's care is shaped by the ideology of intensive motherhood examined in Section IV, by the consumer logic of the family outing, by the zoo as an institution of capture. I do not appeal to care as a criterion that escapes contamination, and this paper offers no principle, standing outside the structures it describes, for distinguishing good care from bad. What the ending performs is more modest and, I think, more consistent with the argument: an orientation, an attention directed toward others, operating within contamination without being reducible to it. This is what Guenther's "unbuilding from within" amounts to in Ellmann's novel, and it is why the conclusion invokes natality rather than normativity. Their trip together, through a care, is a beginning made possible, not a secured standard. Importantly, I find this ending to be exemplary of the sixth sense of critical phenomenology in Guenther's articulation: community organizing as "the relation between theory, action, and reflection that is explicitly oriented towards resistance, resurgence, emancipation, liberation, or some other way of trying to get (a little more) free" (Guenther 2021: 17).

Phenomenology, for Guenther, is an important emancipatory tool because it can identify, in lived experience, those moments available to us. Guenther writes:

> The desire to restructure the world might sound naïve or utopian if we limit our revolutionary imagination to a sudden, instantaneous change on a planetary scale. But if we understand the meaning of world phenomenologically, as an open-ended context for meaningful experience with nested levels of intimacy and strangeness that sometimes overlap and sometimes conflict or crash against each other, then we must admit that the structure of the world is quite open to change – sometimes frighteningly so. (Guenther 2021: 18)

Literature here is not only an object for phenomenological analysis but also a phenomenal figuration whose formal articulation makes critical phenomenological analysis possible. The novel articulates an imagined experience; the reading, in turn, renders that articulation as phenomenology. On this division of labour, Ellmann's novel supplies a literary figuration of the quasi-transcendental, and the reading finds in its formal strategies an account of how care and connection function within structures that would deny their significance. The comma's thousand-page deferral culminates not just in a period but in a movement toward the next day, toward the possibility that consciousness, however compromised, can still orient itself through connection.

Let me close by stating what this examination has sought to contribute in each of the fields it touches. To scholarship on *Ducks, Newburyport*, it offers a formal account of the novel's syntax that neither reduces the comma to a stylistic curiosity nor inflates it into an unpunctuated "flow," and that specifies, against the general invocation of the Joycean, what is horizontal, paratactic,

and delaying about Ellmann's sentences in particular. To the use of Derridean concepts in reading literature, it offers a working example of distinguishing the literary performance of quasi-transcendental structure from its philosophical analysis, while insisting that the former genuinely discloses what the latter struggles to exhibit. To critical phenomenology, it suggests that literary form can furnish the field with articulations of situated consciousness finer-grained than its own descriptive prose – so long as the division of labor between figuration and analysis is kept in view, and the resources such reading recovers, care among them, are acknowledged to be as situated as everything the novel describes.

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Danijel Brenan

Zarez i kondicional: *Ducks*, *Newburyport* Lusi Elman i performans kvazitranscendentalnog

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad razmatra način na koji roman Lusi Elman *Ducks, Newburyport* formalno otelovljuje kvazitranscendentalno – uslove mogućnosti koji su istovremeno i uslovi nemogućnosti. Polazeći od Deridinog okretanja Džejmsu Džojsu, čije je dvosmisleno pisanje razotkrilo ono što je Huserlova težnja ka jednoznačnosti potiskivala, roman Lusi Elman čitam kao književnu figuraciju čija formalna artikulacija omogućava kritičku fenomenološku analizu. Analiza je usredsređena na dva najuočljivija postupka poetike ovog romana – neprestano odlaganje zatvaranja zareza i nominalizujući refren „činjenica da" – uz istovremeno razmatranje šireg kompleksa tehnika (nabrajanja, akumulacije i kontrapunktno postavljenih, vremenski omeđenih odeljaka koji prate lavicu) kroz koje tekst konfiguriše značenje. Tvrdim da ova sintaksa pokazuje nemogućnost klasične *epohe* za svest konstituisanu strukturama kasnog kapitalizma, bele supremacije i patrijarhata, istovremeno ostavljajući otvorenom mogućnost kritičke fenomenologije u smislu u Lise Genter: kao načina usmeravanja pažnje na to kako moć i istorija oblikuju proživljeno iskustva, kao i na razgrađivanje tih struktura iznutra.

Ključne reči: Lusi Elman, *Ducks, Newburyport*, Žak Derida, Edmund Huserl, kvazitranscendentalno, kritička fenomenologija, Džejms Džois, parataksa

II

STUDIES AND ARTICLES

STUDIJE I ČLANCI

UDK: 316.323:316.422
323.1:342
DOI https://doi.org/10.2298/FID2603541C
Original Scientific Article
Received 15.06.2026. Accepted 21.07.2026.

PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIETY
VOL. 37, NO. 3, 405–700

To cite text:
Crnko, Tamara. 2026. "Self-determination, Political Membership and Immigration Controls." *Philosophy and Society* 37 (3): 541–558.

Tamara Crnko

SELF-DETERMINATION, POLITICAL MEMBERSHIP AND IMMIGRATION CONTROLS

ABSTRACT
The collective right to self-determination is one of the core concepts in the political philosophy of immigration, used to justify the right of legitimate states to exclude potential immigrants. The right to exclude is seen as an essential aspect of control over membership composition, its character and future development, which are understood as essential aspects of communal self-determination. In this sense, the exercise of self-determination is viewed as largely incompatible with freedom to immigrate. This paper aims to challenge this view. It is claimed that, if self-determination is viewed as primarily serving the interest of a political community and its members to self-govern independently, control over migration is not essential for its exercise. The external dimension of self-determination entails a collective being able to choose policies and control its development without external coercion, while the internal component presupposes the existence of a political arrangement that allows some form of popular sovereignty or political participation of members of a political collective. If it can be shown that immigration is not incompatible with preservation of regimes of popular sovereignty, and if immigrants can be seen not as an external threat but as becoming a part of a political collective with mechanisms to accommodate them, then it is not clear that discretion over immigration is an essential aspect of the right to self-determination.

KEYWORDS
self-determination, immigration, self-government, popular sovereignty, membership control

Introduction[1]

One of the core issues in the political philosophy of immigration is the moral justifiability of the right to exclude immigrants from the territory and political

1 This paper is the result of the research project "Epistemic Challenges of Populism: The Impact of Language and Discourse on the Epistemic Foundations of Democracy", funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU – EIP – uniri-iz-25-134, and the project Ethics and Social Challenges at the Institute of Philosophy, reviewed by the

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membership of sovereign states. The collective right to self-determination is often used to justify a state's authority over its migration policies (Walzer 1983; Wellman 2008; Pevnick 2011; Miller 2016; Song 2018; Ferracioli 2022). This internationally recognized right to self-government is, furthermore, closely related to the idea that the exercise of political freedom and independence necessarily includes control over the composition of political membership, and therefore, immigration (Walzer 1983: 61; Wellman 2008; Song 2018: 69). Free exercise of self-determination is, therefore, in tension with more liberal immigration policies, or open borders, which is the position often motivated by global justice concerns (Carens 1987, 2013; Cole 2000; Oberman 2015) or protection of the human right to freedom of movement, which for a number of authors includes freedom to immigrate (Wellman and Cole 2011; Carens 2013, chap. 11; Oberman 2017).

Although freedom in migration is highly contested both as a way of achieving global justice (Niño Arnaiz 2022; Niederberger 2025), and as a human right (Miller 2017; Stilz 2019), there is a consensus that individuals generally have strong interests in being able to move and settle freely. To exclude a prospective immigrant thus entails a potential to harm their basic interests (Fine 2010; Oberman 2017). Therefore, to justify exclusion by claiming the right to self-determination, it needs to be shown that this right serves important collective and individual interests of citizens that free immigration potentially threatens. This analysis requires, therefore, identifying the main interests that the right to self-determination serves, and the extent to which the right to exclude immigrants is required to protect these interests. While the most prominent accounts that connect the right to exclude to self-determination invoke different interests like freedom of association (Wellman 2008), collective ownership over institutions (Pevnick 2011), or protection of national identity (Miller 2016), and the general interest to control the character and future development of political membership (Wellman & Cole 2011; Miller 2016), the standard reading of the right to self-determination understands it as protecting the right of a political collective to govern itself independently from unwarranted external intervention and coercion (Lægaard 2013; Stilz 2016).

This paper aims to challenge the view that the exercise of self-determination is necessarily in tension with the right to freedom in migration. While this incompatibility is often the result of seeing self-determination as entailing the right to control the composition and character of the membership, since this dimension of self-determination is neither standard for the right nor easily justified (Laegaard 2013; Crnko 2025), the focus of the paper will be on the standard interpretation of self-determination as internal self-government and

Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Croatia and financed through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021–2027 of the European Union – NextGeneration EU. The views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the official stance of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the European Commission can be held accountable for them.

non-intervention. Therefore, it will be shown that when self-determination is primarily conceived in terms of self-government, it does not require control over membership composition and is not necessarily in tension with freedom to immigrate.

This analysis builds on previous conceptual work in the political philosophy of immigration (Lægaard 2013; van der Vossen 2014; Stilz 2019) that aims to destabilize the connection between self-determination and the right to exclude, understood as a *general* pro tanto right of the state to prevent foreigners from entering and settling on the state's territory (Lægaard 2010). To contribute to these discussions on the role of self-determination in the philosophy of immigration, this paper focuses on the dynamic between the internal (i.e., self-government) and external (or non-intervention) dimensions of the right and membership control exercised as the right to exclude immigrants. This paper, however, is primarily concerned with the conceptual analysis of the right to self-determination, and its connection to the general right of the state to exclude prospective immigrants. In this sense, it does not prescribe any specific immigration policy, especially in non-ideal contexts, and it leaves open the possibility that the exercise of self-determination may, in some contexts, justify some limits on freedom to immigrate[2].

First, the right to self-determination is more closely inspected with a focus on the interests it serves, namely self-government and political freedom. Then, its relationship with migration is laid out with a focus on the tension between the right to freedom to immigrate and the right to control membership composition. In the third part, this tension is further explored by connecting migration controls with the external and internal dimensions of self-determination with the intention to show that self-government, as a central reading of self-determination, is not necessarily in tension with more liberal migration. Lastly, some implications for future work on self-determination and migration are offered.

Collective self-determination and political autonomy

As introduced, self-determination is standardly conceived as a *moral* claim of a political community to govern itself independently (Lægaard 2013; van der Vossen 2014; Stilz 2016; Song 2018: 53). It is a right recognized by international law, and it is codified in major human rights documents (e.g., Article

2 It is important to highlight the difference between understanding the right to exclude as a general and conditional right. State's having a general pro tanto right to exclude means that this right holds in all cases, in general, but is subject to being constrained and overridden by other normative principles (Lægaard 2013: 254). In this sense, it is different from conditional right to exclude, which holds in certain conditions and contexts, which is relevant in thinking about migration in non-ideal contexts or situations in which migration may impact institutional stability of the state. Proponents of the argument from self-determination generally claim that states have a moral right to exclude in the former, and not the latter, sense.

1 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1976)). It grants all peoples[3] the right to freely determine their political status and pursue their development. Historically, it is related to the creation of states and justification of the Westphalian state system, but also to challenges to existing territorial sovereignty by grounding claims for secession, decolonisation, and autonomy for minorities (Rodríguez-Santiago 2016; Macklem 2016; Stilz 2016). It is a widely studied concept, tied mostly to issues of humanitarian intervention, colonization, global justice, democracy, globalization, minority and indigenous rights (e.g., Wellman 2005; Miller 2007; Brock 2009; Altman and Wellman 2009; contributions in Tesón 2016a). Its connection to migration is, historically, often tied to racism, discrimination and imperialism (e.g., Menge 2023), while in contemporary philosophical discussions it relates to the idea of membership control, mostly within the constraints of the liberal-democratic framework (see Crnko 2025).

Standardly, however, self-government, or freedom of the collective to independently self-rule, is at the core of this right (Margalit and Raz 1990; Nine 2012; van der Vossen 2014, 2016; Stilz 2016; Song 2018). It is generally recognized as having two main dimensions (Angeli 2015: 101; Stilz 2016: 98, 2019; Song 2018: 54), one referring to the relationship with external collective agents (i.e., the external dimension) and the other pertaining to internal conditions of self-government (i.e., the internal dimension).

The external dimension, tightly connected to the notions of territorial sovereignty and non-intervention, refers to the political collective, usually represented by a state, being able to freely determine its political status without outside interference or coercion. Historically, this dimension generally referred to claims of particular groups for an independent state, or sovereignty over a particular territory. As a negative right against intervention (Lægaard 2013), it protects its holders from outside interference, mostly from other external collectives, associations or institutions.

The internal dimension, in turn, refers to the aspects of the rule, or the idea of popular sovereignty (Song 2018: 54). For a collective to be able to govern itself, a political order in which power is derived and authorized by the people must be present. The internal dimension, therefore, requires a political system (e.g., democracy or similar political arrangements, see Stilz 2019: 127-131) that allows participation in the political process and public accountability. This dimension, therefore, connects members of the group with political power and authority, relating closely to the idea of legitimacy, which requires that institutional structures that impact the lives of individuals are justified (Mandle 2006: 20-21; Song 2018: 54-55). It is, in this sense, interpreted as a positive claim right

3 Different collectives are recognized as bearers of the right to self-determination, e.g., nations, peoples, cultural minorities and indigenous groups or citizens of existing states. For the migration debate, it is primarily the latter which is taken into consideration (see Stilz 2019 for the discussion on pre-political and political agents of self-determination).

to self-government (Lægaard 2013), entailing the freedom of the members of the collective to participate in political decision-making.

These dimensions point towards the identification of interests that the right to self-determination serves. On the one hand, being a *collective* right (Altman and Wellman 2009; Moore 2015; Miller 2020a), it serves the interest of the *collective* to a degree of political freedom and self-rule. This dimension of the right points to what is wrong with acts like colonialism, annexation or intervention that interfere with the collective and its institutional structure (Altman and Wellman 2009: 40). On the other hand, it is the interest of individuals, as members of the collective, that self-determination ultimately serves. This interest can be identified as the ability to be, in the relevant sense, authors of and not just subjects to political institutions (Song 2018: 55; Stilz 2019: 93). In this sense, individuals have an interest to participate in the political process and creation of laws, which prevents alienation from the political and social conditions in which they live (Miller 2020a) and allows a degree of control over one's political environment (Nussbaum 2019). It is claimed that even though the individual impact on institutional structure, laws and collective projects is restricted, having the opportunity to participate and co-create these structures serves a fundamental interest to be (politically) autonomous (see Angeli 2015: 97; Moore 2015; Stilz 2019, 2022, compare Wellman and Altman 2009: 20; Pevnick 2011: 29), adding to the general well-being of individuals, stability of institutions and justice (see Stilz 2016: 113). The value of self-determination also connects to other dimensions like nationality (for overview, see Banai and Kollar 2021); however, the political freedom of collectives and individuals comprising them is recognized as primarily grounding this right (Stilz 2019: 94).

Self-determination, therefore, apart from serving collective interests to be free from external domination, serves important intrinsic and instrumental interests of individuals to be free from alienating institutional coercion. As such, it is a part of the human rights framework, protecting the claim to collective self-government, and political autonomy of individuals.

It is important to note that not all political collectives or groups are justified in exercising this right. In international law, it is a notoriously problematic issue (Ohlin 2016; Tesón 2016b). In political theory, claims for self-determination are generally tightly connected to the idea of legitimacy. Only states which are sufficiently just, or those that are compliant with the human rights framework (both for members and foreigners) and which allow internal self-government for their members, have a claim to self-rule without interference, and to exercise belonging rights, including the right to exclude immigrants (Stilz 2009; Wellman and Cole 2011: 28; Lægaard 2013; Stilz 2019, 89).

The right to self-determination and immigration

As canvassed above, self-determination may be considered a valuable principle protecting important collective and individual interests to a degree of political freedom and autonomy. Immigration, primarily understood as the movement

of persons across borders with the intention to permanently settle, is also, especially taking into consideration the poverty and inequality that often motivate it, considered to serve relevant human interests. For proponents of the right to international freedom of movement, the right to immigrate is claimed to protect essential well-being and freedom interests, including the exercise of personal autonomy in setting the course of one's life according to personal judgments, values and choices (see Carens 2013; Oberman 2017). Thus, it is important both intrinsically, as a valuable freedom in and of itself, and instrumentally, as a prerequisite for other freedoms.

While neither the right to self-determination nor the right to freedom of movement are considered to be unlimited, nor entailing completely closed or open borders respectively, they are often understood to be in tension, in which the exercise of one right curtails the exercise of the other. This, on the other hand, means that exercise of the right to exclude is limited when there are particular claims for admission (e.g., in cases of refugees or family reunification) (e.g., Pevnick 2011: 93–40; Moore 2015: 209; Miller 2016: 76–93; Song 2018: 113–131), and on the other, freedom in migration is limited by protection of institutional stability and security (e.g., Carens 2013; Oberman 2017: 33).

One of the main reasons for tensions between these rights is the interpretation of self-determination as requiring control over the membership composition, or control over the *self* of the political community. It is claimed that, to be self-determining, a political community needs to be able to determine its own character, and relatedly, its future development (Fine 2013; Lægaard 2013). This dimension of the right, or self-composition, is recognized across self-determination accounts (see, e.g., Crnko 2025). For nationalist accounts (Miller 2016), immigration is seen as affecting the national culture and identity (or national character of the self) relevant for the stability of political institutions. Institutionalist conceptions (Wellman 2011; Pevnick 2011; Angeli 2015; Song 2019) similarly stress how changes in the character of a community (including values, goals, aspirations, etc.) affect the direction in which a community develops in the future. Both control over the constitution and character of the self, and, relatedly, the way it develops in the future, are seen as key elements of self-determination.

Since there is a consensus in the liberal political theory of immigration that permanent settlers are to be awarded full membership and political status as a matter of justice (see Walzer 1983: 61; Wellman 2008: 131; Carens 2013: 45-61; Song 2019: 173-188; Stilz 2019: 197), immigrants are seen as potential new members of a political community. However, by bringing new cultural and political values, they affect the constitution, character and future development of the community. Without control over membership, which in the case of migration includes admission, integration and naturalization policies, members of the political *self* lack control over these dimensions that are understood to be essential aspects of self-determination (Walzer 1983: 62; Wellman 2008: 115; Wellman and Cole 2011: 40-41; Angeli 2015: 98; Miller 2016: 63; Song 2018: 69). To be self-determining, therefore, existing political members of the state

need to be able to define what the self is, and controlling immigration is an essential aspect of this control. Following this interpretation, it is evident how freedom to move and settle as one wishes would render membership control impossible, and thus the right to self-determination void.

Free immigration and self-government

To explore this tension further, the effect of this freedom to move and settle on both external and internal dimensions of self-determination, and their relation to political freedom and autonomy, is considered.

External dimension of self-determination

As previously indicated, the core understanding of the external dimension of self-determination refers to a claim for self-government without external interference. Acts like colonialism, military intervention or forcible annexation, which are cases of external coercion, are perceived as standard threats to the self-determination of political collectives and their freedom to determine their political status. Wellman (2008: 112) uses similar state-to-state, or state-to-supranational organizations (e.g., state associations with the European Union) dynamics to show that states should, as a matter of their self-determination, have a discretion over associations with other agents, including choice over how they wish to be governed in relation to these external agents. The intuitive power of these examples, where it is evident that the political freedom of the collective and its members is violated by external agents, is, however, used to derive a conclusion that political collectives should be able to reject associations with potential immigrants (Wellman 2016: 84).

Without going into the full analysis of the analogy on which Wellman builds his case (see Fine 2010), the relationship between a potential immigrant and a state cannot be easily compared to the cases in which other states or associations engage in forcible interference with a state (see van der Vossen 2014). Immigrants are individuals, who usually cannot have a comparable impact on state institutional structure, its members and their self-government, as decisions pertaining to association with other collective entities do. For example, while it is clear that colonialization or annexation severely limits the political freedom of the state and affects its political status, this is not so clear in the case of standard migration.

Regular immigrants, that is, generally have the intention to settle permanently on the territory of the state and eventually become members of the political collective (see Sager 2007: 73). In this sense, they do not seek to associate themselves with a collective or a state as an institutional entity, but rather they seek to become an integral part of the community (see van der Vossen 2014: 276). This integration is generally achieved by contributing to a state's institutions and *playing their part* in its political project (see Stilz 2016), minimally by willing participation in its social life, by respecting the law, working

and paying taxes. It is not clear that by becoming a member of the collective, an immigrant threatens self-rule as colonialism or military intervention would. State-to-state associations or forcible interactions often affect state institutional structure (e.g., by a takeover or imposition of limits), which affects the possibility of members to make independent decisions regarding their political status and future development of their community. In the case of migration, the political status, institutions and political freedom are not comparably affected, since migrants aim to become a part of the community and its institutional structure, and not engage with it either with the intention to take it over or to enter into association with it.

Therefore, it is not a change in the membership composition by immigration, but rather external coercion that is the main threat to the collective interest to self-rule. Immigration, similarly to regular population changes by procreation, entails adding new members to the community that aims to self-govern independently, and it does not constitute external coercion to this community.

However, it may be claimed that a homogeneous and large number of immigrants unwilling to become part of the collective would pose a threat to the external dimension of self-determination (Sager 2007: 73-74; Carens 2013: 273), if such immigration has become similar to cases of external collectives interfering with the state. This is, however, different from the case of regular immigration, which is often more paced and in which immigrants become a part of the community, through processes of integration and naturalization. Clearly, extreme cases, in which masses of immigrants in a short period of time seek to enter the state territory, would justify restrictions of freedom of movement to protect institutional stability and self-rule (Carens 2013: 276-279). In such cases, the exercise of self-determination would be imperilled, and the state would be justified to prevent admission of immigrants. Exercise of this right would, however, be conditional on the described situation, and not an instance of a general right to exclude, which is generally argued for.

Internal dimension and immigration

The internal dimension of self-determination, as introduced, entails securing institutional preconditions for popular sovereignty. In this sense, the analysis focuses on the connection between changes in membership and communal character and the conditions of the internal self-government. This matter can be explored both conceptually and empirically, and may be related to understanding the impact of changes in membership and character on autonomy and the effect of immigration on institutions that enable political participation.

Proponents of the argument for the right to exclude immigrants generally understand migration as impacting the character of the community and its future (Wellman and Cole 2011: 40, Miller 2021). Migration is understood to impact the national culture, traditional ways of life, economy, political values, social and civic life, and other aspects of society. It also brings demographic changes to society and requires that society adapts to accommodate

new members (Miller 2021). The extent to which immigration (i.e., membership change) leads to changes in the community character, and whether such changes have a positive or negative impact on society, is, however, an empirical matter. It has been argued that often the impact of immigrants is overemphasized (Sager 2007; Carens 2013: 285), and dependent on a number of factors like the absorption capacity of a society, immigration rates, differences between the values of immigrants and the community, efficiency of integration and naturalization policies and other social, cultural and political measures. Furthermore, the interpretation of the communal character and investment in communal development can be further analysed. While it is often taken that this character primarily includes the public culture of the society (see Sager 2007; Miller 2016), it also encompasses more general ways of life. Proponents of the argument, in this sense, seem to take it that there is a shared will of the people or communal character which directs future development, which can be challenged by the fact that citizens of contemporary states are often multicultural, non-homogeneous and polarized around a number of relevant issues including political values and ideas about the ways in which their communities should develop (see Sager 2020: 64-69). Many empirical issues regarding the change of the community character, and it being something discernible and unified, therefore, remain. However, the point which is stressed by proponents of the argument from self-determination is that changes, positive or not, and the ways a community develops, should be in the hands of the collective (Wellman and Cole 2011: 40; Miller 2016, 2021), and are important aspects of their self-government. In this sense, the point is not whether immigration in reality brings changes, but whether self-determination requires states to have control over character change and future development.

Van der Vossen (2014: 282), in the analogy with individuals, shows that not all aspects of one's character should be under control to preserve personal autonomy and self-determination. Personal *autonomy* is taken to require having the authorship over one's life and aligning one's agency with personal values and commitments (see Stilz 2019: 101; Miller 2021: 172). People change their character constantly and still remain autonomous. For an individual to remain autonomous, it is important that any changed values or traits of her character are subject to her standard rational and evaluative capacities, and not a result of coercion and manipulation (van der Vossen 2014). As an example, a very dedicated meat eater can radically change her views as a result of the outside influence by her vegetarian friend. However, unless her friend manipulated or coerced her into changing her views and eating habits, her autonomy is not restricted by this change in values. According to van der Vossen (2014), similar conditions hold for the political community, which is seen as self-governing if it can make choices about collective actions based on collective values, commitments and goals, without some other external force interfering[4]. While

4 It is important to note that the analogy between individual and state is not perfect. States, after all, are administrative entities, and they are not similar to individuals in

immigration may bring changes in values and commitments, for these changes to affect autonomous decision-making they need to occur by subverting standard processes by which members deliberate and decide. When these changes are introduced regularly, over time, mediated by institutions of society, and filtered through regular integration and naturalization policies, they do not seem to limit the possibility of autonomously acting based on the collective values (van der Vossen 2014: 283-284). It simply means that the collective gained new values or traits, and therefore changed some of its character. This process is, moreover, hardly tied only to migration, since societies and their cultures change through globalisation, technological advances and different media and cultural influences. It is clear that not all of these changes can (nor should) be under control to preserve self-determination. As long as the institutional ability to integrate, reassess or reject new inputs remains, collective autonomy does not seem restricted. As the person who radically changed her conception of the good life by gaining new insights and values can remain autonomous if this change did not occur by force, a community remains self-governing, even if its communal character changes, and as a result its future trajectory alters.

In this sense, it seems that regular changes that occur in the communal character and its future development, by gaining new values or aims which are standardly processed by the institutions of society, do not seriously restrict the interest of political members in political freedom or autonomy. It is still the same political community engaged in decision-making, even if the content of the policies and future development is changed to reflect changes in communal character. The ability to exercise internal self-government rather hinges on there being institutions which allow popular sovereignty.

This issue is often framed in terms of the effect that immigration has on democratic institutions and social justice (Miller 2016: 64-65; Song 2018: 67). It is, for example, claimed that changes which migrants bring to the public culture of the community lead to the decline of mutual trust, and subsequently to the destabilization of welfare and liberal democracy. Clearly, if it would be shown that changes in membership endanger political institutions which allow

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many aspects. Political communities are not agents in the same sense as individuals; unlike persons, they depend on institutional continuity, shared political practices, and historically developed forms of collective identity rather than psychological continuity. Regardless of the differences, analogies between individuals and collectives are often used in migration debates (e.g. Wellman & Cole 2011, Miller 2021, van der Vossen 2014). In this context, the comparison is used to highlight what are the conditions and restrictions on autonomous agency. The comparison is intended only to illuminate one specific aspect of self-determination: that neither individual nor collective autonomy requires preserving all existing values or characteristics unchanged over time. Rather, in both cases, autonomy depends on the capacity to incorporate change through the agent's own deliberative and decision-making processes rather than through coercion or manipulation. The analogy does not imply that individual and collective autonomy are identical phenomena or that the same autonomy-protecting rights follow in both cases; rather, it highlights a shared normative structure despite the different mechanisms through which autonomy is exercised.

popular sovereignty, and a degree of political freedom and autonomy for individuals, then there would be a case to show that important interests that self-determination protects are restricted by the exercise of freedom in immigration.

However, as explored in more detail elsewhere (Crnko 2025), the connection between migration and democratic backsliding is empirical, and its results are contextual and inconclusive (e.g., Nannestad et al 2014; Banting and Kymlicka, 2017; Holtug, 2021). Furthermore, as argued in Crnko (2025), even if it can empirically be shown that diversity and immigration negatively affect social trust and democracy, the right to exclude is not the only, nor always preferable, measure to protect institutional orders of popular sovereignty. States already possess mechanisms to foster solidarity and trust (Song 2018: 68), and to integrate immigrants into the political, social and cultural life of the community (Miller 2016), including support to institutions of political participation and social justice, political and media discourse regarding immigration, and support to civil society (e.g., Nannestad et al. 2014; Zelič 2020; Brock 2020). These policies are, moreover, directly in the hands of the collective, and they ultimately determine the conditions of the permanent settlement and membership. Therefore, it is not clear that the general right to exclude immigrants from admission to the territory, which normally frustrates important interests they have, can be grounded by the contextual and inconclusive impact of immigration on trust and democracy (see also Abizadeh 2002), especially when there are other internal policies and mechanisms that can be used to protect democratic institutions (Holtug 2021), and consequently the interests that self-determination serves.

However, it can be claimed that even if democracy is substituted for some other political arrangement as a result of new members bringing new ideas and values to the collective, if this change did not arise as a result of coercion, but by integrating new values through standard mechanisms of society and regular decision-making, it did not restrict internal self-determination. Rather, though unfortunate, it is the expression of it (Stilz 2019: 129). As long as there are mechanisms that allow members of the collective to revoke this institutional change or to express dissatisfaction, and as long as institutional change came about by reflecting the shared will of the collective, it does not restrict the political autonomy of individuals (Stilz 2016: 110-111). As long as conditions of popular sovereignty obtain, that is, political autonomy of members is not necessarily restricted even when political institutions and government change (see Stilz 2019: 128; see also Wenar 2016: 227-228).

Exercise of internal self-government, therefore, requires an institutional structure which reflects shared commitments and interests of the political membership, and not control over membership change and the character of the community. The general right to control migration is not in this sense required for protection of interests in political freedom, especially since there are alternative measures to have a degree of control over communal character. Merely claiming that members of a political community are strongly invested in the communal character and future (Wellman and Cole 2011; Miller

2016), does not immediately warrant exclusion (Blake 2020). Clearly, in cases in which institutions are changed by radical changes in values imposed by large groups of immigrants that current institutions cannot regularly process, internal self-government may be at risk, and these situations would justify a right to exclude. The right to exclude in this sense is, however, conditional on there being situations in which institutions are taken over (van der Vossen 2014: 284) or usurped by outsiders, which is more comparable to colonial annexation (Stilz 2019: 193), than regular immigration.

Clearly, one might object by indicating that some control over membership is essential for a community to govern itself. Self-determination, after all, requires that there is a *self* that self-governs. If there were no permanent members, it could hardly be continuous, or bounded or relatively stable, so that self-government can be achieved (Miller 2020, 2021). This is an important challenge for discussing migration and self-determination, including the ways in which the political self can meaningfully be determined and bounded (see Abizadeh 2008; Lepoutre 2016; Miller 2020b). However, it is not clear that securing self-government and continuity of self requires a general right to exclude. As highlighted by Stilz (2019: 133), in states, like in large institutions or associations, membership constantly changes, and continuity is preserved by institutional structures (i.e., statutes, documents, rules, etc.) in which new members are integrated. Control over the composition of membership is not essential for there being a continuous institutional self which self-governs. Furthermore, it seems that self-government requires that it is clear who is engaged in self-government at any given moment (Honohan 2010), and not control over admission of new members, either by birth or migration. This means that some mechanisms to specify membership are required (like citizenship or residential status, or something else entirely, e.g., Bauböck 2008), but not necessarily the right to exclude prospective immigrants (Crnko 2025).

Self-determination and membership change – some concluding remarks

This paper tried to offer some reasons to abandon the view that the right to self-determination and freedom in immigration are incompatible. When self-determination is understood as protecting the interests in political freedom and autonomy, its exercise requires political institutions being of a certain quality and freedom from external coercion, and not control over changes in membership composition, communal character, or future development.

On the one hand, individual immigrants cannot affect political collectives in the same way as other states or supranational institutions do. They generally aim to settle permanently in the host community and become a constitutive part of it, and it is not clear that becoming a part of the political self can, in standard and non-extreme situations, become similar to taking over the self, or restricting its freedom externally.

On the other hand, political autonomy of members requires an institutional structure that allows popular sovereignty and the negative effect of immigration on these mechanisms is not clear. The change of the *character* of the self, or what it looks like, and membership control connected to it, does not seem necessary to preserve that functioning, due to the mechanisms society has at its disposal to integrate new members, and the conceptual separateness of autonomy and control over one's character. Members of the political community can, that is, exercise their political autonomy even if the communal character is changed, as long as this change did not arise as a result of force, but through internally endorsed processes.

Moreover, political institutions being of a certain quality (i.e., compatible with popular sovereignty) is what self-government seems to require, and the negative effects of migration on those institutions are at best inconclusive and contextual, with a number of other policies at the disposal to the community apart from exclusion.

One such real-life example of the compatibility between freedom in immigration and self-government is the European Union. Nations that are members of the EU allow for free movement of citizens within the Union. This does not restrict the self-determination of member states within the parameters of Union membership. Member states, that is, seem to remain autonomous, and even preserve their distinctive national characteristics, in spite of more liberal immigration. This example is, however, limited, since freedom of movement is reserved only for members of the EU, while exclusionary policies are exercised on the outside. Nevertheless, apart from the conceptual analysis which testifies to potential compatibility between more freedom in immigration and self-government, even some real political examples, like the EU, support this idea. However, even if this paper aimed to show that self-government need not conceptually rely on membership control, it is clear that such a connection may obtain in real, non-ideal circumstances, where migratory movements, especially when forced by political instabilities and wars, may affect the democratic structures of host societies.

This analysis is, therefore, limited. Self-determination is a complex concept and a contested right, and many of its aspects remain unspecified (see Miller 2020a). Even if it can be *primarily* conceived as self-government, additional conceptual levels of this right may be recognized, including the right to control membership composition, or self-composition (see Laegaard 2013), on which the argument from self-determination seems to rely, even if it is not an internationally recognized dimension of self-government. Furthermore, as explained above, self-government may additionally be connected to having some control over the composition of the membership, minimally in the sense of retaining relative boundedness and stability of the self that is engaged in self-government (see Miller 2021). Immigration policies may, moreover, rightly be seen as policies self-determining collectives have a right to choose and exercise as an expression of their self-government.

All of these issues place freedom in immigration in a specific relationship with self-determination, and require additional conceptual (and empirical) work by migration scholars. On the one hand, the relationship with migration and the ways political membership is conceived may need to be further analysed, especially taking into consideration that a significant portion of migration is temporary, and not necessarily permanent. On the other hand, understanding migration policies, that affect the rights and interests both of members and foreigners, as part of the standard decision-making process of the community, may in turn take into consideration the way it relates to the overall global justice and human rights framework. Since immigration is especially relevant and highly polarized topic in our contemporary societies, its relationship with the idea of self-determination and territorial sovereignty of states that are facing increased mobility of individuals, who are among other things responding to global inequalities by migration, will remain an important research interest. With this paper, I hope to add a small contribution to this growing field of research.

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Tamara Crnko

Samoodređenje, političko članstvo i imigracione kontrole

Apstrakt

Kolektivno pravo na samoodređenje jedan je od temeljnih pojmova u političkoj filozofiji imigracije, koji se koristi za opravdavanje prava legitimnih država da kontroliraju imigraciju na teritorij zemlje. Pravo na isključenje imigranata smatra se ključnim aspektom kontrole nad sastavom članstva političke zajednice, njegovim karakterom i budućim razvojem, što se smatra bitnim elementima kolektivnog samoodređenja. U tom se smislu ostvarivanje samoodređenja uglavnom smatra nespojivim sa slobodom useljavanja. Ovaj rad nastoji problematizirati takvo shvaćanje. Ako se samoodređenje promatra prvenstveno kao ostvarivanje interesa političke zajednice i njezinih članova za neovisnim samoupravljanjem, kontrola nad migracijama nije nužna za njegovo ostvarivanje. Vanjska dimenzija samoodređenja podrazumijeva sposobnost političke zajednice da upravlja vlastitim razvojem bez neopravdane vanjske prisile, dok unutarnja dimenzija prava na samoodređenje pretpostavlja postojanje političkog uređenja koje omogućuje političko sudjelovanje članova političkog kolektiva u samoupravljanju političke zajednice. Ako se može pokazati da imigracija nije nespojiva s očuvanjem političkog uređenja koje omogućuje samoupravljanje, te ako se na imigrante može gledati ne kao na vanjsku prijetnju, nego kao na osobe koje postaju dijelom političkog kolektiva koji raspolaže mehanizmima za njihovu integraciju i uključivanje, tada nije jasno da je diskrecijsko odlučivanje o imigraciji nužan aspekt prava na samoodređenje.

Ključne riječi: samoodređenje, imigracija, samoupravljanje, narodna suverenost, kontrola nad članstvom

UDK: 111.852 Хајдегер М.
316.344.7
DOI https://doi.org/10.2298/FID2603559S
Original Scientific Article
Received 05.03.2026. Accepted 22.06.2026.

PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIETY
VOL. 37, NO. 3, 405–700

To cite text:
Stevanović, Vladimir, and Andrea Raičević. 2026. "Reassessment of Heidegger's Notion of Authenticity in Architectural Theory: Between Anxiety and Poetic Dwelling." *Philosophy and Society* 37 (3): 559–584.

Vladimir Stevanović, Andrea Raičević

REASSESSMENT OF HEIDEGGER'S NOTION OF AUTHENTICITY IN ARCHITECTURAL THEORY: BETWEEN ANXIETY AND POETIC DWELLING

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses reflections of Martin Heidegger's philosophy in architectural theory with an emphasis on the notion of authenticity, observed through the disparity of the concepts of anxiety and poetic dwelling. Architectural affirmers of Heidegger, from a phenomenological stance, advocate authentic dwelling as a poetic alternative to allegedly threatening alienation and homelessness in the anxious state of modernity. Conversely, critics of poststructuralist and neo-Marxist provenance find this reading to be a nostalgic regression into a premodern, romantic and mythical state of homely security, far beyond metropolitan contemporaneity. The dialogue's result thus reduces to opposing a domesticated dwelling condition and anxiety provoked by the invasion of an alien presence. In this polarized and superficial discourse of architectural theory, clarifying Heidegger's understanding of the concept of authenticity is necessary. Nevertheless, these considerations should not be restricted to authenticity alone, and they need to extend to other interconnected concepts: alienation, anxiety, dwelling and homelessness. It is additionally noted that Heidegger treated all these concepts differently in early and late phases. The deliberation leads to the intersection of different interpretations from architectural theory and philosophy regarding the mentioned concepts, derived through a comparative analysis of *Being and Time* from Heidegger's early period, and essays collected in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, representative of later thought. In the light of this reassessment, research is directed towards two notions that balance, if not unify, the seemingly contradictory thinking of early and late Heidegger. These are the notions of mortality and care that could clarify dilemmas occupying Heidegger's various architectural readers.

KEYWORDS

Martin Heidegger, authenticity, anxiety, dwelling, homelessness, alienation, mortality, care

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Introduction and Hypothesis

Authenticity, on its standard reading, signifies a state of belonging to self, the own, and the proper. On the contrary, a loss of self is a kind of alienation, where inauthenticity is a kind of existential disorientation and estrangement. Alienation in the most literal sense of the Latin term *alius* means other, always different, never reconciled with a supposed origin of nature. Not as different is Martin Heidegger's understanding of these concepts in *Being and Time*, where he uses the German term *Eigentlichkeit* formed from the adjective *Eigentlich*, which means real, actual or proper, and derives from *eigen,* meaning own (Heidegger 1996: 40). Authentic modes of existence are those in which *Dasein* – that mode of human being whose own Being is always an issue for itself – stands in a first-person relation to itself, in contrast to the second and third-person relations in which it stands to others. This is a distinction between *Dasein*'s direct, immediate and ontologically unique relation to itself in contrast to the mediated relations to others or to itself viewed from an alienated point of view, an estranged, merely observational attitude about oneself (Heidegger 1996: 166; Carman 2005: 292; 2006: 233). Heidegger's conception of authenticity refers to a particular way in which *Dasein* can relate to its own possibilities, enabling authentic selfhood to be wrested away from the average everydayness of social life. Yet, for the most part, *Dasein* exists in an alienated, inauthentic manner that is not its own; it neither thinks nor acts for itself, but conforms to the expectations of others and accepts the ready-made meanings and values of its world. Heidegger thus insists that the subject of everydayness is not the individual but *das Man* (the they), an impersonal one or anyone to which individuals collectively conform (Heidegger 1996: 107).

Alienation is also one of the key topics when it comes to the theorization of modernity. The city in the sense of a modern metropolis is being targeted simultaneously as a source and as the urban and architectural spatialization of the state of modernity. As defined by Marshall Berman, modernity is a condition of living imposed upon individuals by the socioeconomic process of modernization (Berman 1982). The experience of modernity has a profound impact on the ways of life and daily habits. On the one hand, modernity frees from the limitations imposed by traditional community. On the other hand, the triumph of reason imagined by Enlightenment philosophers culminates in economic compulsion, bureaucratic control and standardization of people's lives. The dark side of modernization gives rise to a pervasive sense of alienation, unease and despair associated with living in a disenchanted world of deadening and meaningless routine. Often, commentators of modernity criticized the labyrinthine spaces of the modern city as alienating, fragmentary, violent and disordered and identified the experience of anxiety as inherent to modernity. The generalization of anxiety became the leitmotif of theories of modern alienation and estrangement from Georg Simmel's *blasé individual* to Walter Benjamin's *flâneur*.

Anxious state that distinguished itself as an emblematic imprint of modernity, Heidegger explains in a specific way through the German word *Angst*. In

Being and Time he speaks of the uncanny or uncanniness (*Unheimlich* or *Unheimlichkeit*), as a feeling of not being at home that accompanies the experience of *Angst* (Heidegger 1996: 176). In anxiety, the tranquillized and familiar being at home of everyday life collapses. Anxiety thus reveals to us a certain homelessness – we are not at home in the world, the world faces us as uncanny. Heidegger arrives at his determination of *Angst* by exploiting the etymological meaning of not-homelike, unfamiliar and unhomely, and linking it to the term's German acceptations of strange, weird or sinister. Entering into the existential mode of not being at home in the world, *Dasein* is torn away from its everyday concerns and left with an indeterminate apprehensiveness and uneasiness; with a feeling of the uncanny.

Presented linguistic transformations of the metaphor of home direct us towards the next Heidegger's notion of our concern: dwelling. Like anxiety, dwelling gets generalized in relation to modernity, being even more specifically connected to architectural topics due to its ostensibly self-understandable architectural/building/homely aspect. All too often in architectural theory, dwelling is deployed to mean little more than a feeling of a being at home in the world. For instance, in Hilde Heynen's analysis, which is largely influenced by Berman's conception of modernity and Theodor Adorno's critical theory, modernity is described as a condition diametrically opposed to dwelling. Basing herself on Berman's standpoint, she assumes that the dynamics and the fleeting characteristics of modernity are incompatible with continuity, stability, and security traditionally linked with dwelling (Heynen 1992: 89). Heynen often quotes short remark from Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, written after the destruction in World War II, in which it is said that dwelling in the proper sense is now impossible and that the house is past (Heynen 1999: 17). While Berman was engaged in more general sociocultural aspects of modernity, Adorno wonders from an ethico-political point of view whether man can feel at home in a world where Auschwitz has been possible. In her synthesis, Heynen suggests that in the modern age homelessness has come to prevail as the almost universal condition for human being and at the same time presents Heidegger as the leading representative of this kind of criticism. Indeed, in the well-known analysis from "Building dwelling thinking" (*Bauen Wohnen Denken*; in the rest of the text we will use the abbreviation BDT), Heidegger is pointing to the tie between dwelling and remaining in peace within an inhabitation activity.

> The Old Saxon *wuon,* the Gothic *wunian,* like the old word *bauen* mean to remain, to stay in a place. But the Gothic *wunian* says more distinctly how this remaining is experienced. *Wunian* means: to be at peace, to be brought to peace, to remain in peace. The word for peace, *Friede,* means the free, *das Frye, and fry* means: preserved from harm and danger, preserved from something, safeguarded (Heidegger 1971:147).

According to these linguistic relationships, Heidegger shows that dwelling means to be set at peace in a protected place, which further implies connotations

of cherishing and caring for. Bearing in mind that *Wohnen* also derives from *Gewohnte*, which means what is known or habitual, Heidegger points out that genuine building, that is dwelling, "remains for man's everyday experience that which is from the outset habitual – we inhabit it" (Heidegger 1971: 145). But, in our precarious time, in the destitute time of the world's night, as Heidegger sometimes calls his own modern contemporaneity, this kind of inhabitation is under suspicion. Heynen assumes that dwelling, if understood in Heidegger's ways, is an antidote to modernity which is marked by a condition of homelessness or non-dwelling. Moreover, in her conclusion, there is an unbridgeable gulf between modernity and dwelling (Heynen 1999: 17).

Heynen's approach is actually a kind of recapitulating attitude, or even *étalon*, of how the notion of dwelling – observed through apparently self-evident architectural focus, but still colloquially oriented towards variations of the metaphor of home (being at home, homely) and its negation (non-dwelling, not being at home, unhomely, homelessness) – becomes receptive to simplistic interpretations. In that manner, the dominant branch of architectural theory forms a *pro-et-contra* relation between authentic (dwelling) and alienated (homelessness). Then, authentic – understood in a way of commonsense dogmatism as genuine, sincere and honest – would be equivalent to intimate, domestic, homely security within the four walls of the house. Following the same principle, alienated would imply foreign, strange and hostile invading of the familiar world. This approach is evident both in the proponents of Heidegger, as well as in his critics. Christian Norberg-Schulz, the most dedicated interpreter, developer and affirmer of Heidegger in architectural theory, places dwelling as an authentic alternative to the alleged threatening alienation and homelessness of modernity (Norberg-Schulz 1980). Likewise, critics equate homelessness (that is, in Heideggerian terms, at the same time the uncanny and anxiety) with alienation. For example, Anthony Vidler hails the uncanny as the dominant constituent of modern estrangement and alienation, while Neal Leach identifies alienation with "unfamiliar sense in a space where you don't feel at home" (Vidler 1992: ix, 1996: 575, 2000: 9; Leach, internet).

However, if we take a closer look at how Heidegger defines his concepts, we will first notice that the notion of dwelling means inevitably more than a rational, utilitarian act, such as the mere erection of shelters and interior spaces, and occupying rooms or buildings. Dwelling is conceived more broadly than a spatial expression of the metaphor of home in urban-metropolitan context forced by some architectural theorists, to which notions of modernity, homelessness, anxiety and alienation are opposed all at once.

Besides dwelling, anxiety is also associated with a narrow understanding that needs to be forthwith demystified. If observed through the prism of metropolitan subject matter, it is not uncommon to regard Heidegger's anxiety as "a radically modern interpretation of the significant mood of the first half of the 20th century" (Kurir 2022: 51). With that in mind, it is not unjustified to say that the meaningless routine brought by the process of socio-economic modernization in a certain way intensifies the phenomenon of *das Man* and

its absorption into the average majority. Yet, as Hubert Dreyfus notes (as if he had foreseen the appearance of these readings), it is misleading and superficial to interpret anxiety as the result of the constituents of modernity such as urbanization, repression, overwork, etc (Dreyfus 1995: 337). Namely, Heidegger does not understand anxiety as a mere psychological state that reflects the personality of the modern individual, but rather as an ontological phenomenon that reveals a deep truth about the nature of human beings.[1]

The mere elementary crossing of some of Heidegger's notions, treated in a way proposed by the majority of architectural theory, gives off an imbalance. Here the relation between anxiety and alienation is especially indicative. As we have shown, both Vidler and Leach equalize anxiety and alienation, presenting them *vis-à -vis* as a kind of negative emotional states. Meanwhile, in *Being and Time* it is the very anxiety that is the necessary tool to resist alienation. In anxiety, exactly when not being at home, one becomes open to the possibility of authentic existence, experiencing oneself as radically individualized, free, and responsible (Heidegger 1996: 176). On the other hand, alienation is a symptom of the lack of this self-understanding; the failure to recognize one's own Being in the world as one's own. Hence, anxiety is actually closer to authenticity than it is even with alienation. If so, homelessness – in terms of not at home (uncanny), which is a nuance of anxiety – cannot be randomly associated with alienation either.

Presented starting hypotheses point that the discourse of architectural theory produces two problems: 1) understanding of Heidegger's philosophical terms in a demotic way and; 2) theoretical positioning exclusively based on Heidegger's late thought. In this sense, this paper does not delve into the dilemma of what indeed is authentic – being at home as dwelling or not being at home as anxiety – but is rather concerned with the entire set of problems of the asymmetrical treatment of these notions in early and late Heidegger. Everything suggests that critical engagement with Heidegger's notion of authenticity, as well as with all other interconnected concepts such as dwelling, anxiety, alienation and homelessness, should not be restricted to Heidegger's later work, but also requires rethinking the aspects of his earlier work. Analysis of the observed Heidegger's concepts will first be conducted in relation to divided reception in architectural theory (Christian Norberg-Schulz as the affirmer and Hilde Heynen, Anthony Vidler, Neal Leach and others as the critics). Thereafter, we will compare early and late Heidegger's basic assumptions in order to approach their philosophical insights and considerations by

1 Something similar happens to alienation, where the philosophical and sociological senses of this notion are sometimes permutated. While sociologists stress the historical conditions and circumstances of alienation, Heidegger tends to see alienation as a condition endemic to existence itself. In social theory, there is alienation from the collective, while within Heidegger's philosophical discourse it is exactly the opposite: alienation of the self and siding with the collective in terms of *das Man*. Clearly, it is not the same to speak of individual estrangement from existential standpoint and class alienation from materialist perspective.

several recent Heidegger scholars (in the forefront Karsten Harries, Jeff Malpas and Julian Young, followed by Hubert Dreyfus, Michael Zimmerman and Andrew Benjamin). At the end, these interpretative models shall be used as a guideline for the derivation of conclusions, where we will in parallel follow a less represented, although not less significant, line of Heidegger's thought that focuses on notions of mortality and care. In these findings, we propose that mortality and care unify the thinking of early and late Heidegger and, as such, bear central significance in clarifying the dilemmas that occupy his various architectural readers.

Apology: Dwelling as Authentic Response to Alienation

The first level of analysis is the apology of authenticity in the phenomenological strand of architectural theory, representative of Heidegger's admirer Norberg-Schulz. In accordance with the well-known division between qualitative and quantitative, which is related to the phenomenological critique of positivism, Norberg-Schulz's starting point is the polarization of concrete phenomena (true existential content belonging to the everyday lifeworld) and abstract data (scientific substitutes for reality). Architecture dominated by data he recognizes in modernist universalizing style, especially in its socio-economic parameters, statistical-numerical values, and rationalist ideals of technology, function and standardization[2] (Norberg-Schulz 1980a). Norberg-Schulz was particularly devoted to Heidegger's later essays, which he used extensively to examine the concept of dwelling, in which he overlaps several key moments. Dwelling is represented as a return to authenticity from alienation, and defined through the notions of meaning and place, but in all those instances results in a guiding concept for figural architectural practice. Norberg-Schulz observes that in modern society true dwelling has been substituted by alienation and that at the moment of confusion and crisis Heidegger's thinking may help to arrive at an authentic understanding of architecture (Norberg-Schulz 1983: 67). For him, homelessness is not so much a fundamental condition of contemporary man, but rather an incidental loss that can be redressed by a better understanding of the relation between architecture and dwelling, in order to get back to authentic dwelling (Heynen 1999: 19).

Norberg-Schulz claims that the purpose of architecture is to enable dwelling, that is, to provide the existential foothold in space and time. According to him, dwelling allows us to make and experience our environment as meaningful. Like most architectural postmodernists, Norberg-Schulz finds meaning by recovering the figural dimension of architecture, in the sense of reactualizing

2 This puts Norberg-Schulz into the frame of the well-known standpoint of postmodern critique, according to which the symptoms of modernist architecture are monotony and reduction of living space to the coordinate system, while the wider consequences are the loss of individual identity and a sense of life in everyday activities, isolation from the natural environment, as well as the neglect of values of regional and local character (Stevanović 2014: 94).

historically and contextually conditioned forms expelled by modernism. This is about figures: common and recognizable archetypal elements that keep and explain our existence, and constitute a language of architecture (Norberg-Schulz 1985). He describes figurative architecture by using Heidegger's notion of poetry from the essay "The Origin of the Work of Art". To dwell authentically, for Heidegger, is to dwell poetically, since poetry is a manifestation of truth restored to its artistic dimension. Norberg-Schulz argued that architecture set-to-work the environment in a way that reveals its truth poetically. Since poetry speaks in images, the sole nature of images is to let something be seen. In that sense, architecture becomes a setting into work of truth, and a mean of making the world visible by using archetypal figures (Norberg-Schulz 1983: 64).

An important aspect of dwelling accentuated by Heidegger is remaining. It can be said that therefrom derives the concept of place in architectural theory. As a basic human characteristic, to remain or to stay means to be in a certain relation to a place. As Adam Sharr notices, individuals come to appreciate their place in the world and the circumstances they find themselves in. Such acts of appreciation were ways to feel at home, to reach accommodation with one's surroundings. Dwelling involves somehow being at one with the world: peaceful, contented, liberating (Sharr 2007: 41). Consequently, Norberg-Schulz considers that dwelling implies bonding to place and situating in a harmonious relation with the surrounding environment. Along those lines, he defines dwelling through orientation in space and identification with unique character of place. Those are the primary aspects of man's being in the world and the basis for man's sense of belonging to a specific place (Norberg-Schulz 1985).

Since the meaning of human existence is integrated with places, Norberg-Schultz was especially fixated on expressing the meaningful relationship of the building to its site in terms of visual patterns. He claims that the aim of architecture is to make a site become a place, that is, to uncover hidden meanings potentially present in a given place. In terms of a landscape, environment or surrounding, the place is not just an abstract site, but a totality consisting of material things. According to local circumstances, the place has a particular historical and contextual identity, which is embodied by means of concrete form and substance of space-defining elements, which again have characteristic archetypal figural quality in their formal articulation (Norberg-Schulz 1980a: 14; 1983: 64). Making architecture that gathers and visualizes the properties of the place is that moment when a dwelling is inscribed in place through building in a way that is authentic.

Analysis of Heidegger's affirmation in architectural theory reveals a problem of distorted understanding of his philosophy in the sense of its simplistic application in practice. As we have shown, authenticity is a kind of hallmark within architectural phenomenology, where the concept of architecture as dwelling has become a means of combatting the alienation of modern society and resisting the homogenising placelessness of modernist architecture. This stance may be justifiable given that phenomenology is usually seen as the way to recuperate the fullness of authentic experience and save humanity from the

crisis of modernity by offering resistance to modern technological and consumerist imperatives. As pointed out by Jorge Otero-Pailos, the supposedly fragmented, distracted, technologically mediated, and schizophrenic experience of modern subjects requires the phenomenological search for stable limits (Otero-Pailos 2010: 257). It is, however, questionable whether the reading of Heidegger justifiably leads architectural phenomenologists to believe that there are authentic aspects to dwelling that can in turn be reflected in authentic approaches to the design of architectural space.[3]

Norberg-Schulz's attempt of phenomenological reading of architecture can, in that sense, be regarded as the outcome of a broader process of transdisciplinary synthesis of architectural theory and the series of theorizations within philosophy, social sciences, humanities, art theory, etc. The final consequence of this synthesis is that various theoretical approaches, initially conceived as methods of analysis, observation and interpretation, in architectural discourse are becoming susceptible to superficial reading, arbitrary translation and instrumentalization, which reduces their analytic potential to the formulations of production or promotion of architecture (design strategy, design process, style categorizations). It is the process of translating theory into architectural practice, which has been a topic in the academic community for a long time now (Wigley 1998; Stevanović 2013; Mitrović 2022). This filter did not circumvent phenomenology either, making the so-called phenomenology of architecture result in a certain distance from the philosophical purpose of phenomenology (Haddad 2010; Bedford 2018).

Critique: Dwelling as Nostalgic Jargon of Authenticity

Despite the fact that *Being and Time* rejected all essentialist notions of human nature within the Western tradition of thought, Heidegger's critics consider that his later account of dwelling takes little, if any, account of modern historical conditions. This is clearly indicated in neo-Marxist architectural theorists who follow up Adorno's criticism, especially in his *Jargon of Authenticity*. For example, Heynen writes that Heidegger disregards the question of concrete dwelling for concrete people and ignores the banal but very real question of actual housing needs caused by social conditions (Heynen, 1999: 221). Jeremy Till also advocates the aforementioned thesis about the exclusion of social reality, summarizing that authenticity in architectural theory is often reflected in

3 Although Heidegger begins BDT by warning the reader that his reflections have nothing to say about the practicalities of building and architectural design, this has not prevented commentators from drawing out such a connection at great length. Indeed, the essay does have a special resonance for architects. One might think, given his frequent references to peasant huts and forest paths, that Heideggerian authentic architecture would consist of idyllic country landscapes, log cabins, ski huts and rustic peasant decors. The main problem within the architectural comprehension of building and dwelling is: which comes first? Does one need an authentic dwelling attitude in order to build properly, or a proper building attitude (style) in order to dwell authentically?

the retreat from everyday[4] living into idealized notions of dwelling (Till 2009: 129). A similar approach is evident in poststructuralist architectural theorists who build on Jean Francois Lyotard's critique of Heidegger. In *Domus and Megalopolis*, Lyotard argues against the notion of dwelling, which he presents through the term *domus* as a mythic concept (Lyotard 1997). He is contrasting two models of existence, two ideals of living: the traditional *domus* (the phenomenon of home) and our present condition, that of the alienated model of city-life. Lyotard's position becomes receptive for architectural theory, where it becomes reduced to the oppositions of rural provincialism and urban cosmopolitanism, past and contemporary, traditional and progressive, and so on (Guo 2006).

The target of this kind of criticism is Heidegger's argument, often used by Norberg-Schulz: a properly authentic being in the world is one rooted in place, thus a building should be on and of the soil, of the location on which it is built. This evocation of the soil, this call for a situated architecture, can be further read as an evocation of the homeland (*Heimat*). As Leach notices, quoting Heidegger's brief note he found in Michael Zimmerman, *Heimat* is not in the cities but in the countryside where one is most in touch with nature and tradition (Leach 1998: 33; Zimmerman 1990: 71). Leach appears to assume, presumably on the basis of Heidegger's tendency to look to rural examples, that the concept of dwelling must indeed be tied to a rural paradigm that can have no relevance to the urban. As the main example of this rootedness, Heidegger chooses a farmhouse in the Blackforest, enabling critics to disavow his pining for a more authentic understanding of architecture as a romantic approach. The point of these critiques is that dwelling, as the central notion of their considerations, takes on connotations that are further interpreted in a negative light. While Leach presented dwelling in terms of soil, *Heimat* and rootedness, Heynen does the same by associating dwelling with tradition, security and harmony, which is also the case with Sharr, when speaking of romantic provincialism (Leach 1998; Heynen 1999; Sharr 2006: 72).

More than clearly, those considerations bring us again to our introductory opposition between dwelling (now flavoured with *domus* and *Heimat*) and alienation (simply in terms of urban living conditions). To that effect, for Vidler dwelling represents an embodiment of nostalgia for the true, natal home that emerges in the face of the massive uprooting of modernity (Vidler 1992: 7). This rootlessness, as underscored by critics, is the social form that prevails in the metropolis, which can be condensed in one Massimo Cacciari's observation

4 It is quite noticeable that the meaning of everydayness is not the same for Heidegger, for his affirmers, or for his critics. In Heidegger, everydayness reflects, in not-so-positive manner, connectivity with the inauthentic they, i.e., *das Man*. On the contrary, Heidegger's apologists like Norberg-Schultz, use the term everyday to glorify phenomenological *Lebenswelt* in terms of an approximation to authentic everyday lifeworld, thereby opposing scientific and social abstractions. Finally, for Heidegger's critics, the everyday world is precisely this kind of social life composed of concrete needs and socio-economic conditions, which phenomenologists neglect.

suggesting that to deny the metropolitan situation means a backward attitude that believes in the conservative nostalgia for a better, more natural human life (Cacciari 1993: xiv). Viewed so, dwelling belongs irrevocably to the past, and non-dwelling is the essential characteristic of life in the metropolis, where modern man is called to "an adventurous existence of journeying and migrations" (Heynen 1999: 141).

Analysis of the critique of the concept of dwelling in architectural theory reveals an aporia related to the usual *ad hominem* commentary about Heidegger as the representative of Nazist values. In the first instance, Heidegger's notion of dwelling is anathemized as romantic and nostalgic for being associated with a pre-modern life that guarantees connectedness and meaningfulness. Furthermore, Heidegger's preoccupation with ideas of place, soil, *Heimat*, rootedness and belonging, his apparent preference for the world of peasant and farmer, and his frequent appeal to the notion of home, have all been seen as tied to a conservative and even reactionary politics.[5] In that constellation, dwelling has taken on a connotation of a deterministic concept that is necessarily exclusionary and even violent. The said aporia can be observed as an outcome of selective attentiveness to Heidegger's public appearances (for example, Rectoral Address from 1933) rather than any of his later writings in which the concept of dwelling was actually postulated. As Jeff Malpas perceives, it is a strategy that discredits ideas from Heidegger's later thinking on the basis of the political engagement apparently present in the earlier (Malpas 2006: 20).

In addition to this, much of the interpretations from architectural theory have been determined by the prior assumptions of Heidegger's main critics, first of all Lyotard and Adorno. Therefore, owing to the secondhand readings without checking what Heidegger actually wanted to say, we got a simple repetition of a standard and quite general characterization that appears in his main critics. It is evident that this approach is driven more by Adorno's and Lyotard's preoccupations than by any close engagement with Heidegger's texts as such (Malpas 2021: 59). While all these critical remarks expose what could be deemed as areas of limitation within Heidegger's thinking, they fail to encompass the scope and complexity of his discourse on the notion of dwelling and home in general. At the end, it must be stressed that a great deal of the critique of Heidegger in architectural theory has gone through the critique of Norberg-Schulz (Malpas 2014: 15). Where Norberg-Schulz spoke about orientation and identification in the sense of belonging to a specific place, critics instantly saw all aforementioned negative aspects. In that way, Heidegger's effort in its entirety becomes reduced to the talk about Norberg-Schulz's interpretations of Heidegger and the disavowal of these interpretations. However, critics seem to miss a far more important thing – to conceive to what extent

5 As Adam Sharr notices, while the romanticizing of country life is perceived in many cultures as the obscure and indulgent preserve of dreamers, the path of German romantic provincialism remains far more difficult. *Heimat*, region, nation, and language have here been distinctively aligned. Nazism was larded with invocations which can be linked to the ideology such as of blood and soil (*Blut und Boden*) (Sharr 2006: 6).

theorizations of this Norwegian phenomenologist deviate from the original Heidegger's thought. This, nonetheless, is a topic in its own right which requires special consideration that goes beyond the framework of this paper.

Cross-Section through Early and Late Heidegger

Presented supportive and dismissive opinions became mainstream in architectural theory, where both sides go astray to extremes in something that Heidegger never actually argued in his philosophical writings: whether in terms of building authentic architecture or explicitly siding with Nazi values. Generally, it often remains blurred whether this concerns authenticity in terms of authentic life, authentic world, authentic building, or authentic nation. What is symptomatic is that the majority of architectural theorists were immersed in the philosophy of the late Heidegger and his concept of authentic dwelling, and at the same time largely ignorant of the position of the earlier Heidegger. Given that, for them somehow under the radar remained the key question posed by Karsten Harries: Had Heidegger's *Being and Time* not placed authenticity in opposition to being at home in the world (Harries 1998: 158)? In a subtle endnote, Harries reminds us of Heidegger's insistence on the essential homelessness of human being.

> To be sure, in *Being and Time* Heidegger, very much in the spirit of his place and time, makes homelessness constitutive of the human condition. But soon he was forced to recognize the one-sideness of such an understanding. Although essentially homeless, we yet dream of home. (...) Heidegger had pointed out that first of all and most of the time we feel at home in the world. But *Being and Time* links authentic existence to a recognition of our essential homelessness in the world. Any thoughtful appropriation of Heidegger needs to confront this apparent tension in his thought (Harries 1998: 381).

In *Being and Time*, *Dasein* is essentially uncanny; in other words: not of the home. Here, not dwelling but precisely homelessness is taken as primary. As is known, the prevailing tendency in Heidegger studies is to treat his early and later philosophy as two detached periods of thought, taking as "the turn" (*Kehre*) the one that occurred in the 1930s. One of the main features of that turn is Heidegger's attitude towards home and towards the dwelling/homelessness dynamics in general. In line with that, as Julian Young unambiguously puts it: the transformation of early into late Heidegger is the transformation of the human being from one who is homeless into one who dwells (Young 2000: 193). This difference will be the key moment we will expand on in the continuation of this paper, as well as the backbone of our comparative analysis. Even though the mentioned difference is evident, in accordance with the hypotheses presented in the introduction, we will simultaneously follow the statuses of the notions of mortality and care which, as we will show, maintain a significant position in both early and late Heidegger, and which, as such, allow for a better understanding of the problem exposed herein.

Anxiety and Homelessness: Harbingers of Authentic Possibilities

According to *Being and Time*, homelessness (*Unheimlichkeit*) and anxiety (*Angst*) are structural features of human existence that disclose a deep truth about the human being in its relationship to the world. Heidegger assigns the concept of anxiety a major role in the analysis of *Dasein*, where it is linked to the possibility for authentic existence. The conception of authenticity proposed by Heidegger is highly individualistic, as it suggests that one must extricate oneself from alienating social conventions and seize hold of life's possibilities on one's own, through a solitary confrontation with anxiety. In anxiety, the everyday world withdraws, and *Dasein* is left to confront itself. Therefore, authenticity is a manner of taking hold of one's existence in terms of possibilities consciously chosen rather than facts passively accepted. Anxiety confirms that the human being lives in a mode of deep-seated existential concern for the self, and not solely as a knowing subject or a pleasure-seeking animal. This concernful preoccupation with itself reveals that *Dasein*'s most basic manner of Being is care (*Sorge*) (Heidegger 1996: 178).

However, this is not just about the tension between one's particularity and the imposition of social norms that are uncritically accepted, but it is also a question of a broader understanding of our position in time. Authentic existence is occasioned by an anxious awareness of one's true nature as a being of possibility, as these bring about a lucid attitude toward one's historical situation and finally toward one's own time limit, which is death. From here it is clear that the most unsettling experience of anxiety is connected to the possibility that is closest to myself: the possibility of my own death. This uniquely human awareness of death that is crucial to the emergence of authenticity Heidegger calls being towards death (Heidegger 1996: 219). The project of authenticity begins when *Dasein* is displaced from the inauthentic, everyday mode of existence in which one loses sight of one's freedom as a finite individual. Authenticity is thus felt as a shock to everyday existence where one is comfortable with an average understanding of things and human possibilities. By confronting death and accepting the finitude of one's Being, *Dasein* receives a sense of freedom and takes responsibility for shaping itself according to its own choices, entering into authentic existence. Heidegger linked authenticity to anticipatory, i.e., forerunning resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*) in the face of one's finitude (Heidegger 1996: 247). To be resolute is to remain sensitive to the unique demands of the concrete situation, as opposed to subsuming it under generic rules, thus reducing it to a mere general state of affairs. Resoluteness is functioning as internal resistance to the obfuscating tendencies of preconceived attitudes, which constantly turn *Dasein* away from an explicit, problematic attention to its own temporality and finite particularity. Again, resoluteness is not a stable, self-sufficient mode of existence, but – as Taylor Carman puts it – a perpetual struggle against the reifying forces and continual exposure to the instability and vulnerability of *Dasein's* world and identity (Carman 2000: 23-24). At some point, this evokes a Sartrean idea of anxiety

as a recognition of the constantly renewed obligation to remake the Self (Sartre 1957: 35). Forerunning into death, then, means being ready, willing, and able to embrace a particular and inherently fragile set of possibilities (Carman 2006: 234).

Heidegger elaborated anxiety as an authentic, privileged and revealing – but at the same time the uncanny – experience of our essential mortality. Together with anxiety, the uncanny is certainly *par excellence* manifestation of being toward death. At the moment in which anxiety swells, *Dasein* no longer feels at home within the comfort of its inauthentic being in the world. In the mode of the not-at-home, *Dasein* is left hanging as a homeless being, forced before the nothingness of existence (Magrini 2006: 79). Anxiety in the face of death reveals the truth about mortal finitude and discloses to us the banality or absurdity of life. Experienced in anxiety, uncanniness exposes to *Dasein* the fact that the meaningful world – composed of common meanings that are exactly opposite to banal and absurd – enabling of organizing the everydayness, is not a home anymore. Homelessness thus remains an ever-present possibility for human experience; the authentic experience of apprehending oneself as lacking an internal or external cause.

Despite this promising side of anxiety and homelessness, which hints to the truth of *Dasein*, we tend to avoid this mood because of its unpleasantness. Hence, there is a constant motivation to conceal that unwelcome truth and to back into reaffirmation of everyday life. Heidegger describes the refusal of anxiety as a kind of flight, where *Dasein* flees from its anxiety – which is its proper dying – with the distractions of quotidian busyness (Heidegger 1996: 172). *Dasein*'s absorption in and fascination with the world and its own average everydayness is a direct product of the temptation to flee from its own nullity, i.e., to disown its mortal existence[6] (Carman 2000: 14). In that constellation, *das Man* is the foundation of inauthentic existence. By disburdening *Dasein* of its freedom, responsibility, and finitude, it ensures that the individual exists in alienation from its genuine human possibilities. According to Dreyfus, human beings continue to plunge into trying to make themselves at home, involved in conformist activities in which they seek to give their lives some stable meaning[7]

6 The uncanny feeling of anxiety can both motivate falling into inauthenticity - a cover-up of *Dasein*'s true structure – and undermine this cover-up, thus making authenticity possible (Dreyfus 1995: 313). In other words, one can either accept mortal existence (becoming authentic) or otherwise flee into distractions (becoming inauthentic).

7 The problem of meaning, as posed by Dreyfus, is especially significant for the discourse of architectural theory and therefore requires some additional explanation. It is about the following: Heidegger's account of authenticity has little in common with the ideal of wholeness, completion, or unified subjecthood, which can be recognized in Norberg-Schultz's architectural aspirations towards a meaningful world consisting of orientation and belonging. On the contrary, *Dasein* cannot coherently aspire to any kind of complete or total understanding of itself in its being (Carman 2005:288). Nevertheless, it still doesn't follow that the world is revealed as lacking of meaning. We always already encounter ourselves in a meaningful world. Anxiety shows us, however, that the world need not have the meaning that it does.

(Dreyfus 1995: 37). In the public world, which is presented by Heidegger as a seductive haven of flight, far from feeling despairing or homeless, inauthentic *Dasein* is fully at home with things in tranquilized familiarity (Heidegger 1996: 189). Therefore, home becomes a place to escape to; a place where *Dasein* covers up its uncanniness and calms anxiety.

Poetic Dwelling: Authentic Building

In the previous chapter, we have shown that the uncanny existential mode of the not-at-home for early Heidegger represents the most fundamental way of existence. Radical rootlessness that everyone feels fundamentally uncanny senses that human beings can never be at home in the world. However, in contrast to his early phase, Heidegger's later conception of human being as a dwelling within the fourfold presupposes that primordial dwelling is being at home in the world. In addition to the trajectory that directs dwelling towards home, crucial is the late Heidegger's connection of dwelling with Being. As Andrew Benjamin confirms, what has been suggested at the very opening of BDT is that dwelling and building demand to be thought in terms of the propriety of the question of Being (Benjamin 2000: 221). In BDT, Heidegger considered the etymological derivation of the old German word for building (*Buan*), which originally meant to dwell. *Buan* is intimately related to the verb *to be* (*Ich bin* or *I am*). In that way, *buan* refers not only to building and dwelling but also to Being. Ultimately, building is inherently related to dwelling, and both are connected to Being. At this point we come to the explanation of authenticity. Late Heidegger interpreted authentic dwelling as living in a world unified and gathered together by the fourfold; his well-known quadruple thought structure consisting of earth and sky, gods and mortals. The fourfold can be understood as later Heidegger's account of world (Heidegger 1971: 197). Accordingly, the fourfold is the basic condition of existence in which humans experience things; also the condition in which people experience buildings. Heidegger further develops an analogy between authentic dwelling, the fourfold and poetry. His engagement with the XIX century German poet Friedrich Hölderlin is the main source for the essay "Poetically Man Dwells", where he refines the theme of authentic dwelling by linking it with the poetic. In the line that Heidegger cites from Hölderlin, human beings dwell poetically, which means always to dwell in proper measure.

> Man does not dwell in that he merely establishes his stay on the earth beneath the sky, by raising growing things and simultaneously raising buildings. Man is capable of such building only if he already builds in the sense of the poetic taking of measure. Authentic building occurs so far as there are poets, such poets as take the measure for architecture, the structure of dwelling (Heidegger 1971: 225).

This proper measure is not a measure given in mere calculation, but rather in relation to that which determines human being, to which it is disclosed as

what it is[8] (Malpas 2006: 276). With the fourfold, Heidegger's aim is to emphasize the holistic sense of dwelling by pointing out that an appropriate experience of situatedness in the world requires an experience of limit, being conditioned by that which one cannot regulate and manipulate. That limit is, of course, our mortality. Poetry is adept at thinking the boundaries and existential situation of the human being on the earth as a finite, placed being. Here comes to the fore the continuity of Heidegger's thought on death, which offers a deeper explanation of the relationship between poetry and place: our place, where we dwell, is finiteness – our mortality.

Another aspect accentuated by late Heidegger within the concept of dwelling – along with mortality – is care, which is arrived at through the notion of remaining. As previously explained, the remaining issue in architectural theory was useful for directing dwelling towards place. But, in his etymological transformations, Heidegger comes to the point that remaining also means to be brought to peace, which further means to cherish and protect, to spare and preserve. This variant of remaining's meaning was seemingly more important to philosophers than to architectural theorists. In BDT, Heidegger underlines that the fundamental character of dwelling is in this preserving and safeguarding from harm and danger, which in the final instance means to look after, to take under our care. Distinctly, what we take under our care must be kept safe (Heidegger 1971: 149).

Besides the presented varieties in the interpretation of authenticity in its relation to the anxiety/dwelling complex, this moment opens, or even simply imposes, the possibility of extending the analysis *via* introducing Heidegger's understanding of the notions of mortality and care. In fact, it was not uncommon for these two notions to be compared in terms of early and late Heidegger's thinking, whether in seeking continuity or accentuating the differences. Firstly, what one can see is that in late Heidegger's terminology, authentic being in the world is called a poetic dwelling. *Dasein*, as a designation of authenticity, is a term that is less common in his later works, where he tends to refer to mortals instead. Heidegger thus replaced the earlier analysis of authentic being towards death with his analysis of authentic dwelling as staying with the fourfold. The question of care in these alterations has been carefully studied by Travis Anderson.

> In BDT Heidegger recharacterizes dwelling, after Hölderlin, as the most basic and habitual character of human being on the earth. In *Being and Time*, we recall, this basic character was attributed not to dwelling but to being in the world as care. (...) Of course, dwelling entails care in some sense, perhaps even in the sense that Heidegger articulates in *Being and Time*. (...) This reversal is indicated by his shift from thinking the truth of building as a practical instance

8 In the context of well-known Heideggerian *techne*/*poiesis* dynamics, poetry could play a role in resisting the transition to a technological world: overcoming technology in terms of learning to hear a different language than that spoken by the technological world.

> of project-driven care for a resolutely death bound *Dasein*, to a resolute yielding of poetic existence to the collaborative gathering power of being at its most elemental (Anderson 2011: 77-78).

In spite of the changed terminology, mortals hold much of Heidegger's earlier *Dasein*, in that mortals' existence is centred around the concernful temporality of the care structure. The dwelling of mortals is the action that opens the understanding of temporality in the fourfold, where dwelling is the attentive activity of engagement in which mortals take care of things. As Malpas summarized this continuity of Heidegger's thought, dwelling is taken to involve a sense of looking after or taking care that presages discussion of care (*Sorge*) in *Being and Time* as determinative of the structure of being in the world (Malpas 2006: 75).

Accepting Homelessness: Questioning Being

If the notion of dwelling in late Heidegger is connected with the notions of being at home, authentic being in the world, poetic measuring, mortality and care, does that mean that homelessness is simply everything opposite of that? To answer this question, we will focus on Heidegger's essay "The Letter on Humanism", from where the central argument of BDT is transposed. Here Heidegger reveals that homelessness consists in the abandonment of beings by Being. It was the forgetting of the question of Being that animated humanity's homelessness. Commenting on his own reading of Hölderlin, in which home and the return home, and homeland are central and recurrent themes, Heidegger developed the idea that the reversal of this forgetfulness is a matter of homecoming (Malpas 2006: 308). Thus, if homelessness is the symptom of the oblivion of Being, to come home means to dwell, to be at home with Being as such.

> In the lecture on Hölderlin's elegy "Homecoming" (1943), this nearness of Being is thought on the basis of *Being and Time;* it is perceived as spoken from the minstrel's poem; from the experience of the oblivion of Being, it is called the homeland. The word is thought here in an essential sense, not patriotically or nationalistically, but in terms of the history of Being. The essence of the homeland, however, is also mentioned with the intention of thinking the homelessness of contemporary human beings from the essence of Being's history (Heidegger, 2008: 241).

This citation is important because it distances Heidegger from the common Nazist interpretation developed in one part of architectural theory. It is clear that home of which Hölderlin had spoken was not to be conceived as the geographical place in which the Germans live. The homecoming which Heidegger speaks of is a return to the nearness of Being. To come home means then to come home to the question of Being and to face that question as a question. But in BDT we will see that homecoming is something that is undertaken rather than completed, which can be recognized in one of the central theses of this essay.

> The real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell. What if man's homelessness consisted in this, that man still does not even think of the real plight of dwelling as the plight? Yet as soon as man gives thought to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer. Rightly considered and well kept in mind, it is the sole summons that calls mortals into their dwelling (Heidegger 1971: 159).

Except that it is the only spot in BDT where Heidegger mentions homelessness, revealing the promising side of it, this quote demystifies another architectural prejudice. It is about the belief that dwelling in a sense of homecoming is returning to what is certain and stable, such as some fixed spot on earth (Malpas 2006: 310-311). Contrary to that, the question of dwelling is never a question ever settled or finally resolved. To dwell is to remain in a state in which what it is to dwell is a question constantly put anew. Here we recognize a kind of *eternal return* moment, in the context of the already mentioned Sartrean idea of anxiety as the constantly renewed obligation to remake the Self. As Heidegger presents matters, dwelling is not a matter of closed-off containment within a secure and self-sufficient domain, but an engagement in the world in its complexity and multiplicity (Malpas 2021: 67).

We can deliberate on this further through *Being and Time* and especially through the aspect of *Unheimlichkeit*. Heidegger's homecoming then is not a turn back to what is safe and familiar, but to that which is uncanny, inexplicable, wondrous (Malpas 2006: 311). Of course, it does not mean that the relationship between dwelling and care, established through the aspects of remaining and safety, is abolished. There is only one nuance to that idea: dwelling is not just a comfortable and harmonic care-fying activity, but taking care also implies an uncanny moment. Accordingly, if we look back to "The Letter on Humanism", we will be able to identify perhaps the greatest level of tension between the notions of dwelling and homelessness. As Malpas notices, the homeland that is invoked here is exactly that "uncanny district in which the essence of Being comes to presence" (Malpas 2012: 195). Considerations along a similar line can be found in Zimmerman and Harries, as well. According to Zimmerman, we are not at home because we no longer understand who we are. When we are able to recall who we really are, we are home again (Zimmerman 1985: 254). Comprehensible, a response to the question of who we are is: we are homeless. As Harries notes, "we cannot really be at home in the world as long as we fail to accept that we are wayfarers, nowhere fully at home" (Harries 1998: 166). In becoming aware of our homelessness, we become aware of our constant tendency to flee into false homes and false identities, away from the true home. To be genuinely at home in this world, we have to affirm our essential homelessness illuminated by shifting ideals of genuine dwelling (Harries 1998:200). Being thus authentic is not an overcoming of homelessness. It is, rather, a living with homelessness.

At this point it is appropriate to single out another important aporia, which is a product of architectural theory and which concerns the relation between

modernity and dwelling. Contrary to all anti-modern readings, Heidegger's focus on dwelling does not return us to some pre-modern utopia in which the uncertainties of modernity can be laid to rest. Although late Heidegger's writing is routinely treated as expressive of a nostalgic desire for home in the midst of the homelessness of modernity, there is almost nothing in his essays that presents dwelling as exclusively tied to the rural or to the past. Malpas has shown that the claim that Heidegger's account of dwelling is specifically rural and dissociated from, even opposed to, modernity cannot readily be supported by his essays (Malpas 2021: 41). In BDT Heidegger writes:

> However hard and bitter, however hampering and threatening the lack of houses remains, the real plight of dwelling does not lie merely in a lack of houses. The real plight of dwelling is indeed older than the world wars with their destruction, older also than the increase of the earth's population and the condition of the industrial workers (Heidegger 1971: 159).

This quote can be viewed as a reply to Adorno's already mentioned claim from *Minima Moralia* stating that the house is past after World War II. Heidegger talks about the plight of dwelling as an ancient one. So, although the plight of dwelling, or homelessness, is a plight that is experienced today, it is specifically not a plight that belongs to this time, to modernity or the contemporary world alone. It is the homelessness that has always been and always will be a part of human being.

Questioning Being: Capacity to be Mortal

In *Being and Time,* Heidegger linked authenticity to a resolute appropriation and affirmation of our mortality. His concept of authenticity is above all a conception of the first-person perspective and its irreducibility to any other person's point of view. One crucial way in which that structural difference manifests itself is in our understanding of death. This iteration brings us back to the well-known dichotomy between authenticity as resoluteness in the face of one's finitude and inauthenticity as alienation from the inevitability of one's own death. For Heidegger, the authentic relation to death involves not being in denial, but instead recognizing the certainty of death. From here we can follow up on the previous thesis about homelessness as an indication of the oblivion of Being and continue in the direction of the interpretation of homelessness as an indication of an inauthentic understanding of death. When talking of homelessness, late Heidegger suggests that we not only find it difficult but have become altogether unable to dwell because we have become incapable of really dying (Harries 1998: 224). Such homelessness is manifest in the failure of mortals to grasp their own being as mortals. In "What are Poets for?" Heidegger is writing about this constant negation of death which produces inauthentic life. He believes that the time remains destitute because mortals are hardly aware and capable even of their own mortality.

> Mortals have not yet come into ownership of their own nature. Death withdraws into the enigmatic. (...) Even those sides of life that are averted from us must, insofar as they are, be taken positively. Death is the side of life that is averted from us, unillumined by us. Death and the realm of the dead belong to the whole of beings as its other side (Heidegger 1971: 94, 122).

This attempt to illuminate the positive side of death is deepened by Heidegger in "The Thing", where he speaks of overcoming the thought of death as entry into an empty nothing.

> Death is the shrine of Nothing, that is, of that which in every respect is never something that merely exists, but which nevertheless presences, even as the mystery of Being itself. As the shrine of Nothing, death harbors within itself the presencing of Being. As the shrine of Nothing, death is the shelter of Being. We now call mortals mortals – not because their earthly life comes to an end, but because they are capable of death as death (Heidegger 1971: 176).

Therefore, death is the other side of Being, just like homelessness is the other side of dwelling. Mortals cannot be truly mortals until they surrender and affirm their mortality, until they are capable of death as death. Heidegger in BDT speaks exactly of that capability as the capacity to dwell.

> Mortals dwell in that they initiate their own nature – their being capable of death as death – into the use and practice of this capacity, so that there may be a good death. To initiate mortals into the nature of death in no way means to make death, as empty Nothing, the goal (Heidegger 1971: 148-149).

In respect to this, Young develops the conception of an ultimate security, where the notion of security covers the entire terminological domain that Heidegger used in the sense of safeguarding, protecting, preserving, sparing, cherishing, looking after, and caring for. For us, Young's conception will be of particular significance because it provides another cross-section through both early and late Heidegger's thinking about what is authentic in the sense of dwelling. In *Being and Time*, Young recalls, the source of our homelessness is anxiety in the face of death, that is, the nothing (Young 2000: 189). That is why early Heidegger concludes that security, being safe in the world or, as he calls it, dwelling, is impossible, thus making insecurity (*unheimlichkeit*, not being at home) an essential feature of *Dasein* (Young 2006: 526). However, if we take a moment to return to late Heidegger, we will find the opposite – that the human essence is to be in the world as in a dwelling-place (Young 2002: 63). To dwell is to be in a free place where one is protected and preserved from harm and danger. To dwell means to experience oneself as safe in, cared-for by, the dwelling-place. To dwell is to experience oneself as, in spite of the risks and dangers, in some ultimate sense secure. Dwelling, then, is security – precisely what is excluded by *Being and Time*. And *vice versa*, the insecurity is understood by late Heidegger as incompatible with, as the opposite of, dwelling (Young 2000: 189). We experience ourselves as essentially insecure and hence fail to

experience our world as a place of safety, as a dwelling place (Young 2000: 193). Clearly, when speaking of the ultimate threat to one's security, Young is pointing to death; but only to "death understood in a negative way, as terror, the abyss of annihilation, horror at the void, nothingness" (Young 2002: 64-65).

Accordingly, Young's conclusion is: if one experiences oneself as ultimately secure, then one experiences oneself as secure even in the face of death. Indications of his conception of confronting death not with the shadow of terror but rather with equanimity can also be traced in other important Heidegger's scholars. Zimmerman notes that when we are at home with our mortality, we no longer have to be enemies of the pain, loss, and death. If we no longer identify ourselves with the ego that craves security and gratification, we do not have to resist what things are (Zimmerman 1985: 254). Dreyfus underlines that if *Dasein* accepted its nullity, the same structure that seemed to threaten all its secure projects and its very identity would be seen to be challenging and liberating (Dreyfus 1995: 317).

We will assess and compare Young's premises through the two perspectives from which we consider anxiety's influence. In the first perspective, if *Angst* is interpreted in an inauthentic manner, as a constant threat to one's existence, *Dasein* flees in fear from anxiety's disturbing effects to the safety and familiarity of the status quo, repressing the knowledge of his own mortality (Magrini 2006: 85). Though by evading a direct confrontation we evade the terror of death, the knowledge remains and, consequently, our lives are riddled by anxiety. As a result, to avoid the terror of blindly staring towards the end, life becomes the anxiety of evasion (Young 2002: 118). This view can be simplified in following Zimmerman's sentence: "because we are unwilling to accept our mortality, we cannot be fully alive" (Zimmerman 1985: 251). Of course, anxiety is inconsistent with security, so such a life can never possess the absolute security which, Heidegger holds, is the hallmark of dwelling. That leads us to the second perspective: if *Angst* is perceived as the bridge to a unique form of understanding, which connects *Dasein* to the finite realities of its being in the world, then as opposed to prefiguring horror and passivity, anxiety announces itself, as the harbinger of *Dasein's* authentic enactment of freedom for its possibilities (Magrini 2006: 85).

This final comparative analysis of anxiety and dwelling observed through the prism of death and care gives us two options. In terms of early Heidegger's concept of anxiety, we obtained: authentic resoluteness into death *versus* inauthentic fleeing into average worldly distractions. In terms of late Heidegger's dwelling, we have gotten: accepting and taking care of mortality as being at home in the essential sense *versus* evading mortality and remaining in the state of false safety and familiarity. Therefore, to become at home, meaning to be authentic, requires overcoming fear in the face of death, and eventually to be capable of the good death. As Zimmerman accurately sums up: "because we are essentially mortal, learning to be at home means accepting mortality" (Zimmerman 1985: 254). *Vice versa*: learning to be mortal is the essence

of dwelling. This is a key thesis on which we intend to linger and which will serve us as the guideline for the derivation of conclusions.

Conclusion: Authenticity as Caring for Death

There is an important point in Heidegger's thinking overlooked by both his architectural apologists and critics. Overly tied to the glorification or disavowing of the concept of place, they have all failed to give attention to the aspect of time. In saying so, we do not aim at the banal space-time switch that would pivot the locus of attention to the problem of time exclusively. It is clear that the valuable role of place in Heidegger cannot be put into question. Nonetheless, it is also not suitable to propose a unilateral equalization of being in the world with being in space, as done by Norberg-Schulz, when he writes that "man as being in the world (*Dasein*) implies that man cannot be understood in isolation from his environment", or when he exalts spatiality as "a property of being in the world" (Norberg-Schulz 1979: 35; 1983: 65). We can already find discrete signs of this trajectory of thought in Harries and Benjamin.

> Heidegger made homelessness constitutive of human being. First of all, and most of the time, we have lost ourselves to the world into which we have been cast. Into this state of lostness breaks the silent call of conscience, which, calling from far away, calls us beyond the world, back to ourselves. But in calling us back in ourselves, conscience does not call us to a specific place (Harries 1998: 203).

In the foreword of Sharr's book *Heidegger's Hut*, Benjamin reminds us of one detail by which, almost in the guise of an autobiography, Heidegger notes: "Strictly speaking I myself never observe the landscape. I experience its hourly changes, day and night, in the great comings and goings of the seasons." From Benjamin's perspective, this passage, quoted by Sharr, is central to any understanding of Heidegger's philosophical project (Benjamin 2006: xviii). Therefore, in accordance with the presumed hypotheses, the first key theme is revealed: how the house (or its architecture, or simply – home) represents the passing of time and, of course, mortality as the integral and highlighted part of this passing.

Just like the spatial aspect in architectural theory overcame Heidegger's notion of time, something similar has happened to another neglected aspect – that of care. As shown so far in this paper, the authentic being in the world that Heidegger associated with dwelling is presented as not primarily a matter of being in space at all, but rather of familiarity with, preservation and of looking after, taking care. Our capacities to relate intimately to and care for our world are that kind of poetic sensitivity which forms the foundation of what Heidegger calls dwelling.

We hitherto know that the building that is undertaken on the basis of our proper dwelling is a building that allows for such dwelling and so allows for the gathering of the fourfold. As Benjamin notes, what was let dwell had to do

with the role of mortals within the fourfold (Benjamin 2000:239). In that sense, the broader logic of the fourfold indicates that there are particular times, places, and things that can help us recall our mortality by calling to us as mortals. Among these are the spaces and things associated with dying and the dead. Heidegger's fullest description of assembling the fourfold in an architectural sense is his famous account of the Black Forest farmhouse.

> Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants. Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth, heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness into things, ordered the house. It placed the farm on the wind-sheltered mountain slope looking south, among the meadows close to the spring. It gave it the wide overhanging shingle roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden of snow, and which, reaching deep down, shields the chambers against the storms of the long winter nights. It did not forget the altar corner behind the community table; it made room in its chamber for the hallowed places of childbed and the "tree of the dead"— for that is what they call a coffin there: the *Totenbaum*—and in this way it designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time (Heidegger 1971: 157-158).

The farmhouse has been built in the temporal rhythm of seasons, of the passing generations, of birth and death. The farmhouse traced its residents' understanding of their physical situation, denoted by the building's particular relationship with weather and seasons, configured with respect to sun, snow, and wind; and also their broader situation, paced out in routines of daily existence (Sharr 2007: 67-68). Its residents marked out their mortality through rites of passage between birth and death. They made certain special locations in the house where celebrations of the passing of years, and of birth and death in particular, might take place (Sharr 2007: 69). Building and dwelling circle is here understood as a thoughtfulness of our temporality, with an emphasis on the way the farmhouse gives room to death.

Since mortals cannot be initiated into their true nature unless death is allowed to be seen – to become a topic – conserving the natural appearances of death in life is a necessary precondition for such initiation (Young 2002: 118). Indeed, making space for such hallowed things in a home is part of what renders a building a proper dwelling place, and not merely a domicile. Heidegger makes reference to the juxtaposed presence of childbed and coffin corner (*Totenbaum*) with the suggestion that they are constant reminders of the specifically temporal character of human existence and, in particular, the death that awaits us all. Especially the *Totenbaum* has the power to evoke an authentic remembrance of mortality. It is a constant reminder of lives ultimately lived toward death and a presence reminding the family of ancestors whose lives culminated there (Sharr 2007: 69).

Heidegger shows that to properly dwell as mortals, we must, quite literally, invite death into our homes. If building is to let us dwell, that is, as the mortals we are, we must grant death its place. In order to arrive at this final analysis,

the essay performed a series of interpretations, in attempt to consistently keep up with Heidegger's project. The focus was on the question of authenticity, which Zimmerman boldly formulated through the question of *who we are*. This most potent question has two equal answers connected in a hermeneutical circle. The first answer is: we are homeless. We can come home only if and when we accept who we are. For that is when we are close to Being. To come home and be close to Being means to think authentically of Being as Being. A requisite for authentic thinking of Being as Being offers a second answer: we are mortals. We are mortals because Being is mortal. To think authentically of Being as Being means to authentically accept mortality. We are homeless because we have forgotten being as our home. Once again, Being is mortal. This means that we have forgotten our mortality. We are mortals, and we dwell in our mortality because death is our last home.

This conclusion represents at least a satisfactory resolution of the question of authenticity, as the main question that this essay was concerned with. Authenticity denotes a certain type of existence that is more originary, more thoughtful than everyday living, just like dwelling poetically is a certain type of existence that is far removed from mundane distractions. This should be allowed within the fourfold, as the manifest grasped in conjunction with the hidden side of reality, in short, to Being (Young 2002: 17). Exactly this was the project of *Being and Time* – to use anxiety for clearing aside the inauthenticity of the everyday in order to reveal the essential character of Being. In anxiety, a person's individuality is brought home. Dwelling in this view presupposes authentic being towards death from *Being and Time.* At last, reaching authenticity always leads through caring for death or evading death, which is a unifying stance for both early and late Heidegger.

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Preispitivanje Hajdegerovog poimanja autentičnosti u arhitektonskoj teoriji: Između strepnje i pesničkog stanovanja

Apstrakt

Tekst se bavi refleksijama filozofije Martina Hajdegera unutar arhitektonske teorije, sa posebnim osvrtom na poimanje autentičnosti koje se sagledava kroz duboku asimetriju između strepnje i pesničkog stanovanja. Polazeći od fenomenoloških pozicija, arhitektonski afirmatori Hajdegera postuliraju koncept autentičnog stanovanja kao pesničke alternative navodno pretećem stanju otuđenja i obezdomljenosti koje teskobno vreme modernosti donosi sa sobom. Sa druge strane, kritičari poststrukturalističke i neomarksističke provenijencije to tumačenje odbacuju kao nostalgični eskapizam u predmoderno, romantičarsko i mitsko okrilje sigurnosti doma, koje je potpuno strano savremenom metropolitanskom načinu života. Tako je celokupna debata svedena na površno suprotstavljanje odomaćenog stanovanja i strepnje pred naletom nečega otuđujućeg. Da bi se ovaj polarizovani diskurs arhitektonske teorije prevazišao, neophodno je razjasniti šta Hajdeger zapravo podrazumeva pod pojmom autentičnosti. Međutim, razmatranja ne bi trebalo ograničiti samo na autentičnost, već ih proširiti i na ostale međusobno povezane pojmove: otuđenje, strepnju, stanovanje i obezdomljenost. Pritom je potrebno uzeti u obzir da sam Hajdeger sve ove pojmove tretira neistovetno u svojoj ranoj i kasnoj fazi. Diskusija konstruiše presek tumačenja arhitektonske teorije i filozofije

na temu pomenutih koncepata, izveden kroz uporednu analizu *Bića i vremena* iz Hajdegerovog ranog perioda, i eseja sakupljenih u zbirci *Poezija, jezik, misao*, koji ovaploćuju njegovu kasnu misao. U svetlu ovakvog preispitivanja, argumentacija je usmerena ka dva pojma koji nijansiraju, ako ne i konfluiraju, naizgled protivrečno mišljenje ranog i kasnog Hajdegera. U pitanju su pojmovi smrtnosti i brige, koji bi mogli da razjasne dileme koje okupiraju razne arhitektonske čitaoce Hajdegera.

Ključne reči: Martin Hajdeger, autentičnost, strepnja, stanovanje, obezdomljenost, otuđenost, smrtnost, briga

UDK: 159.922.7(560)
81'23-053.2(560)
DOI https://doi.org/10.2298/FID2603585K
Original Scientific Article
Received 29.01.2026. Accepted 08.07.2026.

PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIETY
VOL. 37, NO. 3, 405–700

To cite text:
Yılmaz Bolat, Emine, Merve Koyuncu, and Miloš Agatonović. 2026. "Parents' Metaphorical Perception of Toys and Their Views on Play." *Philosophy and Society* 37 (3): 585–604.

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PARENTS' METAPHORICAL PERCEPTION OF TOYS AND THEIR VIEWS ON PLAY[1]

ABSTRACT
This article explores how parents of preschool-aged children in Türkiye make sense of "toys" through metaphor and how these meanings shape views of play and toy selection. Drawing on a qualitative phenomenological design, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 parents. Metaphor analysis was used to map recurring figurative constructions of toys, and descriptive thematic analysis was used to examine parents' accounts of play and purchasing criteria. Parents' metaphors clustered around three interpretive registers: toys as companions (affective and relational support), as developmental instruments (learning and future-oriented investment), and as commodities (objects evaluated through safety, durability, and price). The dominance of the "friend" metaphor foregrounds toys' role in children's everyday emotional life, while the investment and commodity frames reveal how developmental ideals and economic constraints co-produce parental decision-making. By connecting everyday parental talk to wider questions about the social organization of childhood, consumption, and the governance of "good" parenting, the study offers implications for early childhood education, family guidance, and policy.

KEYWORDS
play, toys, metaphors, parental perceptions

1 An abstract of an earlier version of this study, titled 'Ebeveynlerin Oyuncak Kavramına Yönelik Metaforik Algıları ile Oyun ve Oyuncaklara Yönelik Görüşlerinin İncelenmesi' [Examining Parents' Metaphorical Perceptions of the Concept of Toy and Their Views on Play and Toys], was orally presented by Emine Yılmaz Bolat and Merve Koyuncu at the 7th International Conference on Interdisciplinary Educational Reflections (ICIER 2025), organized by the Atatürk Faculty of Education and the Institute of Graduate Studies, Near East University, Nicosia, Cyprus, 8–10 May 2025.

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Introduction

Early childhood is a formative period in which cognitive, social, emotional, and physical capacities are shaped through everyday practices. Among these practices, play and toys occupy a central position, not merely as developmental supports but also as culturally and socially mediated elements of childhood. Play is widely recognized as a fundamental activity through which children explore their environment, negotiate relationships, and express emotions (Ginsburg 2007). Through playful interaction, children develop social competencies, construct experiential knowledge, and strengthen self-regulation (Pellegrini and Smith 1998; Singer and Singer 2005). Toys, however, are not neutral objects within this process. They function as material and symbolic mediators of play, shaping the kinds of experiences that become available to children. Toys can foster creativity and exploratory learning, yet they also reflect broader social expectations concerning development, education, and "appropriate" childhood (Sutton-Smith 1986; Semiz 2022). In this sense, parental choices about toys are embedded in normative ideas about what constitutes good parenting and a successful developmental trajectory. Parents, as primary social actors organizing children's play environments, play a decisive role in defining the meanings and boundaries of play. Their perceptions and preferences influence not only the quality of children's play experiences but also the ways in which childhood is socially constructed within families (Heidemann and Hewitt 2009). Examining parental meaning-making processes therefore offers insight into how developmental ideals intersect with economic constraints, cultural values, and contemporary consumer practices. Metaphors provide a particularly useful analytical lens for studying such processes. As cognitive and linguistic tools, metaphors reveal how individuals structure abstract concepts through everyday language (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Investigating parents' metaphors of "toys" thus allows us to grasp the implicit frameworks through which toys are understood – as companions, educational instruments, or commodities – and how these understandings shape practices of selection and play. Despite the growing interest in play and childhood studies, metaphor-based research on how parents in Türkiye conceptualize toys remains limited. This study addresses this gap by exploring the metaphorical perceptions of parents with preschool-aged children and examining their views on play and toy selection. Importantly, the Turkish context provides a particularly relevant setting, as contemporary parenting practices unfold under conditions of economic uncertainty, rising consumer costs, and the increasing marketization of childhood. In such a setting, toys are not only understood through developmental ideals but are also evaluated through affordability, safety, and social expectations. By linking parental metaphors to broader questions about consumption, economic constraint, and the governance of "good" parenting, the article contributes to both early childhood research and wider theoretical discussions on family life and contemporary society.

Play and Child Development

Play is widely regarded as one of the most fundamental activities supporting children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Piaget (1962) conceptualized play as a mechanism through which children explore their environment and construct cognitive structures, while Vygotsky (1978) emphasized its role in social interaction, self-regulation, and the development of higher mental functions. Through play, children express emotions, establish relationships, and strengthen social–emotional capacities such as creativity and empathy (Singer and Singer 2005). Research further suggests that different forms of play during the preschool years shape development in distinct ways: structured play may support cognitive and motor skills, whereas free play fosters imagination, flexibility, and creative thinking (Frost, Wortham, and Reifel 2012). Recent studies also highlight the importance of play in contexts of disruption and change. Digital play environments have been shown to shape children's attention, perception, and emerging forms of cognitive engagement, suggesting that contemporary play increasingly unfolds through hybrid material and technological forms (Marsh et al. 2016). Thus, the quality of children's play experiences is shaped not only by play types but also by the materials and media through which play is organized.

The Role and Importance of Toys

Toys are essential mediators that enrich children's play processes and extend the developmental possibilities of play, providing children with resources for exploration, learning, and social engagement (Sutton-Smith 1986; Richards et al. 2020). Toys also support emotional expression and motor development: for instance, building blocks and puzzles foster cognitive skills, whereas dolls and role-play materials strengthen social and affective capacities (Shaffer 2009). Recent scholarship has drawn increasing attention to the developmental implications of toy quality and design. Toys that provide rich sensory and exploratory opportunities may support children's engagement, fine motor development, and early problem-solving through play (Shaffer 2009; Sutton-Smith 1986). Digital educational toys and games have been discussed as potentially supporting children's engagement and emerging learning-related skills in early childhood, while also raising concerns about screen-based play and technological mediation (Marsh et al. 2016). Parental toy selection is shaped by multiple criteria, including children's interests, safety, educational value, durability, and economic considerations (Heidemann and Hewitt 2009). In this sense, parental attitudes toward toys are critical determinants of both play environments and children's everyday experiences.

Parental Perceptions and Metaphorical Approaches

Parents' understandings of play and toys directly shape the opportunities they provide and the objects they select for their children (Ginsburg 2007). Metaphors serve as powerful cognitive tools through which individuals conceptualize abstract ideas and organize everyday meaning-making (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The metaphors parents use to describe toys reflect the values, expectations, and child-rearing orientations they attach to them. While some parents frame toys as "educational tools," others depict them as sources of happiness or companionship. Recent studies suggest that parental metaphors are especially revealing in relation to digital and screen-based toys. Some parents conceptualize such toys as "educational," whereas others frame them as risky or harmful, highlighting the tensions between opportunity and threat in contemporary childhood. These findings underscore the relevance of metaphor analysis for understanding how toys are positioned within changing family contexts.

Rationale for the Study

In Türkiye, metaphor-based qualitative research examining parents' perceptions of toys and play in preschool childhood remains limited. Existing studies often focus on toy safety, purchasing criteria, or general attitudes toward play, while fewer investigations explore parents' deeper meaning-making processes. Examining parents' metaphorical constructions of toys is therefore important for filling this gap and for developing practical insights for educators and families. Furthermore, there is a lack of up-to-date evidence on how digitalization, the diversification of toy markets, and shifting family structures influence parental understandings of play. Strengthening the theoretical foundation of the present study thus contributes to a more comprehensive account of how parents conceptualize toys within contemporary childhood.

Theoretical Framework: Toys, Play, and Metaphor in Contemporary Parenting Culture

In this study, parents' metaphors are approached not merely as rhetorical expressions but as condensed "everyday theories" of childhood and family life. Metaphors do more than decorate language: they structure attention, evaluation, and justification, shaping what parents perceive as a "good" toy and what forms of play are considered meaningful. Within conceptual metaphor theory, metaphors organize abstract domains – such as learning, care, and safety – through more concrete domains, including tools, friends, and dangers. Because metaphors encode value judgments and assumptions, they can be read as windows into cultural scripts of parenting that are often taken for granted. When a parent calls a toy a "friend," an "educator," or a "danger," the metaphor does not simply describe the object; it frames the child–toy relationship, legitimates certain practices (such as purchasing educational toys),

and problematizes others (such as screen-based play). For this reason, metaphor analysis in the present study is treated as an interpretive bridge between micro-level parental talk and macro-level social meanings.

Toys are social and cultural artefacts rather than neutral objects. They circulate in markets, are shaped by advertising and educational claims, and often arrive with implicit "scripts" about how children should play and what kinds of capacities should be cultivated. Contemporary childhood is frequently pulled in two directions at once: on the one hand, play as freedom, imagination, and self-directed exploration; on the other, play as optimization – an investment in measurable skills and future success. Within this tension, toys can be understood as both instruments and symbols: they promise developmental benefits, signal parental care, and express aspirations about the child's future. When parents prefer intelligence-enhancing toys or structured educational materials, this may reflect a broader tendency to instrumentalize play, turning it into a regulated activity with expected outcomes. Conversely, metaphors emphasizing friendship, family, or joy foreground the relational and affective dimensions of toys, highlighting how play objects may function as companions and emotional resources.

From a philosophy-and-society perspective, parental toy choices can be read as part of a moral economy of parenting. Parents are increasingly expected to act as responsible planners and risk managers while also sustaining children's wellbeing and family relationships. In sociological discussions, these expectations have been theorized through notions such as "intensive parenting" and "concerted cultivation," which encourage families toward deliberate, expert-guided investment in children's futures (Hays 1996; Lareau 2003). Such pressures also resonate with broader accounts of modern risk management and uncertainty (Beck 1992). This moral economy is further intensified by digitalization (screen-based play and smart toys), consumer culture (rapidly expanding toy markets), and educational competition (pressure to "support" development early). Within such contexts, toys may be framed simultaneously as opportunities for enrichment and learning, and as potential threats involving screen dependency, safety risks, consumerism, or undesirable socialization.

Accordingly, the analysis interprets parents' metaphors and statements through three intertwined lenses: (1) developmentalism and instrumentalization, where toys become vehicles for skill formation, discipline, and future-oriented outcomes; (2) relationality and emotional infrastructure, where toys are imagined as companions or family-like figures mediating intimacy, loneliness, and attachment; and (3) commodification and regulation, where toys are seen as valuable commodities whose costs, risks, and effects must be managed. These lenses are used heuristically, helping connect empirical categories to broader debates without reducing parents' experiences to a single explanation.

This framing enables the results section to move beyond listing metaphor categories toward explaining what is at stake in parents' meaning-making: which ideals of childhood are implied, which anxieties are negotiated, and which social conditions – marketization, digital media, and changing family routines

– are mirrored in everyday parental talk. In the discussion, empirical themes are explicitly connected back to these lenses to demonstrate how micro-level metaphors relate to broader societal patterns in contemporary parenting and the social organization of childhood. In this way, the paper aims to contribute not only to early childhood education research but also to wider discussions about family life, consumption, and the cultural politics of play.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study was conducted using a phenomenological design, one of the qualitative research approaches. Phenomenology aims to examine in depth phenomena that are known to exist but are not yet fully understood (Yıldırım and Şimşek 2013). In this context, parents' perceptions of play and toys were explored through metaphors, focusing on the meanings they attributed to these concepts.

Study Group

The study group consisted of 25 parents whose children attend public preschool education institutions located in the central district of Mersin, Türkiye. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, which provides practical advantages in terms of accessibility while allowing for in-depth qualitative exploration (Yıldırım and Şimşek 2013). In accordance with confidentiality principles, participants were anonymized using the code "P," and their demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Data Collection Tools and Procedure

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview form prepared by the researchers based on expert consultation. During the interviews, parents were asked to express their perceptions of toys through metaphors and to explain their views regarding play and toy selection. The data collection process was carried out through face-to-face interviews between March and April 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. The interview setting was arranged to ensure that participants could comfortably express their opinions (Yıldırım and Şimşek 2013).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Two researchers independently examined the interview transcripts. Parents' metaphors were first coded and then grouped according to shared characteristics to form conceptual categories. When the same metaphor was used by more than one participant, it was categorized accordingly, and representative quotations

were identified. Category development was also informed by previously established metaphor analysis procedures (Saban 2009; Yıldırım and Şimşek 2013).

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, analysis progressed through iterative phases: (1) familiarization with the transcripts, (2) initial coding of statements related to toy choice and play meanings, (3) clustering codes into candidate themes, (4) reviewing coherence across the dataset, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the narrative report. Importantly, metaphors were interpreted together with participants' "because..." explanations, which clarified whether toys were framed in terms of developmental benefit, emotional comfort, entertainment, or risk. Discrepancies between coders were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached.

Validity and Reliability

To enhance validity, direct quotations from participants were included (Yıldırım and Şimşek 2013). Reliability was supported through expert consultation and inter-coder agreement. Agreement was calculated using the Miles and Huberman (1994) formula: Reliability = Agreement / (Agreement + Disagreement). The metaphor categories were also reviewed by an independent child development expert, and the agreement rate exceeded commonly accepted qualitative research thresholds (Saban 2009; Miles and Huberman 1994).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee of Mersin University. The application was reviewed and approved on May 8, 2024 (Decision No: 166). Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Parents were informed about the purpose of the study, the use of audio recording, and their right to withdraw at any time without negative consequences. All identifying information was removed during transcription and analysis, and participants were anonymized using codes (P1, P2, ...). Data were stored securely and used only for research purposes.

Reflexivity and Context

Because metaphors are culturally situated, interpretation requires sensitivity to context. The study was conducted in Mersin, and the meanings parents attach to toys may reflect local socioeconomic conditions, schooling expectations, and prevailing parenting norms. Throughout the analysis, the researchers kept analytic memos to reflect on how their professional backgrounds in education and child development could shape interpretations. This reflexive step helped distinguish between participants' explicit statements and broader theoretical inferences developed in the discussion.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Study Group (N = 25)

Demographic Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	20	80.00
	Male	5	20.00
Marital status	Married	25	100.00
Age	25–31	3	12.00
	32–38	14	56.00
	39–45	7	28.00
	46 and above	1	4.00
Number of children	1	8	32.00
	2	10	40.00
	3	7	28.00
Child's age (preschool)	4	2	8.00
	5	6	24.00
	6	17	68.00
Monthly household income (TRY)	15,000–24,999	4	16.00
	25,000–34,999	4	16.00
	35,000–44,999	6	24.00
	45,000–54,999	3	12.00
	55,000–64,999	1	4.00
	65,000 and above	7	28.00
Father's occupation	Tradesman / small business owner	4	16.00
	Worker	9	36.00
	Civil servant	6	24.00
	Self-employed	4	16.00
	Retired	2	8.00
Mother's occupation	Homemaker	17	68.00
	Worker	5	20.00
	Civil servant	3	12.00
Highest education completed	Primary school	3	12.00
	High school	7	28.00
	Associate degree	8	32.00
	Bachelor's degree	7	28.00

Note: Percentages are based on N = 25.

Based on the demographic characteristics presented in Table 1, most participants were women (80%), and all were married. The largest age group was 32–38 years (56%). In terms of family structure, participants most commonly had two children (40%), and the majority reported having a six-year-old child (68%). Monthly household income was most frequently reported in the 65,000 TRY and above category (28%), followed by 35,000–44,999 TRY (24%). Regarding employment, fathers were most often workers (36%), whereas mothers were predominantly homemakers (68%). Educational attainment was distributed across high school (28%), associate degrees (32%), and bachelor's degrees (28%), indicating a generally mid-to-high level of education among the sample.

Findings

Toy Categories and Priorities as Developmental Investment

The first cluster of findings concerns what parents buy and prioritize. Rather than treating these distributions as purely descriptive, we interpret them as indicators of the cultural logic guiding parental consumption. Specifically, the dominance of intelligence-enhancing and movement-based toys suggests that parents are oriented toward objects that can be justified as developmentally "productive," either cognitively or physically. This pattern reflects a broader expectation that toys should contribute to early skill formation and future-oriented outcomes, aligning with contemporary norms of responsible and investment-driven parenting.

The ranked preferences reported by parents are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Parents' Ranked Preferences for Toy Types Purchased for Their Children (N = 25)

Toy type	Rank 1 (n)	Rank 2 (n)	Rank 3 (n)	Rank 4 (n)	Rank 5 (n)	Rank 6 (n)	Rank 7 (n)	Rank 8 (n)	Rank 9 (n)
Technological toys (tablet, computer games, etc.)	5	4	1	–	–	2	–	2	–
Motor-skill toys (ball, jump rope, etc.)	13	4	1	2	–	–	1	–	–
Pretend-play toys (housekeeping)	4	3	3	–	2	–	–	–	–
Occupation-themed toys	–	3	2	2	3	4	–	–	–
Cognitive/logic toys (puzzles, brain games, etc.)	3	8	10	2	–	–	–	–	–
Construction toys (wooden blocks, LEGO, etc.)	–	–	2	8	3	1	2	1	–
Individual toys (dolls, vehicles, etc.)	–	2	3	3	5	2	1	–	–
Toys chosen by the child	–	1	2	3	2	3	2	–	–
Other (please specify)	–	–	–	–	–	–	1	–	4

According to the findings, the most frequently preferred toy category was intelligence-enhancing/cognitive toys (n = 23), while the highest first-rank priority was given to movement-based toys (n = 21). Sarıkaya and Kaya (2022) similarly report that parents' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors in toy selection are shaped by factors such as the perceived educational role of the toy, children's interest, difficulties experienced in selection, awareness, and freedom of choice. Related research suggests that families often favor toys framed as educational or cognitively enriching while also valuing toys that support motor development (Kollmayer et al 2018; Richards et al. 2020). Broader systematic reviews likewise indicate that parents commonly balance educational value with physical activity, safety, and practical considerations when selecting toys (Kumari et al. 2025). Interpreted through the theoretical lenses of this paper, these preferences reflect a tendency to treat toys as developmental resources – objects expected to "do work" in producing desirable skills – while still acknowledging the embodied and playful dimensions of childhood.

The meaning of play: between enjoyment and optimization

Table 3. Parents' Views on the Meaning and Importance of Play and Toys (N = 25)

Views on the importance of play/toys	Frequency (participants)
Supports development	8 (P2, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9, P11, P12)
It is fun; provides enjoyable/quality time	7 (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P10, P12)
Enables self-expression	3 (P7, P8, P9)
Develops skills	3 (P2, P5, P11)
It is educational/instructive	2 (P4, P5)
It is the child's 'work'; the child spends time playing	2 (P7, P10)
Helps the child focus and think	2 (P3, P5)
Helps the child regulate emotions	1 (P7)
Allows time with friends/peers	1(P10)
Encourages sharing	1 (P10)
Increases interest in the surroundings	1 (P4)

As shown in Table 3, parents most frequently described play and toys in terms of supporting development (f = 8) and providing fun, enjoyment, or quality time (f = 7). Other recurring themes included enabling self-expression (f = 3), developing skills (f = 3), being educational/instructive (f = 2), supporting concentration and thinking (f = 2), and helping regulate emotions (f = 1). A smaller number of parents emphasized play as part of children's everyday routine ("the child's work," f = 2), as an opportunity for peer interaction (f = 1), as encouraging sharing (f = 1), or as increasing curiosity about the environment (f = 1). These findings align with research emphasizing play's role in children's

cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development (Polat and Kara 2023; Ginsburg 2007; Singer and Singer 2005). In our data, however, developmental language co-exists with an affective vocabulary of enjoyment and quality time. This co-presence suggests that parents negotiate two meanings of play at once: play as a domain of pleasure and relational wellbeing, and play as a vehicle for optimization and early skill formation. Such a tension echoes contemporary parenting cultures in which play is valued both as freedom and as an instrument of responsible, future-oriented childrearing (Hays 1996; Lareau 2003). Read through the paper's theoretical lenses, "development" themes resonate with instrumentalization, while "fun/quality time" themes foreground relationality and emotional infrastructure. Some exemplary statements are presented below:

> P5: "It is an educational and instructive activity through which children spend enjoyable time. Toys that positively affect their development improve their hand skills and thinking."
>
> P12: "It is important because it supports the child's development and also contributes to spending quality time."

Toy Selection Criteria: Safety, Developmental Value, and the Management of Risk

Table 4. Criteria Parents Reported for Toy Selection (N = 25)

Toy selection criteria reported by parents	Frequency (participants)
I prioritize toys that support knowledge/skills and overall development	15 (P4, P6, P7, P8, P9, P13, P14, P16, P17, P18, P21, P22, P23, P24, P25)
I choose toys that attract interest and that the child enjoys playing with	4 (P1, P2, P6, P20)
I ensure the toy is not harmful to health	4 (P1, P5, P12, P15)
I take the child's preferences into account	2 (P3, P19)
I prefer toys that encourage physical activity	1 (P8)
I buy toys the child can play with friends/peers	1 (P10)
I consider age- and development-appropriateness	1 (P11)
I prefer calming toys	1 (P12)
I pay attention to softness (plush, etc.)	1 (P1)

As shown in Table 4, the most frequently emphasized criterion in toy selection was prioritizing toys that parents believed support children's knowledge, skills, and overall developmental progress (f = 15). This was followed by selecting toys that attract children's interest and provide enjoyment (f = 4) and ensuring that toys are not harmful to health (f = 4). Less frequently mentioned criteria included considering the child's own preferences (f = 2), preferring toys that encourage physical activity (f = 1), choosing toys that facilitate peer play

(f = 1), paying attention to age and developmental appropriateness (f = 1), preferring calming toys (f = 1), and selecting soft (e.g., plush) toys (f = 1).

These patterns align with prior research showing that parents typically treat toy selection as a multi-criteria decision in which developmental value and safety are central concerns (Adak Özdemir and Ramazan 2012; Kollmayer et al 2018; Richards et al. 2020). At the same time, the presence of enjoyment, child preference, and calming effects – albeit less frequently mentioned – suggests that toy selection also reflects everyday affective and practical considerations. Read through the theoretical lens of this paper, parents' emphasis on "non-harm" and developmental benefit can be interpreted as a form of risk management and responsible parenting, where toys are evaluated not only for what they enable (skills, learning, activity) but also for what they might prevent (harm, overstimulation, undesirable influence). Consistent with this interpretation, Kumari et al. (2025) note that parental choices are shaped by children's preferences as well as contextual and environmental influences.

Illustrative statements include:

> **P1:** "I make sure to choose plush toys that are harmless and enjoyable for the child."
>
> **P8:** "Beyond children's own preferences, if I have a say, I prefer intelligence-enhancing puzzles or toys that encourage physical activity."
>
> **P12:** "I pay attention to choosing toys that do not harm the child and that help them remain calmer while engaging in play."

To identify parents' metaphorical perceptions of the concept of "toy," they were asked to complete the prompt: "A toy is like … because …".

Metaphors as Cultural Scripts: From "Friend" to "Developmental Tool

Table 5. Metaphors Produced by Parents Regarding the Concept of Toy (N = 25)

No.	Metaphor	f	%
1	Friend	8	32.00
2	Productive tool	2	8.00
3	World of imagination	2	8.00
4	Educator	2	8.00
5	Preparer for life	1	4.00
6	Life	1	4.00
7	Book	1	4.00
8	Park	1	4.00
9	Child's property	1	4.00
10	Real object	1	4.00

No.	Metaphor	f	%
11	Good time	1	4.00
12	Child	1	4.00
13	Danger	1	4.00
14	Family	1	4.00
15	Helper	1	4.00
16	Entertainment/Fun	1	4.00

Table note: Percentages are based on N = 25

The data indicate that parents perceive toys through multiple symbolic frames and define them using a diverse set of metaphors. As shown in Table 5, participants generated 16 distinct metaphors, with the most frequently expressed metaphor being "friend" (f = 8, 32.00%). Other recurring metaphors included "productive tool" (f = 2, 8.00%), "world of imagination" (f = 2, 8.00%), and "educator" (f = 2, 8.00%). Interpreted through the theoretical framework of this paper, the prominence of "friend" highlights the relational and affective dimensions of toys, positioning them as companions within children's everyday emotional worlds. At the same time, metaphors such as "educator" and "productive tool" reflect an instrumental understanding of toys as vehicles for learning and developmental optimization. In this sense, parents' metaphorical language reveals the coexistence of relational and future-oriented cultural scripts of parenting. Comparable findings have been reported in previous metaphor research. Giren and Durak (2015), for example, found that preschool teachers most frequently described toys as "friends." Sarıkaya and Kaya (2022) similarly emphasize that parents view toys not only as entertaining objects but also as symbols supporting learning and development. More broadly, those studies underline the critical role of toys and play in children's cognitive, emotional, and social growth, while also demonstrating that parental interpretations shape how toys are positioned within family life (Polat and Kara 2023; Richards et al. 2020). Overall, these metaphors suggest that parents do not treat toys merely as sources of entertainment, but as emotionally meaningful and developmentally charged objects embedded in broader expectations about childhood, care, and "good" parenting.

Table 6. Conceptual Categories Formed from Parents' Metaphors for Toys

Category	Metaphors (participant counts)	Category frequency (f)	Number of distinct metaphors
Developmental support	Productive tool (2), Educator (2), Helper (1), Family (1), Entertainment/ Fun (1), Friend (1), World of imagination (1)	9	7
Providing enjoyable time	Friend (4), Park (1), Real object (1)	6	3

Category	Metaphors (participant counts)	Category frequency (f)	Number of distinct metaphors
Facilitating learning	Book (1), Preparer for life (1)	2	2
Offering life experiences	Life (1), Friend (1)	2	2
Supporting imagination	Friend (1), World of imagination (1)	2	2
Attachment and bonding	Child's property (1), Friend (1), Good time (1)	3	3
Attribution of value	Child (1)	1	1
Perceived risks	Danger (1)	1	1

Note: Frequencies indicate the number of participants whose metaphors were grouped into each category. Because the metaphor "friend" appeared across multiple interpretive dimensions, it is represented in more than one category.

As shown in Table 6, the metaphors produced by parents were grouped according to shared characteristics, resulting in eight conceptual categories. The most frequent category was developmental support (f = 9), followed by providing enjoyable time (f = 6). Less frequent categories included facilitating learning (f = 2), offering life experiences (f = 2), and supporting imagination (f = 2). Metaphors emphasizing attachment and bonding (f = 3) highlighted toys as emotionally meaningful companions, while smaller categories reflected the attribution of value (f = 1) and perceived risks (f = 1).

These findings are consistent with earlier metaphor research. Giren and Durak (2015), for example, categorized preschool teachers' toy metaphors into themes such as developmental support, entertainment, basic needs, emotional reflection, and family membership. Similarly, the present study shows that parents attribute multidimensional meanings to toys, emphasizing their role in children's cognitive, emotional, and social development (Giren and Durak 2015).

Beyond parallels with previous work, the distribution of metaphor categories in this sample is theoretically informative. The prominence of developmental-support metaphors echoes the instrumentalization of play, whereas metaphors clustered around attachment and enjoyable time foreground the relationality and emotional care. The coexistence of these clusters suggests that parental meaning-making is layered rather than uniform: toys are simultaneously imagined as companions and as technologies of development. This layered structure is precisely what metaphor analysis captures, revealing how developmental, affective, and regulatory concerns intersect in everyday parental language.

Discussion

This study shows that parents do not relate to toys as neutral objects. Rather, toys are evaluated through a mix of developmental expectations, moral responsibilities, and relational meanings. The prominence of intelligence-enhancing and movement-based toys indicates that many parents interpret toy choice as a

consequential decision – one that should support skill formation and "healthy" development – while metaphors of friendship, assistance, and learning reveal how toys are also positioned as companions and symbolic resources in family life.

Developmentalism and the Instrumentalization of Play

Across participants' statements, the most purchased and most prioritized toys were those associated with measurable developmental outcomes – intelligence, problem-solving, and motor skills. Read through the first lens proposed in the theoretical framework, toys appear as instruments of developmentalism: they are expected to cultivate competencies and to prepare children for future success. Such expectations resemble broader patterns described in the literature on intensive parenting, where parents are encouraged to actively manage children's trajectories through educational investments and expert-informed choices (Hays 1996; Lareau 2003). The findings therefore suggest that the meaning of play is partially reorganized around optimization, even when parents also affirm the intrinsic value of playfulness.

Importantly, this instrumental framing does not necessarily imply that parents reject play-for-its-own-sake. Rather, parents often combine developmental language with statements about enjoyment and wellbeing, indicating a hybrid orientation: toys are valued when they are both "fun" and "useful." This hybridity is analytically significant because it shows how contemporary parenting scripts can absorb play into an educational logic without fully eliminating its experiential and affective dimensions.

Relationality, Attachment, and Emotional Infrastructure

The metaphor analysis highlights a second, relational register. When parents describe a toy as a "friend," "companion," or "family member," they articulate toys as part of children's emotional infrastructure – objects that mediate comfort, attachment, and everyday companionship. This framing resonates with sociocultural accounts that treat material objects as participants in social relationships and as carriers of meaning within family routines. In this sense, toys function not only as pedagogical tools but also as resources for intimacy and self-expression.

From the standpoint of philosophy and society, these relational metaphors also point to normative ideals of "good childhood" that include warmth, creativity, and security. They complicate purely consumerist readings of toy acquisition by showing that parents often justify purchases in terms of care and emotional wellbeing, not merely in terms of status or entertainment.

Commodification, Risk Management, and Regulation

The third lens foregrounds commodification and regulation. Parents' attention to safety, appropriateness, and potential negative effects suggests that toy choice is also treated as a matter of risk management. This aligns with the idea

that modern family life increasingly involves navigating expert claims, market signals, and anxieties about harm (Beck 1992). In our findings, concerns about technological toys and their perceived effects echo broader debates about the social organization of childhood under conditions of digitalization and consumer expansion.

Taken together, the three lenses clarify why the results cannot be read as a simple list of preferences. Parents' toy choices are situated at the intersection of (a) future-oriented developmental investments, (b) relational and affective needs, and (c) market-driven risks and regulatory concerns. Toys thus emerge as everyday sites where cultural ideals, economic structures, and moral responsibilities are negotiated.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study is limited by its sample size, its focus on a single urban setting (Mersin), and the reliance on self-reported statements. Future research could compare different socioeconomic groups, examine the role of advertising and social media in shaping toy meanings, and include observational data on how children actually use toys at home. Such work would deepen the link between metaphorical constructions and everyday practices, strengthening contributions to debates on consumption, childhood, and family life.

Implications for Inequality, Markets, and Public Guidance

A broader implication concerns inequality and the commercialization of "good parenting." When toys are framed primarily as instruments for cognitive advantage, families with greater economic resources may be better positioned to access expensive "educational" products, while other families may rely on improvised play materials or secondhand toys. In this sense, the cultural elevation of educational toys may unintentionally reinforce classed distinctions in early childhood opportunities.

Public guidance therefore matters: rather than equating good play with consumption, early childhood professionals and policymakers can emphasize low-cost, child-led play practices, community play spaces, and toy-sharing initiatives. Regulatory attention to marketing claims – especially around digital and "smart" toys – may also reduce parental anxiety and support more informed decisions. For a Philosophy and Society audience, these findings invite reflection on how markets, expert discourses, and family moral responsibilities converge in the everyday politics of childhood.

Overall, the study highlights toys as morally and culturally charged objects through which contemporary childhood, care, and social expectations are continuously negotiated.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that parents most often preferred intelligence-enhancing toys, while movement-based toys held the highest first-rank priority in selection. In discussing the meaning of play and toys, parents emphasized developmental support alongside enjoyment and quality time, and they reported prioritizing toys that foster children's knowledge, skills, and overall developmental needs. Parents also framed toys through a rich metaphorical language, most notably describing them as "friends," which highlights their emotional and relational significance in children's everyday lives.

Beyond these descriptive patterns, the analysis demonstrates that parental talk about toys is structured by broader cultural scripts of contemporary parenting. Preferences for educational toys point to a future-oriented developmental logic, whereas relational metaphors foreground toys as companions and affective resources within family life. Concerns about safety and appropriateness further suggest that toy selection is shaped by the management of perceived risks within expanding consumer markets. Taken together, these findings show that toy consumption is not a neutral practice but an everyday site where ideals of childhood, care, and parental responsibility are continuously negotiated.

Implications

Based on the findings of this study, the following implications are suggested:

1. Educational programs may be developed to increase parents' awareness of age-appropriate toy selection and the value of child-led, low-cost play practices.
2. Toy manufacturers may design products that support cognitive and motor development while avoiding exaggerated "educational" claims that could intensify parental anxiety.
3. Early childhood education policies may encourage play-based learning environments and promote access to developmentally rich play materials in public preschools.
4. Parents' metaphorical perceptions should be considered in family guidance programs, as metaphors reveal the values, expectations, and concerns shaping everyday parenting decisions.
5. Community-based toy-sharing initiatives (e.g., toy libraries) and safe public play spaces may help reduce inequalities in access to quality play materials.
6. Clear public guidance and consumer protection regarding safety standards and marketing practices – particularly for digital and smart toys – may support more informed parental choices.

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Metaforička percepcija igračaka kod roditelja i njihovi pogledi na igru

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad istražuje na koji način roditelji dece predškolskog uzrasta u Turskoj razumeju „igračke" putem metafora i kako ta značenja oblikuju njihove stavove o igri i izboru igračaka. Oslanjajući se na kvalitativni fenomenološki pristup, sprovedeni su polustrukturirani intervjui sa 25 roditelja. Analiza metafora korišćena je za identifikovanje ponavljajućih figurativnih konstrukcija o igračkama, dok je deskriptivna tematska analiza primenjena na ispitivanje iskaza roditelja o igri i kriterijumima za kupovinu. Roditeljske metafore grupisale su se oko tri interpretativna registra: igračke kao saputnici (afektivna i relaciona podrška), kao razvojna sredstva (učenje i ulaganje usmereno ka budućnosti) i kao roba (predmeti koji se procenjuju na osnovu bezbednosti, trajnosti i cene). Dominacija metafore „prijatelja" ističe ulogu igračaka u svakodnevnom emocionalnom životu dece, dok okviri ulaganja i robe otkrivaju na koji način razvojni ideali i ekonomska ograničenja zajednički oblikuju donošenje roditeljskih odluka. Povezujući svakodnevni govor roditelja sa širim pitanjima društvene organizacije detinjstva, potrošnje i regulisanja „dobrog" roditeljstva, ova studija ukazuje na implikacije za obrazovanje u ranom detinjstvu, savetovanje porodica i javne politike.

Ključne reči: igra, igračke, metafore, roditeljske percepcije

UDK: 13:141.82
DOI https://doi.org/10.2298/FID2603605S
Original Scientific Article
Received 03.09.2025. Accepted 14.04.2026.

PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIETY
VOL. 37, NO. 3, 405–700

To cite text:
Song, Yifan. 2026. "Living Institutions, Violence, and Communal Forms of Life: Towards a Marxist Social Ontology." *Philosophy and Society* 37 (3): 605–630.

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LIVING INSTITUTIONS, VIOLENCE, AND COMMUNAL FORMS OF LIFE: TOWARDS A MARXIST SOCIAL ONTOLOGY[1]

ABSTRACT
This article re-examines Marx and Engels's conceptualizations of what constitutes a "living institution." The concept of living institutions transcends the conventional state–civil society binary, revealing plural anthropological practices that are simultaneously emancipatory and normative. I trace the various manifestations of the "living institution" throughout the development of Marx's thought, from his early polemics against the historical school of law to the mature expressions of historical materialism. In the latter, Marx theorizes the ambivalence of violence, viewing it either as a manifestation of social vitality and transformation or as the "inorganic naturalization" of society in the service of social reproduction. Historical materialism implies that a new institutional imagination can only take root through the re-institutionalization of existing, concrete institutions. This imperative ultimately leads Marx in his later years to engage deeply with anthropology, ethnology, and non-Western societies. Specific forms of communal life, as Marx recognized, often outlive their own era, possessing an "afterlife" (Nachleben) that introduces heterogeneous and plural temporalities into contemporary society.

KEYWORDS
living institution; habits; violence; inorganic nature; non-Western society

Conventionally associated with functionalist or conservative thought, where order and stability are posited as society's central objectives, the concept of the "institution" has long been marginalized within Marxist philosophy. Yet, in its essence, the institution, understood as an anthropological practice within plural forms of life, opens a conceptual horizon beyond the binary framework of state and civil society. It redirects attention to human actions across micro-level domains (such as the embodiment, habits, and imagination) and meso-level formations (such as clans, families, and matrimonial institutions).

1 I am deeply grateful to Prof. Petar Bojanić, Prof. Tao Qi and two anonymous reviewers for their invaluable and constructive comments on the topic of life and institution.

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This multiplicity resists reduction to, or territorialization within, any singular state form. The institution operates simultaneously as a condition of social existence (expressed in the Hegelian term "inorganic nature") and, in its verbal sense (instituting), as a source of movement and radical imagination.

Recently, Roberto Esposito has rearticulated the genealogy of institutions through the lens of "to institute life" (*vitam instituere*): "How can we restore the connection between institutions and life, overcoming the theoretical and political deadlock that barred its expression throughout the twentieth century? Let us start from the first side of the question, that is, the oft-repeated need to 'give life' to institutions, in both senses of instituting and revitalizing them." (Esposito 2022: 85) For Esposito, this genealogy of vitam instituere traces from Machiavelli and Spinoza to Hegel's concept of "second nature." Yet Marxist philosophy, a foundational source of critical social theory, is conspicuously absent from this narrative. The questions of how Marx synthesizes resources from both Spinoza and Hegel, and how his institutional thought emerges through his critiques of the historical school of law and Saint-Simonianism, remain largely under-examined.

Intriguingly, Marx and Engels themselves, when analyzing concrete institutional forms, consistently employ the terminology of "viability" (Lebensfähigkeit)[2]. They repeatedly assert, for instance, that "it is not a question of restoring a bogus Poland, but of restoring *the state upon a viable foundation (Herstellung eines Staats auf lebensfähiger Grundlage)*" (Engels 1848, CW 7: 352; MEW 5: 334). Similarly, they note that "*the vitality of primitive communities (Lebensfähigkeit der Urgemeinschaften)* was incomparably greater than that of Semitic, Greek, Roman, and other societies, and, a fortiori, than that of modern capitalist societies" (Marx 1881, CW 24: 389-390; MEW 19: 386).

2 Marx and Engels occasionally distinguish between the terms "Lebenskraft" (e.g., the Mark community "infused new vitality [neue Lebenskraft] into dying Europe") and "Lebensfähigkeit" (e.g., "restoring the state upon a viable foundation [Herstellung eines Staats auf lebensfähiger Grundlage]"). This distinction remains largely inconspicuous in English translations, which frequently conflate the two as "vitality" or "viability." While both terms are inherently interconnected through their shared root of "life" (Leben), their connotations in German diverge subtly: (1) *Lebenskraft,* understood as a living force, emphasizes the immanent drive and impulse of life, a concept epitomized by "labor power" (Arbeitskraft). This lineage can be traced back to post-Kantian Romanticism, such as Blumenbach's Bildungstrieb and the tradition of chemical physiology, notably Johann Christian Reil's *Von der Lebenskraft* (1795). In his *Naturphilosophie*, Schelling sought to synthesize these two sources, arguing that even within purely inorganic matter, there exist conflicting principles of life, see Zammito (2023). By interpreting nature as an organic and conflicting unity, this perspective exerted a profound influence on the young Marx, particularly during his doctoral dissertation period. (2) *Lebensfähigkeit*, which synthesizes "life" (Leben) and "ability" (Fähigkeit), leans towards a structural and existential possibility. It represents vitality as mediated through objective institutional forms. An institution may possess Lebenskraft (such as the collective identity of its people), yet it will nonetheless perish if it lacks Lebensfähigkeit, that is, the objective capacity to endure, such as a stable economic foundation or geographical advantage.

In their analyses of non-Western societies (such as India, Mexico, and Algeria), Marx and Engels persistently invoke the "viable" character of clan-based institutions to articulate resistance against colonialism, if they could be reactivated by modern communism.

These formulations resist straightforward assimilation into the "state–civil society" analytical framework. Instead, they suggest that communism cannot be reduced to a simple abolition of the state and institutions; rather, it must entail a re-institutionalization of communal forms of life, namely the establishment of "living institutions." This implies, first, that the institution has its own life and possesses unique temporalities and rhythms, irreducible to the exclusive temporality of capitalist modernity; second, that the living institution must remain responsive to the living conditions of social members, reactivating the sediments, habits, and affects at the foundation of society[3]. In sum, this article addresses three intersecting themes: the relationship between life and institution, the role of violence, and communal forms of life. Together, these elements constitute the foundation of a Marxist social ontology.

The Institutional Debates in *Vormärz*: A Vitalist Reading of Young Marx

The Vormärz period plays a profoundly significant role in shaping radical thought in Germany. The era marks the impending demise of an old epoch, while the principles of a new world have yet to be firmly established. "The chasm of the great French Revolution closes only in outward appearance; in reality, the world stands at the beginning of a whole 'Age of Revolutions,' in which the masses win from the upper classes an independent political power" (Löwith 1969: 26). People anticipate that a just new order will emerge from conditions of suffering. Philosophically, this period signals the decline of German classical philosophy, as the reconciliation between reason and faith, or state and religion, seems increasingly untenable. Progressive intellectuals, influenced by the French Revolution, actively incorporate socialist ideas – particularly Saint-Simonianism – into their theoretical frameworks. The so-called *Verfassungsfrage* (constitutional question), concerning the distribution of power between the people and the monarchy, becomes a highly sensitive and critical issue. Young Marx, during his studies in Berlin, is undoubtedly familiar with this debate, as his two professors, Friedrich Carl von Savigny and Eduard Gans, represented opposing stances on the constitutional question.

Savigny inherits the romantic tradition's emphasis on the vitality of "life" and the ideal of constructing a German nation-state. He argues that the law of

3 The discussion of "the institution" in post-war French philosophy emerged with Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze, extended to Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort, and has radiated to contemporary Italian thought (e.g., Esposito). At the same time, discussions on "the common" and institutions arose in the field of jurisprudence, as seen in the works of Maurice Hauriou and Santi Romano. see Seyfert (2011) and Spanò (2019).

the new world does not derive from the legislator's will but from the "common consciousness of the people" (gemeinsame Bewußtsein des Volks), infusing history with a sense of national unity. Law has a "twofold life" (ein doppeltes Leben) (Savigny 1999: 19). It is inextricably linked to the organic growth of the national spirit while also embodying a distinct technical and scientific life. The historical school of law seeks the origins of law in the customary practices of the people, but its essence is a defense of the *ancien régime*. In other words, the historical school romanticizes the feudal institutions of the Middle Ages, constructing a mythic Germanic world. The national habits, which Savigny regards as truly vital, are in fact remnants of an "inorganic nature." They resist reflection and fail to respond to the revolutionary affects of the multitude at the present. Even for many Old Hegelians (represented by Carl Friedrich Göschel, Hermann Friedrich Wilhelm Hinrichs, Heinrich Leo, etc.), their conservatism resonates with that of Savigny. Starting from the premise that "whatever is real is rational," they defend the status quo of Prussia and proclaim that the state already signifies the end of history. As Marx later remarks: "A school to which history shows nothing but its a posteriori, as did the God of Israel to his servant Moses, the historical school of law – this school would have invented German history were it not itself an invention of that history" (Marx 1843, CW 3: 177; MEW 1: 380).

In contrast to Savigny, Gans develops all the ambiguous elements of Hegel's philosophy of right into a clear radical liberalism. He demands a rational foundation for the modern state, rather than justifying it solely through shared national history. He advocates the transition from an absolutist state to a constitutional one, insisting that even the monarch must be subordinate to the functional structure of the state. Considering the intellectual debates of his time, it is difficult to categorize Gans simply within the Right Hegelians. In *Naturrecht und Universalrechtsgeschichte,* Gans continues Hegel's critique of Savigny:

> This philosophy of positive law contains nothing more than *the presentation of appearance* (Darstellung der Erscheinung). No genuine thought is found within it, but merely a pure enumeration of what exists positively – a repetition of the nomenclature found in positive law. *Institutions, for example, have been elevated and disseminated simply because they have appeared (Die Institutionen z.B. sind deshalb erhoben und verteilt worden, weil sie erschienen sind)* (Gans 2005: 5).

He further insists that the idea of law must realize itself, breathing life into institutions rather than justifying and affirming what is remaining in the past:

> The *Idea of law* would have been very weak had it not realized itself. For what does not come into appearance is weak, and what is truly Idea must appear [...] one must grasp the Idea and not remain stuck in *what institutions have been*. Instead, one must allow law to develop out of itself (so muss man die Idee auffassen und nicht dabei stehenbleiben, was die Institute gewesen sind, sondern man muss das Recht sich aus sich selbst entwickeln lassen) (Gans 2005: 6).

By advocating the idea of law as freedom, Gans arrives at several genuinely radical conclusions: "If the constitution of the people is not right for them, if it's totally different from what they want, they'll get rid of it and change themselves, and these are the foundational crises in history, the revolutions" (Gans 2005: 215–216). This radical stance earns Gans high praise from the Young Hegelians, who incorporates the liberal and socialist dimensions of Saint-Simonian associationism[4] into his thought. However, Gans's liberalism ultimately seeks a reconciliation with Hegel's philosophy of the state. By defending the principles of individual freedom and private property – particularly evident in his staunch belief in inheritance rights – Gans promotes the establishment of free corporations, aiming to secure the ethical safeguarding of civil society through collective negotiation and contractual relations. (In the second section, I argue that Marx diverges from this view, positing negotiation as merely a process of normalization that obscures the violent foundations of institutions.)

It is evident that the theoretical origins of the young Marx align more closely with Gans than with Savigny. In 1842, when Savigny is appointed as the minister responsible for revising Prussian law, Marx composes *Das philosophische Manifest der historischen Rechtsschule*[5] as a response. Ostensibly criticizing Gustav Hugo's skepticism, which closely follows Kant in reinforcing the dichotomy between phenomena and noumena, Marx interprets the historical school as a betrayal of the German Idealist commitment to the "rationality". The principle of reason guarantees that institutions must be founded on freedom, whereas the suspension of reason implies a justification for the oppressive and arbitrary elements of feudalism. "Therefore, he by no means tries to prove that *the positive is rational*; he tries to prove that *the positive is irrational"* (Marx 1842, CW 1: 204; MEW 1: 79). Hugo constructs a world consisting solely of historical remains. He reduces the domain of law to a purely natural, animalistic realm (for example, marriage is predicated not on ethical life but rather on sexual impulses), devoid of the dynamic interplay between life and institutions. Marx, as a precursor to genealogical critique, declares that positive law is essentially the "*law of despotic violence [Das Recht der willkürlichen Gewalt]*," implicitly targeting Savigny—"*Hugo's successor"*—as someone who is not "*fit to be the legislators of our time [die Gesetzgeber unserer Zeit zu sein]"* (Marx 1842, CW 1: 209; MEW 1: 84–85).

However, the position of the young Marx cannot be perfectly conflated with that of Gans. What emerges as crucial here is not the question of rationality, but rather the question of "life" as inspired by Ludwig Feuerbach's naturalism. Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) delivers a profound theoretical shock to the Young Hegelians, introducing a special kind of naturalism into constitutional debates. The crux of the matter can no longer be confined merely to political emancipation; it extends to whether life can flourish on a natural

4 Concerning the intellectual relationship between Eduard Gans, the Young Hegelians, and Saint-Simonianism, see Breckman (2001) and Waszek (2015).

5 Young Marx's debates with the historical school of law, see Kelley (1978).

scale and whether human solidarity can be achieved. Feuerbach's concept of genus, if correctly interpreted as an infinite openness of life, a unity of forms in metamorphosis[6] rather than a simple, homogeneous essence, helps clarify why the young Marx turns to labor (a distinctly human capacity) to articulate the mutual transformation between organic and inorganic nature. Humans, as genus-being (Gattungswesen), possess the very ability *to institute* a certain kind of "second nature." This is a capacity that Catherine Malabou, in her reading of Hegel's philosophical anthropology, specifically attributes to the "plasticity" of the human body (Malabou 2004: 57–75), simultaneously transforming one's own inner nature and the objective world, rather than merely consuming and exhausting them as animals do.

Feuerbach seeks to reinterpret the formation of institutions through a naturalistic anthropology of the body. For instance, the sanctity of marriage, property, and civil law does not derive from religion conferring sacredness upon them; rather, these are regarded as divine institutions only because our "affections" within social relations encounter this sacredness directly. As Feuerbach asserts: "Property does not become sacred because it is regarded as a *divine institution (göttliches Institut)*, but it is regarded as a divine institution because it is felt to be in itself sacred. Love is not holy because it is a predicate of God, but it is a predicate of God because it is in itself divine" (Feuerbach 2008: 224). Love represents the paradigmatic model of projection and objectification in life activity. It creates institutions, and conversely, established institutions affirm love. In this way, Feuerbach radically traces the origin of institutions back to certain forms of living experience. Law becomes empty when examined only from within; it must critically reflect on its own boundaries, namely, nature or life. If the debate over institutions is to break free from the confines of legal positivism, this "counter-right" must often be sought in pre-conceptual affections and the human sensuous process of objectification.

Feuerbach's discussion of the relationship between life and institutions marks a turning point in the young Marx's political and social thought. In his subsequent commentary on the debates over the theft of wood, Marx interrogates the "genesis of law," scrutinizing and reorienting Hegel's proposition that "law (Recht) is the existence (Dasein) of freedom" within specific,

6 Recently, Thomas Khurana, drawing on Hegel's philosophy of nature and philosophy of spirit, argues that the genus-process (Gattungsprozess) constitutes a third moment alongside the process of shape and assimilation. The genus (Gattung) differs from the species (Art). A species (such as the human species) remains an abstract universality, whereas the genus, in a certain sense, signifies the "completion of the idea of life." It emerges as the outcome of life undergoing complex morphological transformations and interactions with the external environment, and cannot be reduced to any form of anthropocentrism. This interpretation is particularly helpful for understanding Feuerbach's concept of Gattung, since for Feuerbach, the category of genus is broader than that of "human": drawing on a certain pantheistic perspective, the entire natural world manifests different levels of life through the genus, see Khurana (2022).

conflict-ridden conditions.[7] The theft of wood reflects a struggle between the customary law of the aristocracy and that of the impoverished. From the perspective of positivistic institutional history, gathering fallen wood constitutes a violation of the private property rights of forest owners. However, Marx goes further, arguing that behind positive law lies the habitualization and normalization of the aristocracy's violent appropriation of social surplus products, which are, in essence, "customary wrongs."

The customary rights of the aristocracy are founded on "lawlessness" (Unrecht), fixing primordial relations of inequality as state-sanctioned rights and declaring themselves positive law. Codified Roman law, or so-called "enlightened legislation", precisely obscures this origin, concealing the very moment of "instituting" that occurred at its genesis.

Confronting the aristocratic customary law, Marx attempts to reconnect "life" with the "institution" – or, rather, to *revitalize the institution*. Beyond the positive legal system, there exists a customary law of the poor that remains unrecognized by the state, yet constitutes the true source of a living institution. In other words, Marx reinterprets the category of habit (Gewohnheit) not merely as something given, but as a battleground for symbolic hegemony.[8]

To be more accurate, the customary law of the poor possesses two characteristics:

(1) Plurality at the margins: The customary law of the poor predominantly exists in the indeterminate zones of property relations. Just as Marx affirms "contingency" in Epicurus's philosophy in his *doctoral dissertation*, embracing these accidents and ambiguities opens a gray area for life to flourish. Yet, these local customary laws are excluded by established institutions. Legislative minds, drawing on the abstract private law of Roman jurisprudence, try to erase all such contingencies. "Little thought is needed to perceive how *one-sidedly* enlightened legislation has treated and been compelled to treat *the customary rights of the poor,* of which the various *Germanic* rights can be considered the most prolific source [als deren ergiebigste Quelle man die verschiedenen germanischen Rechte] [...] They abolished particular customs, but in so doing forgot that whereas the wrong of the estates took the form of arbitrary pretensions,

7 Although Rancière's interpretation of genus and "species" here is highly problematic, I find his reading of the wood theft debates illuminating. Specifically, his observation that "the relation between feudalism and the 'epoch of general laws' is in fact not historical but ontological" Rancière (2019: 13) enables us to understand why, in the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, the distinction between democracy and other political forms is not merely a difference in forms of government, but rather an ontological difference. Only this ontological difference can substantiate a vitalist reading.

8 When reading Hegel's philosophical anthropology, Žižek has already realized this special meaning of habits: "habits are always 'unexpected,' contingent, an accident elevated to universal necessity. The predominance of one or another habit is the result of a struggle for hegemony, for which accident will occupy the empty place of the universality." see Žižek (2009: 119)

the right of those without social estate appeared in the form of accidental concessions" (Marx 1842, CW 1: 232; MEW 1: 117).

(2) Vitality: Marx further argues that, as the gathering of wood is an expression of life, the poor possess a "natural right" to resist naturalized "lawlessness" (Unrecht). Here, his position resonates with Spinoza's doctrine of natural right or the right of war in the *Political Treatise*. Based on their existential needs and their status as a part of nature, the poor claim nature's gifts as their own. This customary law remains a vital force that has not yet been assimilated into the established state system.

> In these customs of the poor class, therefore, there is an instinctive sense of right; their roots are positive and legitimate, and the form of customary right here conforms *all the more to nature (naturgemäßer)* because up to now *the existence of the poor class* itself has been a mere *custom* of civil society, a custom which has not found an appropriate place in the conscious organisation of the state. (Marx 1842, CW 1: 234; MEW 1: 119)

The pursuit of a *naturgemäßer* form of life already contains the seeds of radical politics and establishes the framework for Marx's critique of Hegel's philosophy of right, which returns the institution to its vital roots. Later, following Spinoza, Marx distinguishes "democracy" from other political forms as the most natural form of life, an expression of life as the genus (Gattung). He extends Feuerbach's concept of "genus-being" (Gattungswesen) into the political sphere, thereby decentralizing the state: "Democracy is the genus constitution (Verfassungsgattung). Monarchy is one species, and a poor one at that. Democracy is content and form. Monarchy is supposed to be only a form, but it falsifies the content" (Marx 1843, CW 3: 29; MEW 1: 230–231).

There are always certain aspects of life-practice that are not objects of state control, but rather processes of institutionalization and socialization. Marx is clear here that democracy is a form-of-life[9] rather than a form of government. It is radical precisely because it fundamentally relates to the ontological status of all social members. Therefore, democracy is rooted in society instead of the state *per se*. It demands an institutional framework that engages all social members and activates human productivity and social vitality. Marx specifically notes here that the struggle between monarchy and republic remains a discussion confined to the sphere of the abstract state. "The *political* republic is democracy within the abstract state form." (Marx 1843, CW 3: 31; MEW 1: 232) In this context, republic serves as the negation of monarchy only within the political domain (Marx here conceives of it through Rousseau's idea of

9 The connection between Marx's radical democracy and Spinozism can be traced back to the pioneering work of Maximilien Rubel, which is also an important resource for Miguel Abensour. Martin Saar explicitly interprets this radical democracy as a form of life, while Vittorio Morfino insightfully discerns its conceptual linkage to what Marx later describes as socialism in *On the Jewish Question*, see Saar (2013: 387–391) and Morfino (2013: 179-203).

public will), where the people must distort their own nature to become political man (*homo politicus)*, coalescing into a single, unified will. However, democracy is actually an integral part of social emancipation, which must address how the pluralistic social members within civil society transform and reorient their own desires and needs.

The people (*potentia multitudinis* in Spinoza's term) create institutions, and in turn, the sphere of material life absorbs, nurtures, and activates the political domain: "Democracy is *the essence of all state constitutions*—socialized man as a *particular* state constitution [So ist die Demokratie das *Wesen aller Staatsverfassung*, der sozialisierte Mensch, als eine *besondre Staatsverfassung*]" (Marx 1843, CW 3: 30; MEW 1: 231). Hegel's class system merely fragments organic relations into oppositions between species. Just as the customary law of the poor stands in relation to that of the aristocracy, democracy represents a higher vital principle that activates the pluralistic forces within material society. Miguel Abensour, in his close reading of this texts, correctly points out, Marx encounters here a Machiavellian or Spinozist moment: the state must be "*reduced*" to the collective self-determination of the *demos,* namely, "a path beyond the political State would be opened by the democratic institution of society, such that the demos manifests and recognizes itself as demos in all realms of human life while respecting the specificity of each one." (Abensour 2011: 66) Moreover, in the preface to the Italian edition, Abensour focuses on the institutional dimension of "true democracy", which implies "a distancing, in the name of the institution, from sovereignty and the law; the only avenue open to the institution is that of greater plasticity, more openness to events, and a stronger disposition to welcome the new." (Abensour 2011: xxviii) The institution creates two temporalities –- the overthrow of a state system and the opening of a new communal form. This transitional phase begins with the people's desire for freedom and struggles constantly against the restorative efforts of the old state apparatus, thereby opening a space where conflict cannot be eliminated and the people are empowered with vitality. Abensour formally traces the idea of "true democracy" throughout the entirety of Marx's thought, specifically linking it to the study of the Paris Commune.

In sum, Marx's critique of Hegel aims at reviving the verbal dimension of "*vitam instituere.*" Movement is inherent to the concept of the institution, granted by the mutability of life itself: "It becomes necessary that the movement of the constitution, that *advance*, be made *the principle of the constitution* and that therefore the real bearer of the constitution, the people, be made the principle of the constitution. Advance itself is then the constitution" (Marx 1843, CW 3: 57; MEW 1: 259). This new form of life requires the full activation and mobilization of "social life," reciprocally nourishing the formation of institutions and subordinating the state to the growth of society, creating more spaces for engagement and wild imagination. It may be argued that the young Marx's social philosophy is, at its core, a philosophy of the "living institution."

Violence and the Inorganic Nature in Historical Materialism

In this article, I do not intend to accentuate the alleged break between the young Marx and his later thought, but rather to highlight the varying manifestations of the "living institution" across different stages. The radical democracy advocated by the young Marx as a form of life soon finds a more comprehensive expression in socialism. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx elaborates on the idea of social life: "His manifestations of life—even if they may not appear in the direct form of communal manifestations of life carried out in association with others—are therefore an expression and confirmation of *social life (gesellschaftlichen Lebens)"* (Marx 1844, CW 3: 299; MEW 40: 538–539).

However, this also raises a crucial question: if institutions inherently possess vitality, then violence may well constitute an essential element of the institution[10]. The Historical School and Gans's free corporations attempt to conceal the presence of violence within the social framework, whereas Marx precisely grasps the ambivalent function of violence. This insight leads us to Marx's mature formulations regarding social formations and historical materialism.

(1) On the one hand, *from the perspective of life*, a living institution cannot claim to be the antithesis of violence (Gewalt) or forces (Kräfte). As Balibar aptly observes: "Violence can't be simply the other of politics, unless we want to imagine a politics without powers, power relations, inequalities, conflicts, or interests, which would be tantamount to a politics without politics." (Balibar 2020: 386)

The very foundation of Marx's social ontology, whether in the origin, maintenance, or dissolution of society, we invariably encounter the traces of violence. The mutual mediation between life and institution suggests that for any given society, its organic and inorganic spheres, the boundaries between nature and society, remain in a state of constant, dynamic adjustment. For Marx, nature is not an external object, but rather a 'relation' or a 'network' whose boundaries are demarcated by social practice; thus, the very act of naturalization inherently involves the intervention of violence. This point is most vividly illustrated in his application of the concept of "inorganic nature" (*unorganische Natur*).

As early as in the *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx has already theorized the dialectical mutual transformation between the inorganic and organic nature: "Nature is man's *inorganic body* – nature, that is, insofar as it is not itself human body (Körper). Man *lives* on nature – means that nature is his *body* (Leib), with which he must remain in continuous interchange (in beständigem Prozeß) if he is not to die" (Marx 1844, CW 3: 276; MEW 40: 516).

10 Petar Bojanić has noticed these violent roots of institutions. "The idea that violence can be transformed, which is to say preserved in a different and acceptable form, appears as a perfect fiction to keep a group, large or small, together. If the community is still active, that is, still acts jointly, with its members in close proximity to one another, sharing language, goods, money, affection, labor, etc. - this is a good sign that force has been, at least seemingly, successfully transformed, bad acts either hidden well or incorporated into a group holding together" Bojanić (2022: 12).

On the one hand, this passage carries profound implications of political ecology. *Körper* belongs simultaneously to nature and humanity; through its divisibility, it manifests the entire life process as a continuous metabolism and interchange between individuals. Human objective activity cannot thoroughly "conquer" nature by transforming it into "organic nature," but can only reactivate it. On the other hand, the text suggests that the organic and inorganic, life and death, are not two diametrically opposed categories with fixed boundaries. Rather, they represent two perspectives or possibilities of life itself.[11] Marx hence implies a unique while necessary reality of social reproduction: the vital and activated body (Leib) can also be transformed into a naturalized, inorganic physical body (Körper).

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx frequently considers the instituted part of social history as the inorganic nature of subjects (unorganische Natur vorgefundner Leib seiner Subjektivität). He relates this to the analysis of violent social reproduction: "In the relation of slavery and serfdom [...] one part of society is treated by another as the mere inorganic and natural condition of its own reproduction" (Marx 1857-58, CW 28: 413; MEW 42: 397). A core feature of pre-capitalist societies is that individuals are always presupposed within their "inorganic nature." The objective conditions of labor are not the products of labor but exist as pre-given nature – namely the laborer's land, means of production, and relations of consanguinity – which continuously reproduce the same individual. However, society constantly re-regulates the boundary between "inorganic nature" and "society." For instance, war, as a representative institution of social interaction, incorporates plundered slaves into the category of nature while denying their social identity.

This usage of "inorganic nature" is already prefigured in Hegelian philosophy. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "This past existence has already become an acquired possession of the universal spirit; it constitutes the substance of the individual, or, his inorganic nature" (Hegel 2018: 18). Here, inorganic nature represents the inherent dissonance of second nature, the discarded forms of Spirit that individuals confront externally and unreflectively. Furthermore, in the *Philosophy of Nature*, when Hegel discusses the second moment of life – the process of assimilation – he argues that inorganic nature is defined only through its relation to the organism (Chaput 2025: 183-208). The inorganic nature of the animal is its external environment (Umwelt), a totality in which it inhabits. The process of assimilation implies that the animal must violently posit this part of the living world as part of itself, consuming and destroying it to complete the reproduction of life: "The animals and plants which the animal consumes are, it is true, themselves organic structures, but for this animal they are *relatively* its inorganic nature" (Hegel 1970: 398).

11 Butler has correctly pointed out the mutual transformation between inorganic and organic nature: "The human organism is bound up with inorganic nature for its own life, and can become inorganic for itself, living as a being both animated in some respects and de-animated in others." Butler (2019: 15)

Marx creatively grafts the term "inorganic nature" into the context of social philosophy. Inorganic nature is both the unreflective, presupposed condition of human being and a relation dynamically adjusted by society. The inorganization of social members manifests itself in wars and slavery, where their labor sustains the community yet remains invisible to civilizational discourse. At the origins of capitalism, during the stage of primitive accumulation, Marx vividly depicts how early colonial activities violently posit non-Western indigenous peoples, cheap labor, and precious metal resources as the "inorganic nature" of the entire capitalist society.

However, we must refrain from simplistically considering the constitutive function of violence as either normative or emancipatory. If the institution is indeed a transitional phase between two temporalities, superimposing different times, then this original violence within the institution, its vitality, should be capable of opening up a new form of communal life. Productive force, the power by which a society manages its own life, at specific moments leaps out of the given institutional arrangements (modes of production). This is precisely the sense in which violence is the "midwife" of a society. Yet, simultaneously, this violent character is obscured by the capitalist legal system, which guarantees employed labor and social contracts between "free" individuals, even during the phase of "bloody legislation." Consequently, in the stage of mature capitalism, the traces of this violence seem to vanish; in reality, however, the separation between the free subject and their inorganic nature has merely been completed in a structural manner – an entire working class has been excluded and posited as the inorganic condition of society. Violence is thus incorporated into the internal workings of the state apparatus.

In Benjaminian terms, this institutes a cyclical interplay of law-positing and law-preserving violence. In his analysis of the "working day," Marx, in a tone of proto-genealogy, states: "Between equal rights, violence decides (Zwischen gleichen Rechten entscheidet die Gewalt)" (Marx 1867, CW 35: 243; MEW 23: 249). Within the sphere of circulation, state power retains the illusion of neutrality. Both capitalist and worker are formally equal under the laws of exchange. Yet, no "just" adjudication within this legal framework is possible. If the worker's labor generates value equivalent only to the value of labor-power, surplus value evaporates. The capitalist thus insists on the buyer's right to extend the working day, while the worker asserts the seller's right to limit it within physiological bounds. In this constant struggle, a hidden civil war, the class that prevails through struggle imposes the so-called "normal working day." However, this institutional violence does not posit a new beginning as a revolution should; rather, it confines conflict within the nation-state and institutes new forms of normalization through negotiation, which merely represents the effect of state ideology. In this sense, Marx must seek a "new" form of violence or social vitality to put an end to capitalism, a Messianic moment[12]

12 I find Balibar's interpretation of the Messianic meaning of "the expropriators are expropriated" highly inspiring, see Balibar (2019).

that reverses the usage of violence, in which "the expropriators are expropriated" (Marx 1867, CW 35: 750; MEW 23: 791).

(2) *From an institutional perspective*, however, Marx also provides a critique of violence. Historical materialism acknowledges the presence of violence at the origins of history, yet refuses to reify it as an immutable inorganic nature, "without however, imagining that it was the plan or the destiny of previous generations to give them material, and without believing that these conditions were *inorganic* for the individuals creating them" (Marx 1845, CW 5: 81; MEW 3: 71). Historical materialists seek to redirect and re-institutionalization of vital force of society. Without the mediation of institutions, pure vitalism can also be taken advantage of by conservatism and lead only to pure destruction and blindness.

It seems there is always a constant tension between Marxism and anarchism in his era. When Marx asserts that "all social life is essentially *practical*," this should best be understood as "a flexible, decentralized instituent praxis" (Esposito 2022: 88), rather than an Moses Hessian anarchist philosophy of act (Tat). The latter implies a contempt for nature (reduced to a mere projection of the animal kingdom), as if human history could only begin where natural history ends. "In natural life, contradictions are the forms in which *the idea of life (Lebensidee)* manifests itself, so that here, without contradictions, there would be no life. But natural life is not the realization of freedom." (Hess 1962: 139) Hess further critiques the anarchism of Proudhon and Babeuf, arguing that they only conceive of the subject in action in a state of limitlessness (Schrankenlogigkeit) and non-determination (Bestimmungslosigkeit), a condition that inevitably relapses into the domination of one person over another. For Hess, true anarchism must be transformed into the self-determination of the actor, and open a new stage of human history by transcending its own pre-history, natural history, represented by the animal kingdom.[13] Calling for the realization of divine history (heilige Geschichte), Moses Hess shapes an ethical socialism that summons activism through the categories of absolute "freedom" and "equality", where people can find themselves in a pantheistic unity. Political action, to some extent, must transcend (or ignore) the various natural conditions presupposed by the institution.

Moses Hess and Max Stirner, despite their divergent appeals to "association" – whether conceived holistically or egoistically – demand that the world be arranged (eingerichtet) according to the self-determination of acting subjects. Yet, for Marx, the resulting arrangements (Einrichtungen) remain mere

13 Here I find Esposito's distinction between instituent power and constituent power particularly illuminating. Constituent power aims to activate the political as such, sacrificing the instituted dimension for a one-dimensional constituting process, and presupposing always-ready revolutionary subject. "The resumption today of explicitly anarchic stances follows the same line of argumentation, alternating between revolutionary calls for constituent power and appeals to destituent power. What connects them, albeit in opposition, is a demand for immediacy that opposes any institutional mediation." Esposito (2022: 13)

artifacts, detached from concrete social habits and the specificities of national character. Stirner revels in rebellion (Empörung) but shuns revolution. As Marx observes: "Every rebel in his 'egoistical act' is faced by a particular existing reality, over which he endeavors to rise, without regard to the general conditions" (Marx 1845, CW 5: 382; MEW 3: 366).

Here, Marx scoffs at the anarchists' lack of institutional imagination: "The rebels who strove to be 'without a constitution' [...] 'arrange things for themselves' by 'choosing' for themselves a 'constitution' of landed property. We see that Sancho [Stirner] was right in not placing any brilliant hopes in new 'institutions' (neuen „Institutionen")" (CW 5: 390–391; MEW 3: 375). If Marx and his pioneer Spinoza are thinkers of transindividuality, then they cannot be reduced to the perspectives of individualism or holism. In Marx's view, anarchists, whether appealing to pantheistic unity (Hess) or egoist association (Stirner), fundamentally lack a radical imagination for new institutions; as a result, they either simply draw their inspiration from pre-modern feudalistic institutions or turn to the non-institutional free associations. The distinction between Marxism and its contemporary anarchist counterparts[14] can be summarized in the following three aspects:

(a) In theorizing the relationship between revolution and institution, Marx eschews the overly "transparent" theories of emancipation found in Hess or Stirner (e.g., the divine history of linear progress, the *Bildungsgeschichte* of humanity, or non-coercive free associations). Instead, Marx insists on the ambivalent role of the state, the nation, and the imagination. While these institutional achievements certainly serve social domination, they inherently contain emancipatory elements within their revolutionary preconditions that allow for reactivation. Consequently, the revolutionary task shifts toward an immanent critique of the contradictory productive forces and social relations within society.

(b) Marx does not derive the acting subject from general ethical determinations or meta-normative categories (such as freedom, equality, or the "ego"). Normativity can only be conceived and realized through history. Indeed, the

14 Admittedly, Miguel Abensour has raised a formidable theoretical challenge here. He is equally keen to realize that Hess and Marx represent two distinct receptions of Spinozist philosophy: "If Hess pulls Spinoza over to the side of anarchy metamorphosed into ethics, Marx by contrast leads us back to Spinoza's thinking of democracy" Abensour (2011: 51). Strictly speaking, Hess seizes upon Chapter 17 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, the possibility of realizing a contemporary version of "true religion" modeled after the ancient Hebrew commonwealth. Marx, by contrast, focuses on Chapter 16, where democracy is understood as the most natural form of life. Within this interpretative framework, Abensour places greater emphasis on explaining the problem of democracy within the tradition of civic republicanism. I, however, place more weight on the naturalism inherent in the Spinozist interpretation. This means that my concern extends beyond the politicality of the *demos* to encompass the dimension of their natural and affective life. At the same time, for me, the institution is not merely a site for the possibility of conflict; I am also concerned with its broader significance, including its philosophical-anthropological connotations (such as imagination and second nature), collective action, and social solidarity.

notion that a subject can achieve total self-determination or construct a pure "philosophy of action", is itself a construct of modern civil society. Capitalist society requires a subject endowed with labor power while stripped of natural constraints, acting as a pure agent of action (Fischbach 2006). Conversely, Marx asserts that "the social character is the general character of the whole movement" (Marx 1844, CW 3: 298; MEW 40: 537). Here, "social character" is not a sentimental bond of love or a naturally unified "genus-being," but a social solidarity constructed through situational relationality, in which social members share the same fate.

(c) The idea of natural history (*Naturgeschichte*) differs fundamentally from that of divine history. From the perspective of social ontology, the living institution theory distinguishes itself from simple humanitarian or purely political-revolutionary stances. It focuses on the "gray zones" between society and nature, and between institution and life. In these zones, every social action must account for its relationship with non-human elements (this perspective of inter-objectivity is precisely what transindividual means): inorganic conditions, national sedimentations, external constitutive resources, and the "inner nature" of the people. While Proudhon and Hess attempt to purge "violence" from the social constitution, Marxian social ontology emphasizes that violence is an untransformable and unavoidable fact of natural history.

The living institution is neither a return to the past nor a project that "creates its poetry from the past." Rather, the living institution is essentially a form of tension: while it operates within the presupposition of natural conditions, it must simultaneously resist the tendency of naturalization in every institutions, continually reactivating and transforming the institution from within. This transformation is also called social revolution. This stance permeates Marx and Engels's positions on Poland, Ireland, and Asiatic societies. Society requires a certain "vital force" to forge communal forms of living and revolution must be thought precisely through its re-institutionalization.

Re-instituting Communal Living: From Margins of Europe to Non-western Societies

From the perspective of a social ontology, institutions possess a unique spatio-temporal characteristic. The temporality of institutions differs from the totalizing time of capitalism. The latter, through the concept of socially necessary labor time, tightly binds the entire modern world to an ever-accelerating, thoroughly quantified linear temporality. Yet institutions have their own life. Even when capitalist institutions have become rigid and lifeless, certain primordial institutions may still exhibit more dynamic vital forces (Tomba 2017: 58–77). If the capital-nation-state represents a narrow, monolithic form of life, institutions, by contrast, embody the absolute diversity of human life: a plural temporality that coexists with the totalizing time of modernity (for instance, people still perceive seasonal changes through their bodily rhythms). It is precisely on this basis that Marx, while analyzing capitalist society, actively

explores the institutional plurality at the margins of Europe, as well as in ancient and Asiatic societies. This plurality has the potential to become a powerful force of resistance against capital.

(1) Let us first examine the example of Poland, a peripheral European country, as mentioned at the beginning of the article. Here, I wish to distinguish between two concepts: the nationality of a society and the "principle of nationalities."

The "principle of nationalities" was a maneuver frequently exploited by the imperialism of Marx's era, most notably by Louis Bonaparte and Bismarck. The core idea of this principle is that the interests of a nation are merely bargaining chips to be exchanged within the capitalist world market; it respects neither ethnic pluralism nor a nation's historical traditions, natural-geographical foundations, or the affective basis of people's identity. Instead, it carves out territories through political violence (that is the reason why Engels comments on Bismarck's politics under the title "violence"). As Engels notes: "As Emperor he [Bismarck] not only made politics serve the interests of capitalist profits and stock exchange machinations, but also pursued politics entirely according to the rules of the stock exchange and speculated on the '*nationalities principle (Nationalitätsprinzip)*'" (Engels 1887-1888, CW 26: 462; MEW 21: 414). The "principle of nationalities" has nothing in common with national self-determination; its purpose is to incite national competition and transform the movements of smaller nations into instruments for the counter-revolutionary policies. We can see the direct result of Bismarck's Machtpolitik is the antagonism between nations and the violent exclusion of ethnic minorities (consider, for instance, Germany's repression of Jews, Poles, and Danes in North Schleswig). Nationalities principle fabricates a political conception of nature, positing a biologically grounded, exclusive race as the basis for a political unit. This mode of organizing community is inherently closed, demarcated by a rigid "friend-enemy" distinction that inevitably leads to the exclusion, or even violent segregation of other ethnic groups.

Now let us turn back to the Polish Question. The "principle of nationalities" does not concern itself with the institutionalization of life; it abstractly asserts that every nation has an inherent right to independence (e.g., Romanians and Italians, Manx and Welsh, regardless of their historical institutional achievements or bonds of solidarity, should each become independent sovereign states): "*The European importance, the vitality of a people (Die europäische Bedeutung eines Volkes, seine Lebenskraft)* is as nothing in the eyes of the principle of nationalities" (Engels 1866, CW 20: 157; MEW 16: 158). If nation-states were constructed solely along ethnic divisions, existing communities would only fragment further. For a long time, Poland had been under the threat of the Russian-Prussian-Austrian alliance, with its internal population comprising a mixture of Poles, Jews, Lithuanians, Belarusians, and other ethnic groups. If left to the dictates of the "principle of nationality," the Russian-speaking population in southeastern Poland would have been directly absorbed into the rule of Russia (Pan-Slavism), and Poland itself would have been fragmented into at least four separate states.

On the contrary, Marx and Engels approach Polish independence precisely from the perspective of life. An institution is an assembly of affects, imagination, custom, and social conditions. When an institution can effectively mobilize and guide oppressed groups, when it transcends nation-state-imposed boundaries to activate fluidity, it reveals the foundation of its vitality. As Marx argues in *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, concluding the "genus of the constitutions" as a form of life, the Polish question is ultimately about shaping a form of communal living, allowing the principle of vitality to reciprocally nourish the state form, transforming habits and historical legacies into sources of communal living rather than obstacles. Nationality is essentially a phenomenon of solidarity characterized by natural aggregation and pluralistic coexistence. While it certainly encompasses the naturalization inherent in any institution, this nationality can, under specific spatio-temporal and strategic relationship, be transformed into a resistant force through the social revolution's reactivation of its natural foundations. Hence, "it is not a question of restoring a bogus Poland, but of *restoring the state upon a viable foundation (Herstellung eines Staats auf lebensfähiger Grundlage*)" (Engels 1848, CW 7: 352; MEW 5: 334).

Here, the notion of "restoring the state" should not be simplified into the restoration of the bourgeois nation-state that needs to be ultimately abolished in classical Marxism. Rather, it is an instituent praxis, much like Spinoza's account of the formation of the ancient Hebrew commonwealth, or Hegel's idea of ethical life as a "living good" (lebendiges Gut). The viable foundation does not lie in the rigid demarcation of borders but in the awakening of shared sentiments and revolutionary consciousness. On the one hand, Poland needs independence, as it could serve as a bulwark for the socialist movement against Russian oppression. On the other hand, Marx and Engels deliberately tie Poland's national independence to the social solidarity that the proletariat could inspire. A Poland built on a viable foundation transcends racial or ethnic divisions, achieving a solidarity oriented toward the "genus" (Gattung) of humanity—namely, a unity of all oppressed classes where the ethnic distinctions between German and Polish workers no longer take precedence. In a famous speech on Poland, Marx clearly confirms:

> The victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie is, at the same time, victory over the national and industrial conflicts which today range the peoples of the various countries against one another in hostility and enmity. And so the victory of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie is at the same time the signal of liberation for all oppressed nations. (Marx 1847, CW 6: 388; MEW 4: 416)

Solidarity here is no longer confined to a closed, mono-ethnic unity but becomes a human solidarity forged through shared conditions and collective suffering. In short, the case of Poland demonstrates that the fundamental function of institutions is solidarity—an openness toward ever more members. This serves as a concrete starting point for revolution and resistance against imperialism.

(2) As entities stand upright and endure in time (in-statuere), institutions possess the capacity to accumulate, preserve, and transmit the emancipatory potential of the past into the present. Bojanić offers particularly incisive reflections on this, noting that the etymological roots of "institution" often intertwine with concepts like "will" or "testament."[15] Many of collective actions are undertaken for the sake of those who will join in later—to create the sediment that makes revolution possible, to open a space of possibility for the future. This dual function of the institution as "*sedimentation*" and "*for the future*" is crucial for Marxism.

A living institution often lives longer than its time, possessing what might be called, in Benjaminian terms, an *afterlife (Nachleben)*. As in Engels's retelling of European history, the "barbarism" of the Germans—specifically the Mark community—actually "infused *new vitality (neue Lebenskraft)* into dying Europe" (Engels 1884, CW 26: 254; MEW 21: 149). This primitive gentile institution "retained the *naturally evolved democratic character [naturwüchsig demokratischen Charakter]* which distinguishes the whole gentile order, and thus preserved a piece of the gentile constitution even in its degeneration, forced upon it in later times, thereby *leaving a weapon in the hands of the oppressed*, *viable even in modern times (lebendig bis in die neueste Zeit)*" (Engels 1884, CW 26: 251; MEW 21: 146). Engels also widely uses the terms "ein lebendiges Stück" and "noch lebendigen Erbschaften" to describe the heterogeneous and plural temporality created by the institution. What Germany bequeathed to Europe could not be the Realpolitik of Bismarck's rule, but rather a certain redirected and rearticulated "vitality," which initially appeared in a barbaric yet communal living. If democracy is understood as a naturally emergent form of life (which is profoundly a Spinozist expression), then Marx and Engels's late anthropological studies deeply resonate with their earlier critique of Hegel's philosophy of right, even accentuating the communal essence of such primal forms of life. These communal institutions could transcend established structures and transform into weapons in the hands of the oppressed.

In his late years, through his readings of Morgan and Kovalevsky, Marx turns his attention to the multiple forms of primitive communities, even borrowing geological terminology:

> The history of the decline of primitive communities (it would be a mistake to place them all on the same level; as in geological formations, these historical forms contain a whole series of primary, secondary, tertiary types, etc.) has still to be written. (Marx 1881, CW 24: 358; MEW 19: 386)

15 "There are sundry examples: the essence of giving a toast is the expectation of others joining it, as I also toast to those not present; I hasten to move when the light turns green, so that as many cars behind me could also pass; when taking a coffee at a local bistro, I pay for another coffee, for one who will drink it without paying (caffè sospeso); I pay my charge and tax now, while employed, in advance, to help those who are currently out of work; etc." Bojanić (2022: 31)

This geological terminology inevitably leads us to reflect on the "sedimentation" of institutions. Merleau-Ponty, in his lectures on institutions, employs a similar formulation:

> Every institution involves this double aspect, end and beginning, Endstiftung at the same time as *Urstiftung*. That is what sedimentation is: trace of the forgotten and thereby a call to thought which depends on itself and goes farther (Merleau-Ponty 2010: 758)

Strictly speaking, sedimented matter is not a vanished past or a mute "fossil." It possesses a porous and pliant quality (much like the tuff[16] formed by volcanic sedimentation in Naples), revealing glimmers within its dense, forgotten materiality. Marx's use of the geological metaphor here suggests that ancient communal institutions, though submerged in history, are not irrelevant to the present. Rather, they persist as a vital force sedimented at the foundation of institutions. Sedimentation, in turn, forms the ground for imagining future institutions.

In his excerpts on *Morgan's Ancient Society*, Marx notes:

> *Communism in living* seems to have originated in the *necessities of the consanguine family*, to *have been continued in the* punaluan, and transmitted to the *syndyasmian* unter d. American aborigines, with whom it remained a practice down to the epoch of their discovery – (and the *South Slavonians*? and even *Russians* to a certain degree?) (The italics are added by Marx himself.) (Marx 1974: 115)

This paragraph seems to imply that the communist mode of life indeed belongs to ancient communal institutions, yet it is not dead. It accumulates within existing social structures – within their geological strata – allowing for reactivation under specific conditions and even potentially accelerating revolutionary processes within institutional frameworks. In other words, the communist mode of life cannot be transcendentally blueprinted; it can only be lived out in each concrete social formation, varying from the South Slavonians to Russia, within specific institutional foundations and through contingent spatio-temporal practices.

The temporality of institutions also encompasses *contraction,* the *"tiger's leap,"* and *surges*. For instance, when addressing the Russian commune, Engels particularly emphasizes:

16 In addition to Merleau-Ponty, I will also provide an example from the German tradition. Benjamin, Lacis, and Bloch use Naples' porous, soft tuff to reflect on milieu and architecture, institutions in the broadest sense, extending this auratic spatial structure into philosophical thought: "Porös wie dieses Gestein ist die Architektur[...] In solchen Winkeln erkennt man kaum, wo noch fortgebaut wird und wo der Verfall schon eingetreten ist. Denn fertiggemacht und abgeschlossen wird nichts. Porosität begegnet sich nicht allein mit der Indolenz des südlichen Handwerkers, sondern vor allem mit der Leidenschaft für Improvisieren. Dem muß Raum und Gelegenheit auf alle Fälle gewahrt bleiben." Benjamin (1991: 309–310). Mittelmeier subsequently argues that this Neapolitan porosity serves as the hidden origin of Critical Theory, see Mittelmeier (2013).

> The countries which have only just succumbed to capitalist production and have salvaged gentile institutions (Gentileinrichtungen), or remnants thereof, have in these remnants (Resten) of common ownership and in the corresponding *popular customs (Volksgewohnheiten)* a powerful means of appreciably shortening the process of development into a socialist society and of sparing themselves most of the suffering and struggles through which we in Western Europe must work our way. (Engels 1894, CW 27: 426/MEW 22: 428)

This unique surge of socialist time, combining the remnants of living institutions and popular customs, holds the potential to overturn the entire institutional framework of modern temporality. The Russian rural commune's contemporaneity with Western capitalism transforms historical development into an "aleatory encounter" between material conditions, circumstances, and popular customs, thereby activating the inherent "vitality" of communal institutions in the present.

(3) Institutions are not lifeless, inorganic remnants; they can also serve as potent weapons of resistance. In his discussions on the institutions of Ireland, Indigenous peoples, and India, Marx cautions against blindly transposing European historical frameworks directly onto Asiatic societies, particularly in interpreting the decline of primitive communes through the lens of "feudalization." Anthropologists like Maksim Kovalevsky simplistically categorize Indian institutions, such as military tenures, tax-farming, and clientelism, as part of a feudalization process. Marx, however, explicitly refutes this, noting that India lacks both the personal dependencies of serfdom and full land privatization. Thus, "the imposition of land taxes did not transform their property into feudal property, any more than the impôt foncier turned French estates into feudal holdings. Kovalevsky's entire passage here is exceedingly clumsy." (Marx 1879-1880, MEGA2, IV.27)[17]. Marx's critical comments underscore the complexity of institutions: their analysis demands not just formal comparisons between East and West but a meticulous examination of the forms of life they engender, each with its distinct institutional temporality and developmental trajectory.

Here, historical materialism once again clashes with the historical school of law. Another key source for Marx's study of Indian history is Henry Maine's *Lectures on the Early History of Institutions*. Maine, the erudite British historian who is also considered a member of the historical school of law, believes that customary law precedes written law, framing British rule over India (as fellow Aryans) as an inevitability: "Linguistic affinities prove community of blood. But wherever the political theory of Nationality is distinctly conceived, it amounts to a claim that men of the same race shall be included, not in the same tribal, but in the same territorial sovereignty." (Maine 1880: 75). Maine

17 In this article, I have cited Marx's excerpts on Kovalevsky's Communal Land Ownership (Общинное землевладение). This text was made available in Chinese as early as 1985 in Volume 45 of the Collected Works of Marx and Engels (Chinese edition), which was translated from the Russian second edition. However, the original German manuscripts were not published in a critical edition until 2023–2024 in MEGA² IV.27, see Marx (2023/2024). The translation is mine.

reads history through the formation of race. Marx's engagement with Maine's work reveals that the question of institutions never left his horizon. He extends his early critiques of Hugo and Savigny, exposing how customary law naturalizes aristocratic privilege and primordial inequality. Historical materialism, by contrast, treats custom (Gewohnheit) as a contested terrain of hegemony, reanimating it as a site of struggle.

Marx condemns Maine's advocacy for transplanting British legal institutions to India as a means of "dynamic" societies overcoming "static" ones, a reflection of Victorian anthropologists' progressive optimism. Rejecting this colonial gaze, Marx writes: "Sir Henry Maine [...] assures us that all the government's noble efforts to support the communes were thwarted by the spontaneous violence of economic laws! [spontanen Gewalt der ökonomischen Gesetze]" (Marx 1881, CW 24: 359; MEW 19: 386).

To write history is to shape a nation's collective imagination. The decline of communal institutions cannot be reduced to economic inevitability; like primitive accumulation, it is underpinned by colonial violence. Marx repeatedly emphasizes that communal structures, whether in Ireland, India, or America, must be preserved as bulwarks against colonial aggression.

On this issue, there appears to be a certain tension between Engels and Marx. For instance, when discussing the primitive communal system in Java, Engels refers to it as "state socialism" and argues that these ancient institutions actually served as instruments for Dutch colonial domination:

> Here one sees how the Dutch have, on the basis of the communities' age-old communism, organised production *for the benefit of the state* [...] It also shows how there, as in India and Russia today, primitive communism (provided *no modern communist element comes to stir it up*) supplies the best and also the broadest basis for exploitation and despotism, and survives in the midst of modern society as an *anachronism (Anachronismus)* (to be eliminated or, one might almost say, turned back on its course) no less glaring than the Mark communities of the original cantons. (Engels 1884, CW 47:103; MEW 36: 109)

However, considering Engels' praise for the Mark community and the popular customs of the Russian commune discussed above, this does not contradict the theme of this article. Instead, it perfectly illustrates why "re-institutionalization" can only be an ambivalent rather than a transparent process. Gewohnheit (custom) itself is not a purely natural given entity, but a contested terrain of hegemonic symbols. It can be exploited and occupied by the dominated ideology, yet it can also be pivoted toward emancipation. Engels typically maintains a dual perspective when discussing primitive communes: one is the modernization perspective within world history, where old institutions must undergo a social revolution; the other is the anti-colonial perspective within the imperialist landscape. Indeed, it is during this same period that Engels devotes considerable energy to studying Irish history, customs, and the "character" of the Irish people, those institutional achievements bequeathed by nature. In the latter part of this letter, Engels actually praises Morgan's *Ancient*

Society and points out that a living institution is essentially an "anachronism" that must be "*stirred up*" by "modern communist elements." In other words, the key here is not whether the old Javanese institutions can be preserved, but how the institution can reactivate itself by de-centering the state (no longer "for the benefit of the state"), that excessively solidified and exclusive institutional form, and thus galvanizing naturally emergent democratic power. An institution becomes more "alive" the more it is able to bridge the past, the present, and the future. After all, for a living institution, the primary goal is not the maintenance of function or the prolongation of its own survival, but the extent to which it enables the people inhabiting it to attain a better form of life. In the case of Indigenous peoples, Marx criticizes European colonists for imposing private property to dismantle local communal institutions. "The system of hereditary serfdom further perpetuated the practice – the systematic extermination of the Indigenous population and the seizure by colonists of their ancestral communal lands (justified under the pretext that they were *'wasteland'*). Finally, through this process, the kinship (clan) principle, which constitutes *the principle of life (Lebensprincip)* of these communal associations, was destroyed at the core of the village communities, so long as their transition into purely rural communes (сельскія) had not yet been fully completed." (Marx 2023/24).

Notably, the term "principle of life" here is pivotal. Colonial strategies seek to sever communities from their naturalized bonds, dismantling the frameworks of collective inhabitation. Land distribution and privatization are forms of juridical violence – a process of suppressing local resistance while legitimizing colonial expropriation. Conversely, living institutions require reviving the truly vital elements of institutional achievements. They live through human history, create possibilities for understanding our communal living, and resist the domination imposed by capitalism.

Conclusion

Half a century after Marx's turn to anthropology and ethnology, modern anthropology, represented by the Durkheimian school (deeply influenced by Saint-Simonianism), seems to arrive at a similar conclusion:

> Conceived in this way, an institution is in reality merely an abstraction. True institutions live, that is, change incessantly [...] It is, then, living institutions, as they are formed, function, and are transformed at different moments, which constitute specifically social phenomena, the subject-matter of sociology. (Mauss 2005: 11)

Both Marx and Mauss appear to converge on the idea that institutions are collective social acts and instituted social facts themselves. Institutions even possess their own distinct temporalities, perpetually in flux and transformation. However, a Marxist social ontology places greater emphasis on the dynamic interplay, mutual permeation, and ontological entanglement between

life (force) and institutions. We might call this a "living institution" or, alternatively, an institutionalized yet unfinished form of life.

As Marx sarcastically notes, anarchists represented by Hess and Stirner, lack a social imagination for "new institutions," attempting to conjure revolution from ahistorical "artifacts." In contrast, Marx himself stresses that institutions are museums, accumulating revolutionary practices, constantly incorporating new members and new generations, and creating "us." At the same time, Marxism demands that institutions justify themselves before the imperatives of life (including its requirement for diversity, autonomy, and collective flourishing). Thus, Marxism integrates social conditions and their reproduction into critical reflection and forever transformation—a dimension sorely lacking in positivist social theory.

If "institution" in its broadest sense refers to the immense diversity and fluidity of anthropological practices, then it cannot be centralized or localized within a singular bourgeois mode of life. It opens an intermediate field that transcends the binary opposition of civil society and the state. A multitude of plural institutional temporalities intermingle in the present, generating fluctuations and contractions of time and space, contesting social imagination against solidified "customs" and established structures.

It could be argued that living institutions provide a theoretical foundation for later anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles. On the one hand, the communal elements sedimented in natural history form a force of resistance against the violence of colonization and privatization. On the other hand, as Marx demonstrated in the cases of Poland, Ireland, and India, social revolution can only emerge from the re-institutionalization of existing, concrete forms of life. Different forms of life follow distinct historical trajectories that cannot be subsumed under a singular framework of modernity. Furthermore, the independence and self-determination of subaltern nations are necessary preconditions for communism. This insight offers an indispensable perspective for understanding contemporary practices in Eastern societies.

For instance, many Chinese sociologists today employ a "life-institution" framework to interpret social changes, attempting to move beyond the "state-society" binary: "Reform and opening up have brought a great transformation in the post-1949 formal institutions of Chinese society, a shift from a totalistic society to micro-management. This change arises from the institutional continuity of some of the reasonable demands of living subjects and has eased the general tension between institutions and life." (Ying 2015: 82). Even within this unified nation, there exists a multiplicity of diverse forms of life—a hybrid of modernity and tradition. Social action, far from being directly rooted in the state, often emerges from the interplay of complex, institutionalized, and customary practices of life. Yet a Marxist social ontology must go further. It does not merely positively describe social reality but treats custom as a battlefield, imposing emancipatory demands on society and connecting the past to the present. It relentlessly probes how to forge broader solidarity and more flourishing forms of life.

Abbreviations

CW: Marx and Engels Collected Works, 50 vols., New York: International Publishers, 1975–
MEW: Marx-Engels-Werke, 44 vols., Berlin: Dietz, 1956–

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Jifan Song

Žive institucije, nasilje i forme zajedničkog života: ka marksističkoj socijalnoj ontologiji

Apstrakt

Članak preispituje konceptualizaciju kod Marksa i Engelsa značenje „žive institucije". Koncept žive institucije prevazilazi uobičajenu dihotomiju država-društvo, ukazujući na višestruke antropološke prakse koje su istovremeno emancipatorne i normativne. Autor prati nekoliko vrsta manifestacija „živig institucija" kroz razvoj Marksove misli, sve od ranih polemika protiv istorijske škole prava do zrelog izraza isotrijskog materijalizma. U svom poznom izrazu, Marks tematizuje ambivalentnost nasilja, smatrajući ga katkad izrazom društvene vitalnosti i transformacije, tj. „inorganske oprirodnjenosti" društva u službi društvene reprodukcije. Istorijski materijalizam implicira da nova instituciona imaginacija može nastupiti samo kroz reinstitucionalizaciju postojećih, stvarnih institucija. Ovaj imperativ konačno navodi Marksa u svojim poznim godinama da se temeljno bavi antropologijom, etnologijom, ne-zapadnim društvima. On uviđa da razni oblici zajedničkog života često nadžive sopstvenu epohu, tj. imaju život nakon života (*Nachleben*) koji uslovljavaju postojanje heterogenih i višestrukih temporalnosti u savremenom društvu.

Ključne reči: živa institucija, navike, nasilje, neorganska priroda, ne-zapadno društvo.

UDK: 141.7:32
DOI https://doi.org/10.2298/FID2603631L
Original Scientific Article
Received 18.09.2025. Accepted 03.02.2026.

PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIETY
VOL. 37, NO. 3, 405–700

To cite text:
de Lasala, Santiago, and Ulzhan Kazybekova. 2026. "Meritocracy Reconsidered Through Aristotle's Virtue Ethics" *Philosophy and Society* 37 (3): 631–648.

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MERITOCRACY RECONSIDERED THROUGH ARISTOTLE'S *VIRTUE ETHICS*

ABSTRACT
The categories of merit and meritocracy have received a lot of attention by political philosophers, especially during the second half of the 20th century. They appeal to merit as a criterion of legitimacy to rethink the distribution of wealth and resources in our society. From a superficial perspective, meritocracy is presented as open competition based on personal qualities and effort to determine how rewards are distributed. It is often seen as highly attractive and intuitively fair.

In this article, we intend to analyze whether contemporary meritocracies help citizens to develop themselves, to be better citizens and better persons, to be more virtuous and to fulfill themselves, or, on the contrary, these meritocracies lead citizens to become less virtuous and therefore worse individuals. Furthermore, by extrapolating what happens to individuals, we can consider how meritocracies impact institutions and societies as a whole.

For this purpose, we will draw on various philosophical perspectives, from Aristotle to the political thinkers of the 21st century. These authors offer ethical frameworks connecting the good life of the individual with personal and social development.

Meritocracy may appear to emphasize the achievement of excellence by individuals, making it seem like a good match for virtue ethics. However, this article argues that Aristotelian virtue ethics is actually at odds with the raw meaning of contemporary meritocracies and may also lead to a society which is not cohesive, which is also contrary to the notion of a virtue society for Aristotle.

KEYWORDS
Virtue, Institutions, Common good, Distributive Justice

Introduction

The main feature of meritocracy is that a person's position in society is determined not by origin, affiliation with a particular group, or financial status, but exclusively by individuals' abilities and achievements. In a meritocratic society,

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individuals will supposedly strive to improve their position by the acquisition and the achievement of those goals which are held in high regard by the rest of the citizens. Originally, the term "meritocracy" was introduced by the book "The Rise of Meritocracy" (Young 1958), where he saw that the distribution of wealth, jobs, and power in the future society, based on merit would correspond to each individual's actual intelligence and effort (cited in Cho et al. 2023:1). Thus, meritocracy acts as a justification where individuals' worth and talent is the main determinant of their successes and failures. Critics argue, however, that contemporary meritocratic systems promote income inequality, and this inequality is often interpreted as an individual rather than a societal problem (Cho et al. 2023:6). Surveys across 34 countries between 1987 and 2019 revealed that meritocratic beliefs are associated with income inequality (Cho et al. 2023:6). Thus, addressing the challenges brought by meritocratic beliefs is complex and includes promoting collective goals, collaboration that focuses on social responsibility and raising awareness about external factors that impact on the success of the individuals (Cho et al. 2023:6).

Mulligan (2022:18) states that, historically, meritocracy has been understood in two ways. First, it is connected with the approach to governance, where leaders are selected on the basis of merit and will benefit society. The roots of this understanding lie in Confucius and is defined as "Eastern Meritocracy." Second, meritocracy is understood as a theory of justice, where the distribution of social goods happens according to individual excellence and has its roots in Aristotle, and it is known as "Western Meritocracy". Contemporary meritocracy, by contrast, often understands social rewards – wealth, status, and recognition – as ends in themselves. This absolutization of merit, rather than merit *per se*, generates the moral and social concerns discussed in this article.

While Aristotelian meritocracy is compatible with virtue ethics, contemporary meritocratic systems, which elevate individual success and material rewards to ultimate ends, often appear to be in tension with the cultivation of virtue and the promotion of social solidarity.

Methodology

This article is structured in two parts. The first briefly describes meritocracy and analyzes its application in contemporary Western society. The second examines the extent to which meritocratic systems, both Aristotelian and contemporary forms, promote the full development of citizens and contribute to strengthening institutions.

To pursue these objectives, three types of sources were used. First, for the initial part of the article, recent studies (published since 2020) that analyze and critique contemporary meritocracy were consulted. Likewise, some sources published after *The Rise of Meritocracy* (Young 1958), the moment when the term was coined, were considered in order to better clarify and contextualize its meaning. Second, for the latter part of the article, various works by Aristotle were employed, as the aim is to compare Virtue Ethics with meritocratic

proposals. Finally, some contemporary sources that refer to Aristotle's theses in the current debate were also included.

Main body

Observation of the existence of Meritocratic societies

In discussing meritocracy, the main question lies in how 'merit' is being measured, since it affects the life of people. According to Mulligan (2022:34-35), Western Meritocracy is more convincing, since giving people what they deserve on the basis of their merit promotes good consequences by providing meritorious people the good that they deserve. This entails a distributive approach, where justice is a crucial part of morality. Eastern Meritocracy points to the possibility that distribution of goods sometimes is done unjustly, not on the basis of merit, which would be particularly notable in the political context. Though, the difference in focus, history and conceptual definition must be taken into account between Eastern Meritocracy and Western Meritocracy (Mulligan 2022:35).

Meritocracy leads to a situation where citizens are treated unequally by their fellow citizens. Therefore, even if everyone supposedly has the same chances to succeed, the divide between winners and losers is apparent. Modern meritocracy could be associated easily with the image of a competitive race, where successful people believe that they have earned their success and benefits that come with it. So, paradoxically, when we attain true equality of opportunity, it seems more plausible to those who succeeded and to those who struggle that the winners achieved their success and deserve their rewards (Sandel 2021:2).

Meritocracy rewards the meritorious with more resources, thus attaining social efficiency and justice. The increase of meritocracy in society apparently is the institutional consequence of implementing progressive humanism, which is an ideal-type of worldview that promotes harmonious individual achievements and social contributions. However, present-day meritocracy also represents self-defeating illusions, since even in practice, it only rewards conspicuous and wasteful displays of merit, rather than genuine contributions to society (Zhang 2024:1).

Criticisms made to meritocracy

Although meritocracy doesn't necessarily entail competition in all possible contexts, it often fosters competitive dynamics in social environments where rewards are limited, depend on a person's position, and have a social value. In these contexts, achieving high status, income, or recognition depends not only on developing one's abilities, but also on outperforming others. Therefore, merit is usually viewed more in relative rather than absolute terms. The logic of meritocracy thus becomes quite individualistic: success is attributed to effort and personal talent, while cooperation and shared responsibility

recede into the background (Von Platz 2022:21). Rather than promoting social solidarity, meritocratic systems under these conditions encourage individuals to continuously enhance their performance in order to secure or maintain a privileged position within hierarchical social structures. According to Sachs-Cobbe (2023:176-177), there are three clear objections to meritocracy in the USA and the UK. First, meritocracy can be criticized because of how it favors people who were born into wealth or in fortunate circumstances. Second, meritocracy can be criticized for the achievement it rewards, because such rewards are usually measured on the basis of income and status irrespective of the actual contributions to society. And third, meritocracy promotes extreme inequality with its challenging and socially destructive attitudes, specifically with arrogance among wealthy people and resentment among everyone else (Sachs-Cobbe 2023:177).

Sardoc (2022:137) claims that there are six issues linked to equality of opportunity that are largely taken for granted. For example, motivational – the reason behind giving equal opportunities to all individuals; procedural – defining those main elements in the process of distribution based on merit; genealogical-the description of the fair starting position to compete for an advantageous social position; substantive- defining the requirements for equalizing individuals' prospects; taxonomic – stating the type of disadvantage that is eligible for compensation and compensatory, defining the process of equalizing opportunities in practice. Each of these issues is addressed differently, based on the various conceptions of equality of opportunity (Sardoc 2022:137).

According to Mijs (2021:10), in societies with higher economic inequality, individuals tend to endorse meritocratic beliefs more strongly, since they might rationalize differences by associating success with individual effort and talent, thus by justifying the status quo and decreasing their cognitive dissonance in relation to inequality (cited in Tejero-Peregrina et al. 2025:2). Other studies have questioned this positive correlation, e.g. Bartram (2023:764) claims that the relationship between economic inequality and meritocratic beliefs could differ substantially, depending on other contextual factors, such as culture, politics and historical background; while Morris et al. (2022:423) found no clear link between income inequality and meritocracy in England (cited in Tejero-Peregrina et al. 2025:2). So, according to Tejero-Peregrina et al. (2025:2), the effect of economic inequality on meritocratic beliefs is hardly conclusive, since it is more about perception of inequality rather than inequality measured on the basis of those economic factors that most consistently determine economic inequality.

According to Zhang (2024:115), the belief in meritocracy has caused an increase in inequality, lowering of social mobility, indifference to poverty, and other social problems. In addition, he argues that there are two reasons why meritocracy is associated with conspicuous waste. The first is connected with the assessment of achievements and social contributions (2024:119). For instance, honesty positively affects economic development, but it is impossible to monitor how economic returns are linked to a person's honesty. Another

example is the role of creativity in scientific progress, yet the failure rate of scientific discoveries is high, and the contributions of scientists who failed could be left hidden. Thus, by rewarding only visible achievements, meritocracy pushes individuals to focus only on observable outcomes and neglect meritorious personal traits and efforts that may not bring visible results (Zhang 2024:119).

Thus, it is hard to achieve a truly meritorious society unless we take into account that every individual has a different kind of merit and unless we understand individual differences would help to understand society better.

Discussion

Would an ideal meritocratic society be just and cohesive?

One of the most powerful and persistent criticisms of contemporary meritocratic systems – systems in which honor, status, and resources are distributed based on individual merit – is that they are grounded on an unrealistic and fundamentally flawed premise. In theory, meritocracies promise a fair society in which everyone, regardless of their background, can rise or fall depending on their talents, efforts, and achievements. But for such a system to work fairly, everyone should have to start on an equal level: they would need equal access to education, healthcare, social networks, financial resources, and opportunities to reach their potential. This would be something equivalent to what John Rawls proposes with his "Original position" experiment, according to which all citizens would enjoy the same rights and opportunities while acting under a "veil of ignorance" (Rawls 1971) – that is, without knowing their subsequent place in society. Furthermore, everyone would roughly have to have the same abilities and skills at the initial point. But in reality, this initial condition of equality not only does not exist, but is actually utopian. From birth, people are shaped by a wide range of circumstances over which they have no choice or control. The family we are born into, our country of origin, the quality of local institutions, and the economic and cultural capital that surrounds us, all play a determining role in our development. Similarly, biological factors, the so-called "genetic lottery", determine our cognitive ability, physical health, and other innate traits that can significantly affect a person's capabilities, even in a merit-based system (Pojman 1997:551). As a consequence of these differences, some people are naturally and structurally better positioned to succeed, regardless of the efforts of others. This reinforces inequality under the appearance of fairness. The problem is not just that equality of opportunity is rare; the deeper problem is that it is conceptually illusory. It is unattainable because the conditions that would make it possible – the universal sameness in the background of ancestry, environment, and biology – do not and cannot exist (Cowen 2021: 362). Thus, meritocracies often end up legitimizing inequality rather than reducing it by presenting outcomes as deserved when, in fact, they may reflect unearned advantages.

Michael Sandel emphasizes something he finds even more frustrating for those who see themselves far from success: the meritocratic ideal can mask privileges and make structural injustices invisible by suggesting that those who succeed are more deserving simply because they have achieved it. This leads not only to social stratification, but also to moral complacency, where winners feel justified in their status, and losers feel guilty for their failures. Therefore, while meritocracy often seems like a fair and rational alternative to nepotism or aristocracy, it presents the risk of reproducing many of the same principles, now disguised as respect and responsibility (Sandel 2020:21).

This brings us to a key question in this article: Even if there was a society where all citizens started with the same opportunities, possibilities, education, benefits, etc., it would be worth considering whether a meritocratic system necessarily made that society the best it can be. In other words, even if we were able to eliminate all the structural and biological barriers that truly impede the equal distribution of opportunities, if everyone were on the same level, would a fully meritocratic system lead to the forging of better citizens and stronger institutions? This consideration goes beyond matters of equity and calls for a more profound examination of the society we aim to construct. It requires to consider not merely whether meritocracy as currently practiced is fair, but also whether it is desirable. Does such a society, based solely on the evaluation of individual merit, promote civic virtue, empathy, cooperation, and social solidarity? Or, on the contrary, does it promote hypercompetition, individualism, and a focus on personal achievement?

In a meritocratic system, it is assumed that those capable of working harder and better would consequently be higher in society, and that following this logic would lead to a more efficient and effective society. But we must ask ourselves what kind of citizens such society fosters. If citizens are educated to view life as a competition where rewards go only to the most talented and hard-working individuals, these citizens may come to view their fellow citizens more as rivals than as neighbours. Furthermore, those who receive rewards in a meritocratic society may come to believe that success is entirely their own doing, increasing their arrogance and lack of compassion for those who, despite their efforts, fail. On the other hand, those who do not achieve their goals may simply blame their failure on themselves, without questioning structural social deficiencies.

An additional issue for consideration is the definition of "merit." In most meritocracies in the modern world, merit is defined in terms of academic results, technical skills, productivity, or earnings (Barrera 2023:4). However, although these qualities are positive, are they really the qualities we most desire in our citizens and our leaders? Where does that leave moral character, creativity, emotional intelligence, not to mention commitment to the common good? All of these are essential characteristics for the health of a society that defines itself as democratic and for the institutions that strengthen it. And it is not easy to quantify or reward these qualities, as if they were merit.

A meritocratic citizen may possess many virtues yet not be truly virtuous

According to what has been explained in the previous section, even if an initial starting position with equal opportunities for all were possible, a meritocratic society would not ensure the education of its citizens and institutions in values that sustain a just, humane, and cohesive society. This raises a deeper philosophical question: could it be that the ideal of current meritocracy is not only unattainable, but also flawed in its very conception? Is meritocracy good for humankind and society?

According to Aristotle in his Ethica Nicomachea (EN), human beings pursue different types of goods, each of which may present itself as desirable in its own way at different times in life. Not all goods have the same value or deserve to be pursued in the same way, and not all goods contribute in the same way to the development of the person, to human happiness, or, as Aristotle would say, to achieving Eudaimonia.

In order to analyze, in this article, whether meritocracy can lead human beings to be better citizens, to be happier, and to make institutions serve the common good, we consider that an analysis based on Aristotle's virtue ethics is especially appropriate, for the following three reasons:

a) Aristotle offers a teleological view of human life, in which the criterion of good is not external or arbitrary, but internal to the human being himself. Aristotelian ethics is grounded on a fundamental question: what is the proper goal of the human being? The answer Aristotle offers is «eudaimonia», that is, the happiness of the good life, the full development of the person achieved through the exercise of reason and virtue. This notion of eudaimonia allows us to evaluate systems such as meritocracy. The virtue ethics in Aristotle does not look for its effectiveness or formal justice, but for the capacity to promote the integral development of the human being (EN I.7, 1097a15–1098a20).

b) According to Aristotle, virtue is a habit acquired through action, not merely a moral theory. Virtue does not come naturally or through externally imposed rules, but is formed through the constant practice of good in everyday decisions. This idea is crucial for analyzing whether a prevailing model of a meritocratic system effectively fosters virtue in citizens or, on the contrary, rewards other forms of success that may be incompatible with moral excellence (such as individual ambition, excessive competitiveness, or utilitarianism) (EN II.2, 1103b26–1104a9).

c) Furthermore, Aristotle explains the existence of a close relationship between personal ethics and political organization, arguing that a just city is only possible if it promotes virtuous citizens. In his work Politics (2013, original 350 B.C.E), Aristotle affirms that the purpose of the polis is to enable its citizens to live well. Just as the individual achieves his or her goal through virtue, institutions also have a virtue of their own: their ability to orient social life towards the common good (Dimić 2023:33). For this reason, Aristotle's arguments can help us evaluate whether a system like modern meritocracy promotes institutions that serve the community or that end up reproducing inequalities or vices disguised under the guise of merit and rewards (EN V.1-5, 1129b–1130a).

Once we have explained the reasons why we will use Aristotle's virtue ethics to study the desirability of meritocracy, we will begin by defining where the good of man lies for our author.

Aristotle makes an important distinction between goods that are ends in themselves and ends that are merely instrumental, that is, that serve other, ulterior ends. For example, a life filled with pleasures might seem very attractive to many, but Aristotle argues that such a life reduces human existence to the level of beasts (EN I.5, 1095b14–1096a5). Pleasures are part of human life, but they are not the highest good for human beings, because they are not characteristic of what defines the human essence: the rational faculties. Similarly, the pursuit of wealth and material goods cannot be the ultimate goal of human beings. Riches, by their own nature, are not desirable in themselves, but rather as a means to achieve other ends, such as comfort, greater security, or influence. Grounding the purpose of our life in wealth would overturn the proper order of values and mistake the means for the ends.

Aristotle explains that honors, which many people consider desirable as a sign of social recognition and respect, by their very essence, are judgments that depend on others, not on the recipient. Honors, therefore, are bestowed and not self-generated by the possessor, and are therefore beyond the individual's control. A person can be virtuous without this virtue being honored by anyone. Conversely, a person can be honored through false manipulation of their own image. This turns honor into an inconsistent and unreliable good, insufficient to lead to a virtuous and prosperous life.

After arguing that pleasures, riches, and honors are not the ends of human life, Aristotle maintains that the only good entirely desirable in itself for human beings must be a good that is in accordance with human nature, and this good can only be a life guided by reason: a life governed by the growth of intellectual and moral virtues.

What differentiates human beings from other beings in the universe is our soul's capacity to act according to reason. The highest form of human development, of fulfillment of the person, or in Aristotle's words, eudaimonia, is not found in external goods such as pleasure, resources, or fame, but in the exercise of virtue, specifically the intellectual and moral virtues (Adkins 1960:343). The rational life has two components: practical knowledge and moral behavior. With these two components, we can harmonize our desires with reason and direct our actions toward the true good. Unlike pleasures or honors, which are temporary and depend on external factors, the virtuous life is inherent to the person, and it is lasting, and it is founded on the excellence of the individual's soul.

From these paragraphs, we conclude that, in the Aristotelian perspective, the rational life is not only the highest good, but also the only way to realize the potential inherent in human nature. It is the life proper to human beings and the most worthy of being pursued (EN X.7, 1177a23–1178a8).

A comparison between the qualities required by meritocracy and the virtue in Aristotle

As a working hypothesis, we could argue that meritocracy, in principle, is the system of distribution of honors, goods, and opportunities that best fits the Aristotelian ideal of the virtuous life. In fact, in Aristotle's virtue ethics, the ultimate goal of human beings – Eudaimonia, or individual flourishing – is achieved through the cultivation and practice of virtue. If we take this ultimate goal as a guide, then a society that encourages its citizens to develop personal qualities and rewards them for it, might appear not only to be a just society, but also to be one that morally educates its citizens. Understood in this way, a properly functioning meritocracy might appear to be a mechanism that rewards excellence not simply in terms of talent or achievements, but also in terms of virtues, such as the habits and dispositions that make those achievements possible. That is, society encourages individuals to act virtuously because success in this meritocratic system depends on virtues such as discipline, perseverance, honesty, and fairness (Graafland 2010: 2).

For example, to obtain a good job, one that provides not only a good salary but also social recognition and personal fulfillment, an individual should have a good academic record. But a good academic record requires cultivating certain habits, such as consistent work, a certain intellectual interest, learning work processes, following standards, etc. These habits could be included in the Aristotelian conception of dianoetic and ethical virtues, or intellectual and moral virtues. These virtues are acquired through the repetition of actions under the guidance of reason. A student who learns to work when there is no gratification, to strive even when there is no reward, and to act fairly and honestly when no one is observing, will not only improve their academic record but will also develop a virtuous personality (Carvalho 2022:504). In this sense, a meritocratic society could function not only as a fair method of distributing opportunities, but also as a school of virtues, a school that guides individuals toward the lifestyle proposed by Aristotle, the lifestyle proper to rational beings.

Moreover, in a true meritocracy, rewards would not be given arbitrarily or based on privileges, but rather based on acquired excellence. This reinforces the view of Aristotle that honor and recognition are more authentic when they correspond to virtue and achievement, rather than to birth conditions or fortune. If a society were able to align incentives with the cultivation of virtues, rewarding not only the outcomes but also the effort made to achieve them, it could create an environment for citizens where they feel motivated to live according to reason and virtue. Of course, we are assuming a version of meritocracy without corruption or social inequality, conditions that are seldom observed in societies today. But considering the hypothesis that meritocracy can serve as a bridge between distributive justice and ethical education is very attractive. This suggests that political and economic systems need not be morally neutral, but can be structured in ways that foster the growth of virtues and enable citizens' personal development.

Objections to this hypothesis

Once we have observed certain possible coincidences between a contemporary meritocratic society and Aristotle's virtue ethics, we will present three important objections that can be raised against the hypothesis that this kind of meritocratic society can be considered the most appropriate one for fostering a life of virtue in individuals and institutions.

1) First objection: the nature and origin of intellectual virtues.

The first objection concerns the nature and origin of intellectual virtues and how they relate to justice and opportunity within the framework of meritocracy. Many claim that thriving in a meritocratic society requires citizens to cultivate and apply intellectual virtues. Achievement is often linked to traits such as diligence, critical thinking, curiosity for learning, and the ability to excel in various areas, particularly in academic life. In universities and schools, intellectual effort receives formal recognition through grades, diplomas, scholarships, admission offers, and even job prospects. From the standpoint of meritocracy, such rewards are meant to acknowledge both the significance of what has been accomplished and the dedication involved in acquiring the relevant knowledge and abilities.

Aristotle, however, maintains that intellectual virtues do not arise solely from effort or discipline. While an important component of intellectual virtue is clearly learning, which is actively acquired through study and practice, Aristotle emphasizes that intellectual excellence is also a matter of natural endowments (Adkins 1960:342). Some people are simply better equipped for reasoning, comprehension, memorization, or creativity, among others, and these abilities are not totally acquired through merit, but are given to us at birth. In other words, the cultivation of intellectual virtues depends in part on personal effort, but in part on innate ability (EN II, 1103a).

And this raises a first objection to the contemporary meritocratic ideal. If success in a meritocratic society depends largely on intellectual achievement, but intellectual ability is unequally distributed and it is in part a received gift, then the playing field is not equal. Even if two citizens strive equally, the one with a naturally superior intellectual ability may surpass the other, not because of virtue, but because the two have different natural endowments (Markovits 2019:66). This criticism is again what John Rawls refers to when he uses the term "genetic lottery", highlighting the differences in talents each person receives at birth. He argues that it is unfair to base life success on factors over which individuals have no control, such as natural abilities or the circumstances in which one is born. Furthermore, these intellectual advantages are often reinforced by environmental and societal factors: access to the best schools, parental education, cultural capital, stable family conditions, and other privileges. All of these elements influence a person's intellectual development, but they are not under that person's control. As a result, meritocratic societies end up equating natural advantages with merit by rewarding not only effort but also

inherited talents and social position. This undermines the ethical justification for rewarding merit and, at the same time, calls for a rethinking of the idea that meritocracy fosters virtuous living. Instead of promoting justice, meritocracy can unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities, while still appearing fair.

2) Second objection: an instrumental understanding of virtue.

Aristotle's concept of virtue is not instrumental; it does not have the value of a means to an end; it is not something cultivated with the intention of receiving rewards such as money, fame, or power. On the contrary, virtue is something sought for its own sake. A virtuous life, a life lived according to reason, a life with the habitual practice of moral and intellectual excellence is a life of achievement and represents the highest level of human flourishing, or eudaimonia. In this sense, virtue is in itself its true reward: it perfects human nature and leads to a life that is both morally good and genuinely happy.

In contrast to this concept of virtue, modern meritocratic societies tend to offer different motivations. In these societies, individuals are encouraged to give everything they have got, to be competitive, and to improve themselves in order to obtain a series of rewards such as good status, good earnings, career advancement, good academic credentials, and public recognition. While these rewards are often associated with virtues such as diligence, honesty, perseverance, and justice, they are actually external to virtue. As a result, there is a great risk that individuals in meritocratic societies will begin to interpret virtues primarily as a means to an end. That is, individuals may acquire good habits not because they are worthwhile in themselves, but because they believe these habits lead to success within such systems.

But this shift in motivation has profound ethical implications. When virtue is instrumentalized, when it is used as a strategy for personal gain, it ceases to be true virtue in the Aristotelian sense. A person may behave in society in an acceptable or admirable way, but their actions may lack a proper moral orientation. Aristotle differentiates between continent individuals, who do the right thing despite conflicting desires, and virtuous individuals, who desire the good for its own sake (EN VII.1, 1145a15–1145b15). A meritocratic culture, with a strong emphasis on rewards and recognition, can produce many well-disciplined, law-abiding individuals whose true motivation is self-interest rather than a genuine love of what is good.

Furthermore, when rewards and prizes constitute the primary motivation for virtuous behavior, the system can generate cynicism and moral calculation. People may be encouraged to comply with ethical norms only when it is advantageous to themselves, or when they feel they are being watched by others. This undermines the development of an individual's moral character, which Aristotle regards as essential to both human happiness and the proper functioning of the political community. To sum up, when there is a direct relationship between virtue and reward, meritocracy jeopardizes the very virtues it proposes, potentially turning them into instruments of progress rather than ends in themselves (Sinnicks 2021:270 – 271).

3) Third objection: success as a false endpoint in the cultivation of virtue.

As the main objective of a meritocratic society is the fair distribution of wealth and honor, and social rewards based on each person's effort and abilities, in some contemporary meritocracies citizens could understand that virtue has value insofar as it leads to success. In this context, happiness cannot be understood as Aristotle conceives it: the flourishing of the rational soul through a virtuous life, but rather as the attainment of better conditions, status, and social position. A possible risk could be that individuals will cease their pursuit of virtue once they have achieved a satisfactory level of success and a good social standing. Although this objection is not inherently linked to the theoretical concept of meritocracy, it can be observed in practice in some contemporary meritocratic societies.

Sandel observes (2020:37) that in many contemporary meritocratic societies, successful people often attribute their success solely to their own merits, fostering a "meritocratic arrogance" that can overshadow other moral virtues that are not directly affected by external rewards. From this perspective, once a certain level of status or recognition is achieved, the motivation to continue cultivating virtues such as humility, solidarity, or commitment to the common good tends to diminish, since external success is now interpreted as sufficient proof of virtue.

If people are virtuous only because they seek a reward, be it wealth, recognition, or prestige, then once those rewards have been secured, the motivation to continue developing by cultivating good habits will naturally diminish. Effort becomes unnecessary once the reward has been achieved. Thus, a society that views virtue simply as a tool for achieving success risks producing individuals who abandon intellectual and moral growth once their material goals are met. Instead of producing citizens who aspire to moral excellence in their lives, meritocracy can lead to complacency, mediocrity, and cynicism (Graafland 2010:5–11).

Furthermore, if the typical rewards associated with excellence and achievement, such as wealth, property, and respect, can be obtained through other methods, then these methods may be considered equally valid or even preferable to virtue. For example, if owning a home is a symbol of success, and success is considered a value in society, then the difference between being able to buy a home after many years of effort and work, or buying the home with money won as a lottery prize, is irrelevant. In both cases, society will view equal success with the same admiration, since the result of both processes is the same.

In such a society, the cultivation of virtue loses weight, yet indicators of success gain importance, regardless of the means used to attain them. The result could be a culture in which apparent success replaces a deeper and more sustained pursuit of moral and intellectual excellence. Thus, meritocracy, far from being a safeguard of virtue, puts it at risk by distorting its very essence, by replacing "being good" with "looking successful."

Final considerations on the three objections

While meritocracy is often proposed as a fair and rational system for distributing honors, resources, and opportunities based on personal effort and talent, in some contemporary meritocracies it entails significant risks when individual reward becomes the dominant social ideal. The greatest danger lies in the fact that meritocracy, if not grounded in a deeper ethic, can lead citizens to value virtue less in itself and more in the external rewards it can bring. If the true ideal of a meritocratic society is not to cultivate intellectual and moral excellence in itself, but rather to foster merit as a basis for other achievements, the structure of that society begins to corrupt (Güremen 2018:174). In such a society, virtue is reduced to a means to other ends, useful only insofar as it provides some kind of reward.

Such an instrumental view of virtue can lead to a form of society in which material success becomes the primary criterion for evaluating the individual and the good life. Intellectual and moral virtues, those habits that are essential to human flourishing in Aristotle's ethics, are no longer sought for their intrinsic value, but only because they serve for achieving other goods. Once the level of comfort and desire has been reached, the incentive to continue growing in virtue diminishes, and good habits lose their appeal. Such a form of meritocracy can end up producing citizens who are more concerned with accumulating goods than with being good citizens. Furthermore, people's happiness in this type of society becomes dangerously dependent on what they possess, rather than on what they are or what they have become. This kind of society runs the risk of encouraging its citizens to measure their own worth and the worth of others not by their honesty, intelligence, or character, but by their wealth, credentials, job, titles, and recognition. This approach diminishes the concept of virtue as a stable quality of the soul, and replaces it with a superficial and contingent image of success. Citizens may understand that what is valuable is not what comes from a person's moral development, but from how they are perceived by others, regardless of whether this perception is true or not (Morrell and Dahlmann 2022: 622–623).

Thus, the paradox of contemporary meritocracy is that, while it promotes the rewarding of virtue, it actually weakens the foundations on which virtue rests. By linking personal excellence to superficial success, meritocracy falls into the trap of turning moral life into a competition for rewards rather than a path to authentic personal development. In this way, meritocracy can create a society that is materially prosperous but at the same time spiritually impoverished – a society in which individuals have plenty but are personally empty.

A society that lacks solidarity is not a virtuous society: meritocracy and the institutional erosion of virtue

A wider and more contemporary view of the limits of meritocracy, and more broadly of the ethical foundations of modern capitalist societies, appears in

the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. In his influential critique of modern ethical thought, more specifically in his work *After Virtue* (1981), MacIntyre attempts to recover and update the Aristotelian concept of virtue, clarifying not only its nature and forms, but also outlining the conditions necessary for cultivating virtues in society and institutions. According to MacIntyre, virtues are qualities that enable individuals to attain the intrinsic rewards of particular activities, such as art, education, politics, or science, through sustained practice and dedication. These inherent benefits are the excellence and integrity of the activity itself, not any external rewards that may go with it.

MacIntyre's theory offers a strong critique of capitalism and meritocracy. In modern capitalist societies, and especially in competitive meritocratic systems, virtues are often misrepresented or displaced into what Aristotle might consider vices. The most important of these vices is pleonexia, a Greek term used to define a vice contrary to distributive justice, in which one desires a larger share than is equitable (EN V). Though Aristotle and Aquinas see pleonexia as a moral flaw reflecting a deficiency in temperance and moderation, MacIntyre observes that modern capitalism has transformed this vice into an admirable trait (Knight, 2025). Ambition, acquisitiveness, and the relentless pursuit of success are now seen not as acceptable qualities, but as admirable ones. They are often understood as indicators of strength, productivity, and leadership.

This reversal of values and the way we understand and practice morality gives us an insight into the profound shift taking place in society's mentality. Capitalist meritocracies tend to prioritize goods external to the individual – money, prestige, power – over the inherent goods that come from cultivating and practicing virtues (Graafland 2010:12–13).

As a consequence, people are motivated to develop habits not for their own inherent value or the pursuit of excellence, but rather as tools to attain other advantages. For example, education tends to be perceived less as a process of personal and intellectual development and more as a tool for acquiring qualifications, gaining employment, or facilitating social advancement (Carvalho 2022:504).

MacIntyre warns that when a society prioritizes rewards over the good habits cultivated by individuals, citizens' behavior deteriorates and institutions lose their moral grounding (Sinnicks 2021:271). This degradation leads to the loss of the virtues necessary for the functioning of community life and the common good. Instead of fostering moral character and wisdom, this system rewards outcome-driven calculations, efficiency, and individual progress. In this way, the meritocratic ideal eliminates the notion of virtue as understood in the classical tradition. Thus, MacIntyre's critique supports the previous concerns regarding meritocracy: when virtue is no longer pursued for its own sake, and when the appearance of success is valued above all else, we risk creating a world in which virtue is no longer cultivated, but commodified and ultimately lost.

Conclusions

Contemporary meritocratic systems tend to construe virtues as instrumental means for the attainment of material goals, rather than as good habits that enable individuals to develop as persons, live good lives, and achieve happiness. Thus, the purpose of meritocracy is not to make people more virtuous, but rather to make them more deserving or worthy of quantifiable reward. In this way, meritocracy appropriates virtues in order to differentiate individuals from one another, rather than to form them into better human beings.

By contrast, Aristotle's virtue ethics conceives of virtue as a type of excellence that allows human beings to flourish and to attain happiness. Honesty, generosity, courage, and other virtues are not, nor are they intended to be, subordinated to any ulterior end on the part of those who acquire them. Rather, through the cultivation of virtue, individuals achieve eudaimonia – the happiness proper to a life well lived.

The social divisions produced by the prevailing form of meritocracy – whereby those who possess merit are rewarded and those who lack it are humiliated – engender distrust both among citizens and toward institutions. Once trust is eroded within society, it is not merely interpersonal trust that collapses, but institutional trust as well. Institutions constitute the fundamental pillars of any society; they are what sustain us as a community. Without trust, institutions such as security, health, and education begin to deteriorate. Contemporary meritocracy, in privileging individual advancement, neglects the maintenance of social institutions and thereby exacerbates individualism among citizens.

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Santjago de Lasala, Ulžan Kazibekova

Preispitivanje meritokratije kroz Aristotelovu etiku vrline

Apstrakt

Kategorije zasluge i meritokratije privukle su veliku pažnju političkih filozofa, naročito tokom druge polovine 20. veka. One se oslanjaju na zaslugu kao kriterijum legitimnosti u promišljanju raspodele bogatstva i resursa u našem društvu. Iz površne perspektive, meritokratija se predstavlja kao otvoreno takmičenje zasnovano na ličnim kvalitetima i trudu, kojim se određuje način raspodele nagrada. Često se smatra veoma privlačnom i intuitivno pravednom.

U ovom članku nastojimo da analiziramo da li savremene meritokratije pomažu građanima da razvijaju sebe, budu bolji građani i bolje osobe, postanu vrliji i da ostvare svoje potencijale, ili, nasuprot tome, da li ove meritokratije vode građane ka tome da postanu manje vrli, a samim tim i lošiji pojedinci. Nadalje, ekstrapolirajući ono što se događa pojedincima, možemo razmotriti kako meritokratije utiču na institucije i društva u celini.

U tu svrhu oslanjamo se na različite filozofske perspektive, od Aristotela do političkih mislilaca 21. veka. Ovi autori nude etičke okvire koji povezuju dobar život pojedinca sa ličnim i društvenim razvojem.

Meritokratija naizgled naglašava ostvarivanje izvrsnosti kod pojedinaca, zbog čega može delovati kao dobar spoj sa etikom vrline. Međutim, ovaj članak zastupa tezu da je aristotelovska etika vrline zapravo u suprotnosti sa sirovim značenjem savremenih meritokratija, te da one mogu voditi i ka društvu koje nije kohezivno, što je takođe suprotno Aristotelovom pojmu društva zasnovanog na vrlini.

Ključne reči: vrlina, institucije, opšte dobro, distributivna pravda

III

SEMINARS

SEMINARI

PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIETY
VOL. 37, NO. 1, 405–700

Seminar with Patrik Schumacher

"IN THE AGE OF MONOPOLY CAPITALISM"

This seminar with the architect Patrik Schumacher was held at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade, on November 21, 2025. A day earlier, he delivered the lecture "Architectural Research: Formal & Functional" at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Belgrade. The seminar discussion focused on the manuscript subsequently published as *The Invention of Modern Design: The Early Years of the German Werkbund* (Khōrein Book Series, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory 2026).

Patrik Schumacher

Thank you for giving me this platform. Thank you Petar for publishing my PhD, it is wonderful to see that happening. I've been thinking about publishing it over the years. I had it dumped on my website and because it was one of my oldest texts, it was at the bottom of the pile. It was rather inaccessible since it was in German. Now I have finally translated it for this publication as a book in your book series, which is great.

Do I still appreciate this very old text, written when I was a Marxist? Yes, because I'm still a Marxist in the sense of taking Marx's historical materialism as my bedrock philosophical and methodological premise. I've moved on in terms of my political outlook. I am no longer a socialist but a pro-capitalist libertarian, and I inject these Marxist insights and premises into the libertarian discussion. For instance, I inject the historicizing stance into an otherwise (unfortunately) rather ahistorical libertarianism. The message of libertarians has a new historical urgency. To make this point I am using Marxist categories like post-Fordism as a whole new stage in the development of the forces of production. The Marxist post-Fordism debate which kicked off in the UK in the late eighties when I arrived in London has always been very important to me, also for my architectural theory and now again for my anarcho-capitalist political theory. Libertarian and classical liberal discourse is often rather simplistic and outmoded in its philosophical underpinnings. I see it as my task to upgrade libertarianism via the insights from the philosophy of language, post-structuralism, and Marxism.

Philosophically, I started with a strong interest in epistemology and philosophy of science, and then philosophy of language. In the early eighties I at first

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ended up with Ludwig Wittgenstein's late philosophy. Then I shifted – in terms of my university degree – from philosophy in Bonn to architecture in Stuttgart. I had never considered philosophy as a profession. I rather saw philosophy – the pretense of superior wisdom – as a challenge to crack open and then to move on. As an architecture student at Stuttgart University, I became a Marxist in the mid-1980s, and I kept that going for at least ten years. My PhD thesis stems from this period and is clearly Marxist. It's a historical materialist account of the phenomenon of modern design and design ideology. The Modern Movement took off in the 1920s most strongly in Germany, but also in Holland, Switzerland, France, Poland, Austria, Czechia and Russia. The Anglosphere joined quite a bit later. The intellectual foundations of this Modern Movement had been established already before the First World War, in Germany, organized and promoted by the German Werkbund, a politically and economically motivated association of architects, designers and industrial firms under the guidance of political figures and supported by the Imperial German civil service.

This fact was interesting to me: the philosophy, values, and theoretical principles of modernism in architecture and design were fully established in that period of the Werkbund's founding. However, the formal design language and physiognomy we now recognize as modernism, modern movement or modern functionalism only emerged in 1920s. It is quite interesting to note that theory came first.

However, there are some remarkable contradictions that stood out for me. Modernism was announced as the so-called International Style and as such proliferated across the globe. However, in the Werkbund it was conceived as a decidedly and explicitly German or Germanic style. I was interested in this contradiction. For many architects, the heroes of the Modern Movement like Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Mies van der Rohe are the ultimate heroes of our field. Where do their ideas come from? They were first fully formulated in that so-called pre-Modernist period before the First World War, by the leaders of the German Werkbund Friedrich Naumann and Hermann Muthesius. The three super-heroes of modern architecture – Corbusier, Gropius and Mies – were all working (before the First World War) for Peter Behrens, a core member of the German Werkbund. This was rather remarkable. I was very interested to look into this origin of the ideas and founding principles that had brought forth modernism in architecture and design. I was aiming to subject these path-breaking ideas to a critique of ideology. At the time, I was still an architecture student. I started reading, went into the archives, collected the research material, like old architecture and art magazines from the early twentieth century etc. So, it was collecting, reading and thinking, gradually developing a thesis.

I moved to London to continue my studies there. While still a student, I started working for Zaha Hadid in the late 1980s. In my London student years, I started to absorb more philosophy into my architectural thinking, a different kind of philosophy, post-structuralism, Deleuze and Guattari, etc. At the same time, I was exposed to the Marxist discourse on the socio-economic restructuring from Fordism to post-Fordism that was a hot topic among some

Marxists at that time. I still consider this theme of post-Fordism to be fundamental to understand what the difference is between the mid and late twentieth century. This fundamental socio-economic restructuring must be understood to explain architectural developments like Postmodernism, Deconstructivism and Parametricism.

In the 1990s I started to see the strong resonance and alignment between the socio-economic phenomena like complex network organisations, self-directed work, corporate self-organization, the flattening of hierarchies, the matrix organization with dual or multiple intersecting lines of reporting, the blurring of departmental boundaries and the interpenetration of domains of competencies etc. on the one hand, and the compositional registers and repertoires of deconstructivism and then Folding or Parametricism like networks or the rhizome, layering or superimposition, soft transitions, gradients or smooth versus striated space etc. The conceptual and visual language of deconstructivism and then Parametricism seemed very much aligned with the concepts and language of concurrent post-Fordist business organization theory and corporate management theory.

All these phenomena today associated with neoliberalism, i.e. the breaking up of big organizational hierarchies, outsourcing etc., were observed by the Marxists celebrating post-Fordism as new times based on computational production techniques allowing for flexible specialization. The Marxists were emphasizing attendant features like the impossibility of command and control, self-directedness of work, and lateral communication. What I noticed was that there were very similar organizational transformations to be observed on the left: the Italian Autonomia movement of the 1970s was rejecting Lenin's insistence on democratic centralism and strict party organization and discipline. The Autonomists substituted the Leninist command and control model with what they called the free flow of struggles. There emerged a very similar attitude in the corporate world. The most advanced corporate world was actually very progressive in that sense. These were independent but parallel responses to the same underlying socio-economic dynamics unleashed by the technological revolution of post-Fordism. This discovery incited my interest in corporate organization and management theory.

Now, why did I end up submitting my PhD at Klagenfurt University? This was rather accidental. I came to know a professor of organizational psychology and management theory in Klagenfurt who shared my interest in organizational theory. We talked about my interests in architecture and architectural theory. She invited me to do a PhD. I then related that I had worked on a manuscript for many years which I wanted to turn into a doctoral thesis. This is how my PhD ended up being submitted at the Institute for Cultural Studies at Klagenfurt University. I did not have much supervision, I just appeared in Klagenfurt at my defense, and my thesis was accepted. But there was an interesting character at Klagenfurt, my second supervisor, a philosopher who wrote on organization theory. He wrote a fascinating book called *Die Organisation der Philosophen* [the organization of philosophers]. Here he argues that philosophy

is the very antithesis of organization, an intellectual endeavor that can never be an organized discipline. He said you cannot organize philosophy, so philosophy should not be an organized university department. I agree with him, philosophy, just like contemporary art, cannot be fitted into the straightjacket of the university with its academic standards. So, there were these interesting characters in Klagenfurt, who allowed me to deliver and defend my work successfully as doctoral thesis.

At the time, back in 1999, when I finally submitted the thesis after many years of gestation, I was still a Marxist, but I was already turning away from socialism. I was still a Trotskyist, an activist, but doubts were mounting. In 1995 I had discovered Niklas Luhmann. I was gradually moving out of my left or socialist commitments. However, this work on the Werkbund had to be finished in a Marxist and anti-capitalist vein. That is the background story of my PhD.

I started to absorb all of Luhmann's writings. Luhmann died in 1998, but I was later in touch with Dirk Baecker, one of his key followers, who was also interested in architecture. This engagement with Luhmann later led to my two-volume treatise 'The Autopoiesis of Architecture' published finally in 2010 and 2012. My libertarian leanings started to evolve since the 2008 financial crisis and Great Recession. The PhD we are finally publishing now was worked on and written much earlier, from 1986 to 1999. However, I remain proud of and committed to this original materialist historiography. I believe it stands up very well compared to all the idealist, superficial historiography we find in architectural history, which is usually all about ideas feeding into ideas, the tracing of antecedents and influences.

Here is what I wrote in the conclusion of my thesis. [Ed. note: this text was subsequently published as *The Invention of Modern Design: The Early Years of the German Werkbund* (2026)] "Anchored in the socio-economic and political currents of Wilhelmine Germany, the Werkbund was not merely an artistic or cultural initiative but a state-sponsored, strategic response to the historically new technological and organisational opportunities of industrial mass production and global competition in the age of monopoly capitalism/imperialism.

The history of the early years of German Werkbund from its founding in 1907 up to and into the First World War has been contextualized and explicated here in relation to the Second Industrial Revolution with its Fordist production paradigm that brought mechanical mass production to complex technological products for everyday mass consumption. This implied the emergence of brands and advertising as context for the emergence/invention of modern industrial design. Fordism implied further capital concentration, also in the consumer durables industries, and the advent of monopoly capitalism and imperialism. The Werkbund's efforts to establish a "German national style" were intertwined with the imperialist ambitions of Wilhelmine Germany. Germany's late industrialization, in comparison to its main competitors England and France, added a peculiar urgency and speed to Germany's economic development. Moreover, the fact that the example of England was there to be emulated (or overtaken) allowed for the possibility to formulate a state-sponsored strategic industrial

policy that would not be groping into the dark of a wholly uncertain future. The age of Fordism, monopoly capitalism, and imperialism also implied, especially in Germany, a burgeoning working class mass movement with both economic (trade unions) and political (socialist party) organisations.

The German Empire, unified in 1871 by Prussia under Bismarck's leadership, was a constitutional monarchy. Although heavily weighted toward monarchical and aristocratic authority, the Empire was marked by a lively parliamentary political life, with socialist representation within parliament. While in the late nineteenth century various liberal and conservative parties dominated parliament, by the early twentieth, the socialist party (SPD) was the largest political party in the Reichstag, reflecting the growing influence of socialism among Germany's working class. The constellation of internal political forces also played a significant role within the Werkbund. Friedrich Naumann, a key protagonist of the early Werkbund, tried to pursue a centrist path by attempting to forge an alliance between liberals and nationally oriented socialists, and saw the transformation of the German economy towards a high-value, consumer-oriented industry manufacturing for the world market as the way forward for a more widely spread prosperity. This way there seemed to be the prospect opening up to overcome class struggle in Germany through global economic dominance in high-value-added manufacturing sectors.

This economic and political context sets the scene for the historical-materialist analysis of the Werkbund's artistic principles and ideals. The Werkbund's founders envisioned a strategic association that would bridge the gap between art and industrial production, creating a distinctly German and distinctly modern approach to design. This vision was rooted in the belief that integrating high-quality aesthetics into mass production would elevate German goods in an increasingly competitive global market. Figures like Hermann Muthesius and Friedrich Naumann advocated for the harmonization of artistic values with the practicalities of industrial manufacturing, emphasizing principles such as truth to materials, functional design, machine-suitable design, design in the spirit of the age, national character, typification, unity of style, and the ideal of the independent artist-designer. Most of these principles (with the exception of national character) have continued to be referred to also in the later stages of modern design. Here their early explicit formulation and promotion is being investigated and explained with reference to the particular technological, economic, class-political and geo-political constellation Germany found itself in, at a time when it was a fast-rising industrial power.

The historically novel issues at the time explored in this investigation of the Werkbund's early years—such as monopoly brands, commodity aesthetics, the tension between type and individuality, the concept of machine-suitable design, the independence of designers, individual versus collective "authorship" and "intellectual property" etc. remain relevant and are posited anew in a new technological, socio-economic and political context, namely within today's re-globalized, post-Fordist economy, under a new, fast evolving neo-liberal political consensus that also calls for new forms of critique and counter-politics.

What links our current era of Post-Fordist restructuring with the era of the early Werkbund (during the advent of Fordism) is the fact that both are periods of rapid, technology-induced, socio-economic transformation, impacting the role of design in society. Our current times are also similar to the beginning of the century as it is marked by a renewed level of globalisation, while in the interim period from 1915-1945 the export-import portion of the advanced economies had sharply receded. Although export and import recovered substantially after 1945, globalisation kicked off much more significantly only from 1980 onwards. Globalisation intensifies both competition and the scope for global brand expansion. Design culture, brand awareness and a related status-aware pattern of consumption received a significant boost since the 1980s. The neo-liberal transformation towards unleashed market also led to increasing income inequalities and a corresponding life-style differentiation made physically possible by the new, less monolithic production technologies (flexible specialisation). This more complex and dynamic system of societal reproduction also implied more scope for career individualisation. The post-war era, in contrast was marked by a tendency towards equalisation of incomes, living standards and consumption patterns. This new, more globalized, more differentiated, more competitive, market-driven and dynamized societal life process came together with an enhanced scope for the proliferation of design-based expression and marketing. The experience of this burgeoning design boom was what had inspired my interest in the historical beginnings of modern design at the beginning of the century. Understanding the historical-material logics and dynamics in the former period can and should inform our understanding and critical engagement with the recent resurgence of design and these logics and dynamics" (Schumacher 2026: 169–172).

Such periods of rapid socio-economic transformation bring to prominence creative processes and call for a matching revolution in aesthetic values and design principles. I witnessed such a revolution in the prevailing design paradigm in the 1980s and got myself involved in the 1990s. While in the interim period from 1920 to 1980 there was more of a cumulative evolution. What the early modern protagonists had established by 1914, interrupted by the First World War, was picked up again in 1919, and then went much further and stabilized until the 1970s. The very same protagonists, Gropius, Mies and Corbusier, stood at the beginning and were still leading during the 1960s. When Corbusier died in 1965, he was at the height of his powers.

Marjan Ivković
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory

I will focus on the book, which was really intriguing and inspiring and I learned a lot from it. I'm not from the field of architecture. I'm theoretical sociologist. So, just a few remarks and a question about the fundamental tangent.

The fundamental tension of imperialism (monopoly capitalism) that you identify in the book as the tension between a globally evolving civilization

(socio-economic order) and its segmentation into nation-states and competing empires is, I would argue in line with Marx and some strands of unorthodox Marxism, underlaid by an even more fundamental tension that is intrinsic to capitalism in general. This is the tension between what might be termed capitalism's thrust toward ever greater abstraction (reordering of reality through the principle of valorization) – a logic that is executed through real subsumption – and the inherently human need to concretize and essentialize the reality that has been produced through this process of abstraction. Commodity fetishism is the paradigmatic example of this fundamental tension, but so are the anti-capitalist movements that (falsely) concretize what is problematic with capitalism – the "greedy bankers," the "American empire," rather than the impersonal imperative of valorization. We could argue that in monopoly capitalism, this fundamental tension is further aggravated by the tension specific to imperialism (we could use the concept of "overdetermination").

In the book, your depiction of Hermann Muthesius as a key figure of the Werkbund strikes me as an acute embodiment of this fundamental tension – an innovator speaking on behalf of monopoly capital who is plagued by "cultural pessimism." On the one hand, Muthesius certainly subscribes to Friedrich Naumann's inspiring account of modern architecture that you quote in the book – "The new iron building is the greatest thing that our time has experienced artistically... Here there is no old compulsion, no court art ... Here there is no art alongside construction, no stuck-on decoration, no mere flourishes, here things are created for the purpose, and the form is born like a child that its parents hardly thought of."

This, as I see it, is essentially the account of the transformation of aesthetics through capitalist abstraction – it echoes Marx to a striking extent: "All fixed, fast frozen relations... are swept away with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions." On the other hand, Muthesius's constant attempts to root this evolving aesthetic form that can be defined as international or modern – that he himself was helping to develop – in "Germanic-Nordic" traditions seem comical, and at first sight appears to be addressing the particular anxieties of the German petty bourgeoisie of the time. But this is in fact a subjective expression of the fundamental tension in capitalism, and so is his longing for a "structured societal form," which you identify yourself as a fertile ground upon which German fascism could build – build its own national style "overnight," as you say in the book.

In light of this, would you consider fascism as the striving for a "resolution" of the fundamental tension of capitalism (an *aufhebung* that was also an annihilation of architecture, as you say in the text "The End of Architecture"), a striving that was first born in the wake of the Second Industrial Revolution, a huge structural intensification of the tension, and which grows exponentially at a time of acute economic crisis? If yes, the second question: are we not headed in that direction again right now (the 2008 crisis)? The Fourth Industrial Revolution (as well as the later stages of the Third One, the network society) is another great advance of real subsumption that seems to be generating

another strong yearning for concretization/essentialization, and this is again overdetermined by the dynamics of imperialism (deindustrialization in the West, structural crisis in the capitalist center). This yearning is generally evident in the rise of new right-wing authoritarianism, but it can be observed more particularly, in the aesthetic realm, in such bizarre trends as the "resurrection" of long-gone buildings (the Berlin Castle, etc. – the "revolution of common sense," another obliteration of architecture), and subjectively, it can be observed in the ideological ambivalence of the pioneers of today's monopoly capitalism.

Mark Losoncz
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory

A question from contemporary perspective. I have a strong intuition lately that state capitalism is becoming dominant. There are some obvious cases, like China, but even the USA and EU. Recent policy shifts and large-scale government interventions that might show them moving in a state capitalist direction. The state plays an active, strategic role in guiding, directing private capital to achieve national goals, the state directly subsidizing private industry, strategically directing capital flows to win the technology race and so on. And even leftist fantasies are connected to state capitalist ideas: for example regarding the so-called Green New Deal. Or the degrowth movement, often ostensibly anti-capitalist, functionally relies on the very mechanisms of state capitalism and modern monetary theory to be implemented. The state would implement the planned reduction of production and consumption – a powerful, interventionist state. In a strong correlation: state capitalism and monopolistic capitalism, monopolistic tendencies seem to be stronger. How do you see today the role of architecture, keeping in mind the monopolistic tendencies – and imperialism, nationalism, zero sum games?

I would also like to ask about the article you also published in our journal *Khōrein*, "The End of Architecture." I too published an article in this same issue, "Architecture in the Shadow of Catastrophe and Collapse," in which I suggested that contemporary architecture merely simulates taking the ecological catastrophe seriously, and that only very few truly grasp the significance of this challenge. I specifically criticized greenwashing architecture and the reduction of the entire problem to a focus on carbon. Diplomatically speaking, our approaches differ; which raises a question. Could it be that Niklas Luhmann (who you refer to) was right when he suggested that ecological awareness and environmental ethics, as new social movements, can only arise from the internal tensions of the social system (such as anxiety and morality), yet are unable to break through the walls of the function systems – meaning also, they cannot penetrate the wall of architecture either? Luhmann was highly skeptical that modern, differentiated society could provide viable and functional responses to ecological threats due to its own internal limitations. He traced the problem back to the difference between structure and communication separating society from its environment.

Đorđe Hristov
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory

I really enjoyed your Marxist analysis of the transformations of design in early twentieth-century Germany and I find the parallel you draw with the neoliberal phase interesting.

My comment concerns the way this parallel between Fordism and post-Fordism is framed. Although this is not the central thesis of the book, it is a crucial hinge in your argument that the dynamics of design under monopoly capitalism persist in today's neoliberal order. My sense is that the comparison obscures important discontinuities which go back to the central argument of the book.

The key term for me here is *authenticity*. You show that the Werkbund's design principles were articulated as moral categories – authenticity of materials, honesty of form, artistic integrity – even at a moment when the author-genius idea was being displaced. This moral-aesthetic discourse was tied to Germany's position as a latecomer industrial power: the fear of being the "copycat of Europe" which produced an existential drive to establish originality, a "national style," and a cultural aura around industrial products. So, even when embracing mechanical reproduction, the early twentieth-century discourse still carried a residual "aura," displaced from the individual work of art onto the collective product, the nation, the state, or "German quality," "taste," etc.

What seems different today is that this existential baggage has largely evaporated. Neoliberalism operates without any need for authenticity in this older, moral or national sense. The distinction between original and copy has collapsed – not only philosophically in postmodernism (Baudrillard, Jameson), but economically. Contemporary capitalist production often embraces replication, iteration, and derivation with no anxiety about originality. China is the clearest example: it occupies, or at least in the last decade, it has occupied the same structural position once attributed to Germany – producer of copies – but without the corresponding cultural crisis. And not just China of course, other countries as well. The copy works; sometimes it works far better than the original, and financially or functionally, it outperforms the original.

This suggests that while branding, intellectual property, and authorship remain central today, competition is still paramount, but they no longer rely on the authenticity discourse that structured the Werkbund's ideology. Instead of moralized originality, we have scalable replication; instead of national style, we have global brand ecosystems. This marks not just a historical difference but a structural shift in how value is produced under neoliberal capitalism, which of course ties into the geopolitical nature of this system. It may therefore complicate the strong parallel you draw between the Fordist and post-Fordist moments.

Igor Cvejić
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory

I have a general question about the relation of architecture and aesthetics with some references to concrete problems of Werkbund, but I also want to hear

more on your understanding of language of architecture. So, basically how I, and many others, understand it, in architecture there is a strong tension between concrete relation to material, social situation, situatedness that is not just a question of engaged art, but also of being situated social space and arranging that space, and functionalism, which have their own language, on the one side, and the question of aesthetics, of beauty and free creativity, on the other. The language of the former sometimes might be understood almost as scientific and can be clearly articulated; on the other hand, we have a question of beauty and question of creative processes and questions of aesthetics which usually do not have such language, and it is very often treated as something mystical or work of genius. Of course, we have some aspects of this tension in all arts, but it is not so polarized. In painting, writing, sculpture and music, there is no such tension between craftsmanship, functionality and the language of creativity and beauty.

And we can clearly understand this tension once we address the issue of language, considering that in theory of architecture we can, more or less, clearly articulate demands of parts of architecture, such as its materiality and function, and social relations. However, it seems like that we need another language for understanding creativity and beauty. Authors related to the Werkbund clearly have a tendency to demystify these creative processes. By doing so, they use the principles like "true to material" and "form follows the function," moreover they wanted to make harmony of creativity and beauty with specific architectural demands of materiality and function. However, on the other side, because of this tension in principles, that could make polarization even stronger, considering that language of creativity has to be almost fully integrated into the language of materiality and functionality in some way.

Thus, my question is: are there tensions in the very Werkbund understanding of aesthetic principles in architecture, or do you think that there are? The tension that makes communication between the poles even harder.

This issue might also have implications for the question of the idea of authorship, and question why they finished with the thesis that the author has to be an individual free actor, overlooking collective work.

Probably, and this is my question, the tension and unresolved issues in aesthetic principles lead to conclusion that creation, ultimately, is something uncommunicative and thus something related to free individual.

I would like to ask the same question in terms of communication and theory of architecture and your understanding of it. In theory, for architecture, we can much more easily communicate parts of work related to materiality and function, but creative parts of work usually require different language, and thus often remain mystical. Should we include this question, and tension, in our understanding of what theory of architecture should be?

Marko Ristić
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory

In line with Mark Losoncz's observations, I would also like to compare your book and the essay you wrote for *Khōrein*. Of course, these two texts can hardly be compared, but still, I find it very interesting to think about some differences in terminology and in the way you write about the Werkbund in your book, on the one hand, and the way you write about the state of the discipline – and about *your own work* – in this essay, on the other.

In the book, you argue very strongly, as you said, for a historical-materialist understanding of the rise of the Werkbund within the context of Wilhelmine Germany's imperialism. You very clearly criticize the idealization of the Werkbund in architectural historiography and its long-standing interpretation through a formalist lens.

By contrast, in the essay you wrote for *Khōrein*, you dismiss many attempts to take architecture out of the Western canon of formalist abstraction by expanding the discursive field of architectural theory and connecting it to questions of capitalism, race, colonialism, the climate crisis, etc., which, let us say, are all attempts that foreground the historicity of architectural theory. You label all these approaches "woke" and you say that they contribute to the "end of architecture."

What I find particularly interesting when I compare these two works is a kind of terminological and conceptual shift. In the book, you speak the language of history and historical materialism, whereas in the essay you speak much more about theory. You say that the disappearance of theory from the curricula of architecture schools is a key factor in the disintegration – or, in your words, the "degeneration" – of the discipline. You build this argument by returning to the Renaissance canon and to the figure of the Renaissance architect who writes theoretical treatises and, in a way, embodies the idealist model of the architectural profession. One might say that, in doing so, you end up rejecting contemporary attempts to rethink or even revise this canon, to open up its very history and to subject it to critical scrutiny; ultimately, to question the authority that it perhaps maintains precisely through this practice of abstraction that we call "theory."

My question then is: how do you see this relationship between history and theory in your two texts? Do you agree that there is a difference between them as I have described it? And if so, I would very much like to hear from you a historical-materialist account of your own work.

Patrik Schumacher

Thanks a lot everybody. All very interesting questions.

I think the first question and comment [from Marjan Ivković] was the most dense and maybe difficult, but I have some reflections and answers.

You are talking about commodity fetishism, real subsumption and abstraction. You started with the tension between this real abstraction via valorization

and the human need to re-concretize and essentialize reality. It seems to me you want to link real subsumption and the abstract valorization process that reshapes all labor processes and societal relations with a sense of alienation, and you suggest that Muthesius' cultural pessimism and desire to give society once more an ordered, outward architectural expression is a symptom of this alienation and an attempt to overcome this via art and architecture. I can follow this, and also your suggestion that fascism is animated by a similar sense of loss, nostalgia and desire at re-concretization, also reaching for architecture, in particular monumental architecture symbolizing the unity of a people. The Werkbund's nationalist agenda, as well as the ultra-nationalist fascist agenda, could also be interpreted this way. While I do not find your points altogether implausible, my approach does not operate with psychological needs of this kind, like the desire to re-concretize or re-essentialize, although I do see the role of rituals and symbols. The key categories of my approach are economic categories ultimately based on material needs, albeit culturally overdetermined. The capitalist valorization process imposes system dynamics on all participants. All actors are confronted by the collective or aggregate results of their individual action as an alien force. This is one face of alienation. Commodity fetishism is Marx's term for the systematically false consciousness that the capitalist reproduction process induces in all participants. While value is the result of human labor and social relations of production, they appear as inherent properties of the things exchanged. For Marx, commodity fetishism is not just a mistaken belief – it is structurally produced by market exchange itself. Not only market actors, but even economists who understand capitalism intellectually, are compelled to act as if commodities really do have intrinsic value. Social relations, i.e., relations between people, appear as relations between things. However, the era of monopoly capitalism seems to allow for some degree of active agency to some market participants, namely the monopolists who can presumably organize cartels, control and allocate quantities and set prices. Then they are also able to gain further agency by capturing the state. The tariff barriers were imposed by the state directed by the monopolists only in the 1880s. However, the anarchism of the market, and with this commodity fetishism, had reasserted itself on the world scale in this age of inter-imperialist rivalries.

What I did not understand at the time of writing my PhD and what I have since learned through somebody like Murray Rothbard, the founder of anarcho-capitalism, is that true monopolization or effective cartelization is not possible without the aid of coercive state power. Monopolization is always the work of a strong state intervening on behalf of big capital and in turn allows for further state capture by big capital. Only a state can turn capital concentration into effective monopolization. As Rothbard traces in compelling historical detail, private cartelization was actually attempted in various industries, including banking, but also railways, steel and oil, by the big firms themselves. They attempted to organize into cartels via agreements. However, all of these attempts failed as price and quota agreements were continuously undercut by

the supposed members of the cartel thereby breaking them up from within. These cartels were also vulnerable to new entrants into the supposedly cartelized markets. The participants realized soon enough that they required the power of the state to police and enforce their agreements and to put up barriers to entry. Only the state could do this, and the state was indeed instrumentalized in this way. Of course, everybody knows that the initial monopolies, under mercantilism, were privileges granted by the sovereign, like Louis XIV [under his finance minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert]. However, as libertarians, we also understand that state sponsored monopolies are the only viable monopolies, and that monopoly capitalism is always state capitalism, or as we often like to say 'crony capitalism'.

The irony is that the state has also been called to break up these trusts, via so-called antitrust legislation. However, the perverse reality has been that all or most concrete uses of this supposed antitrust legislation have turned it into its opposite, namely into an effective mechanism of monopolization, of keeping competition out, or preventing innovative newcomers to disrupt the status quo. In this respect I can recommend Robert Bork's *The Antitrust Paradox: A Policy at War with Itself*. Firms that rapidly gain market share, absorb competitors are efficiency-driven and mislabeled "monopolies." Market dominance is temporary anyway. Aggressive antitrust enforcement can paradoxically reduce competition and harm consumers, by punishing and hemming in the efficient winners to protect the inefficient losers of competition. So, anti-trust legislation together with most regulations is paradoxically a means of reinforcing monopoly capitalism. Democracy is here captured by special interest groups.

The older laissez-faire capitalism of the early to mid-nineteenth century was the era of a less corrupt democracy, by the way. There were very many independent capitalists, so that interest organization and back-room dealing to capture politics was nearly impossible. Instead, the capitalists used parliament itself to organize and manage their collective affairs by setting a general framework of rules within which competition could flourish and where the rules were upheld for all equally by the courts, without special organized interests able to usurp state power. But the further concentration process induced by economies of scale eventually led to bigger and bigger concerns, e.g., an industry like banking consolidated by going from 150 banks to five banks. These five banks can then come together in backroom deals and make their economic power felt in the political realm. At this stage democracy mutates into Bonapartism, in the sense that capitalism becomes crony capitalism or finally state capitalism. This process equally underlies American progressivism, the rise of Italian fascism and German Nazism. Capitalism becomes so much dominated and organized by the state that libertarians like Ludwig von Mises talked about Hitler's Third Reich as the "German form of socialism." Indeed, National Socialism and Italian Fascism can be described as forms of socialism, although the appearance of private ownership of industry was maintained while all major economic decisions and capital allocations were directed by the increasingly dictatorial government.

The protagonists and strategists of the Second Socialist International like the late Engels, Kautsky and the young Lenin were all thinking about these phenomena as follows: this concentration and capitalist integration of whole industries, vertically and horizontally, the transformation of firms into these giant command and control bureaucracies, can be regarded as first step towards a planned socialist economy because there was already much less market interaction. They clearly saw that it should be possible to expropriate and fuse these oligarchic, monopolistic and already state-cartelized firms into a unified planned structure. They, however, did not fully appreciate how much important decentralized information processing work was still done by the remaining markets processes, including by the capital markets. The socialists also underestimated the incentive structures of capitalism as well as the Darwinian selection processes of the profit-and-loss system of capitalism which was not yet wholly dysfunctional under monopoly capitalism. These mechanisms were still important for the functioning of capitalism during its monopoly stage. However, socialism was, in contrast to now, to some extent a viable pathway to modernization in this era of mechanical mass production via giant assembly lines, i.e., in the era of Fordism which lasted from about 1900 to 1975. The technological conditions of total social material reproduction during this era implied indeed nearly necessitated equalization of living standards across nearly the whole of society. Mass reproduction did not allow for much product variation. This meant that everybody ends up with the same products, everybody consumes the same bundle of ten to fifteen mass produced commodities, like industrial foods, mass-produced clothes (Levi's jeans), a prefabricated house ("house of minimum existence"), a car (Ford T-model), washing machine, radio, packaged holidays etc. The power of the assembly line production delivered incredible productivity and thus the incredible cheapness even of complex consumer durables like cars, electrical appliances etc. The flipside of this was that any individualized or tailored product was excluded or could only be produced in very small numbers by traditional craft methods, at many multiples of the cost of the standardized factory product. Only very few people could stand out in the crowd. This, together with the social revolutions, enabled the proliferation of these technologies and the equalization of living standards. The result was that by 1960, for the first time, everybody in a big nation like Germany could share nearly equally in a very high standard of living that the aristocracy of earlier centuries would have envied. We might even say, to some extent, that in the era of Fordism, "communism," in the sense of a broad consumption equality, was technologically mandated, a physical inevitability. What is the point of owning five Volkswagen cars, or eating five steaks per day?

When a whole economy is geared up to produce a handful of standardized goods and services, then socialist planning is to some extent feasible. The difference in lifestyles between the advanced Western societies and the societies of the Communist bloc were relatively marginal. England too nationalized many industries in the postwar era. Both blocs converged during Fordism.

The dream of overcoming the anarchic capitalist process dynamics through taking conscious control over the historical process seemed possible. This wonderfully uplifting concept of Marx seemed viable at that time: namely that we – a democratically organized humanity - can consciously create and plan our destiny and overcome the anarchic capitalist system whereby our interactions generate unintended results, which confront all of us as an alien force. This dream, however, soon led to the Soviet style totalitarianism, and to the totalitarian socialism of the German type. The problems of these regimes did not immediately transpire. In America, at the time, many progressives and admirers of FDR's New Deal thought that fascism was wonderful; progressives in the US loved the Soviet Union, and they also loved Mussolini, because it was state capitalism. Even Hitler was much admired at the beginning.

In the end, socialism was a modernization model with forced collectivization, in Russia under Stalin and in China under Mao. These were bold and breathtaking experiments. But these attempts at 'democratic centralization' and planning were not as emancipatory as everybody had anticipated. They turned out to be rather brutal and in part even lethal. However, in the technological era of Fordism they still delivered rapid industrialization and modernization in these less developed countries. Capitalism did a better job at rapid industrialization and modernization than socialism, even during the Fordist era. We can see this if we compare capitalist Western Europe with socialist Eastern Europe. But the capitalist countries also incorporated state planning and political intervention in the economy. These were to varying degrees "mixed economies." The economies with less state intervention did better than those with more interventionist state control. We might compare Germany and the UK, and consider Erhard's ordoliberalization. Germany was flourishing and surpassing Britain because Britain had gone further down the road of socialism. Still, the Warsaw Pact countries could, to some (lesser) extent, industrialize and progress economically, but only until Fordism started to be replaced by post-Fordism. Then the socialist economies fell behind rapidly, soon leading to the collapse of communism. That is why I am emphasizing production technology leading to a technology-induced post-Fordist socio-economic restructuring. There is something fundamental and profound happening with the microelectronic computational revolution and the attendant telecommunication revolution. Instead of mechanical mass production of a very small number of identical products, so called flexible specialization and thereby mass-customization become possible. Before the fixed assembly line made this infeasible. Suddenly we get these economies of scope and the production system evolved a new, enormous capacity to absorb innovations. Now producers can reprogram the robots, 3D print, or update software as service products, and upload a new app every week or day to billions of people. There are black factories in China, where nobody is working on the assembly line, or in agriculture. All human work can now focus on R&D, marketing, and finance, to bring new products to market all the time. This new dynamism has been breaking up these huge corporate bureaucracies. Privatization and market liberalization

were brought forth in England and the US, by the Thatcher and Reagan revolution. At the time, of course, most of the left hated it, but I loved this. Like myself, at that time still a Marxist and indeed Communist, some parts of the left celebrated this post-Fordist restructuring, and its emancipating dynamics. I felt it also at our place of work in architecture: instead of working for some state-owned architectural planning bureau – which I visited in the Soviet Union and which also existed in the UK until the 1970s – there was this new world of dynamism, with many small private architecture firms, and with predominantly private clients. There was global competition, continuous innovation, and the self-directedness of work, with flattening of hierarchies within firms. Big firms broke up via outsourcing. These former departments, together with new small firms, formed loose, flexible networks of collaboration mediated by B to B [business-to-business] contracting. All this was discussed on the left as well as in the business organization literature. It was celebrated on some parts of the left, as well as denounced because it also meant the erosion of trade union power and the fragmentation of the working class. In Eastern Europe, and more generally, there was this idea of market socialism being discussed on the left. The proponents thought that market socialism could be economically competitive with or even superior in comparison with capitalism. Yugoslavia was an example. I participated in debates about this in London in the late 1980s. In Eastern Europe the transition started with consumer markets and business to business markets; but without labor markets and without capital markets, and with controlled integration into world markets. It soon became clear that the introduction of markets into socialism was driving towards ever more full and complete marketisation, or to capitalist restoration as the left called this. The emerging halfway systems seemed unstable and unleashed dynamics for ever more economic freedoms. However, it was clear to me, already then, that post-Fordist capitalism is very different than monopoly capitalism or state capitalism. I welcomed these systemic differences. The new ways of working were emancipatory at the point of production, less hierarchy, less control and micro-management, more self-directedness and empowerment of the shop floor. Large quasi-monopoly mega-corporations started to break-up and internal quasi-markets opened up within the corporations, including internal job markets. There is much more scope for entrepreneurial initiatives, also within corporations, as well as so many more opportunities to break away and start new companies that compete with your former employer. I found all this thrilling and it was boosting productivity.

This was no longer monopoly capitalism. But how should we appraise today's tech monopolies? There seem to be some legitimate worries, but I think "monopoly" remains a bogey specter that the left uses without much real justification. What is new in our current era – which some call the era of platform capitalism due to the prominence of social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook) – are the importance of network effects with winner-takes-all dynamics. This dynamic also applies to ride hailing (Uber), retailing (Amazon), media platforms like YouTube, devices as platforms (Apple). However, none of these platforms

are true monopolies. Competition remains fierce, and new market entrants keep emerging. Anti-trust interventions usually do more damage than good.

There is a fascinating book by this right-wing legal scholar and judge, Robert Bork, *The Antitrust Paradox*. Bork argued that antitrust soon became pro-trust. The purpose of anti-trust legislation became perverted. It became one more tool big businesses could use to win or survive by limiting or wiping out competition. The economic losers used it to stop the economic winners. This kind of perversion is to be expected. The commonweal has no organized voice, but special interests do. Concentrated and organized interests/benefits always win out over dispersed interests/costs, no matter what the letter or intention of the law is. Each new law that allows for intervention in the economy will become a tool of special moneyed interests. This is democracy only in name. "Democracy" is an ideological (if not intentionally demagogic) phrase.

As a Marxist who turned libertarian, I have a number of unique contributions I bring to libertarianism. The first one is the Marxist mantra: always historicize! Applied to libertarianism this means: laissez-faire was neither always possible, nor always equally advantageous. Laissez-faire was very important and potent in the nineteenth century. But during more than half of the twentieth century, economic growth was also feasible via mixed economies. More recently, since the 1980s laissez-faire has been part of a new economic growth surge due to post-Fordism. The retrenchment against laissez-faire since 2000 was a mistake that contained growth and fritted away technologically generated productivity gains. Now laissez-faire is therefore historically much more urgent than ever before, to unleash all the technological potentials of our time. The problem with most libertarians is that they do not think historically. Their doctrine is ahistorical, implying that maximal liberty is always the best, always and everywhere equally urgent.

My second unique contribution to libertarianism is my emphasis on the importance, and indeed increasing importance of discourses as pendants to markets.

We cannot build a society only on a-political market relations. There are and must be political relations. However, I don't believe in centralized political control, but I believe it is possible to remove all coercive political control and replace such control with an intensified political discourse. When everything the state now provides is privatized, so many options and simultaneous possibilities open up in the areas of law, law enforcement, adjudication, education, defense etc. that we'll need an unprecedented amount of scholarly discourse, research, and political debate to critically reflect, compare and steer these possibilities. I think such a situation will be interesting, liberalizing, emancipating and simply thrilling.

Further I think that the capitalists, the guys driving world capitalism, they're a different cast of characters from politicians, they're not these authoritarian figures. The founders and leaders of US tech giants, like Sergey [Brin] and Larry [Page], Elon [Musk], and Mark Zuckerberg are not authoritarian strongmen. They are susceptible to discursive steering. There are monopoly tendencies with

respect to tech platforms like X, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Youtube etc., with its winner-takes-all dynamic. However, these platforms are only a part of the economy, not the whole or even the largest part of the economy. That's why it does not make sense to speak of a new era of so called "platform capitalism." Even these platforms are not really monopolies. Dominance in these services remains very fluid. Competition and new entrants continue to discipline these supposed monopolies. In any event, you can't rely on the government to bust these up. You have to rely on entrepreneurs, and tell governments take the brakes off and get out of the way, because a lot of these compliance regimes, again, actually function to keep the competition and new entrants out. Google wiped out Netscape and others, and Facebook wiped out MSN Messenger, now Claude is overtaking ChatGPT, and on and on and on. The reshuffling of the deck continues. That's what I believe in. I'm not afraid of monopoly. I trust in the dynamism of an unleashed economic freedom.

Mark [Losoncz]. I agree with you that state capitalism is recently becoming more dominant again. Absolutely right, particularly after 2008. Actually, I became a libertarian in 2008 when there was a resurgence of anti-capitalism.

But I have been an anti-capitalist, as a socialist and communist, and I worked myself out of that position through figures like Luhmann. I was not going to go back there in 2008; I had seen the problems and limitations of that outlook and had seen the light elsewhere. Reflecting on where the excesses and self-destructive tendencies that erupted in the financial crisis originated, I concluded that they are not inherent in capitalism's dynamic, nor attributable to deregulation. They are attributable to misguided state interventions. It is a long story, but there had been enormous distortions: the money printing after the dot-com bubble, deposit insurance, the political pressure on banks to lend into certain regions and demographics, the interference with the rating agencies – barring new entrants and mandating reliance on the incumbents' AAA ratings. Endless interventions.

The whole mortgage securitization industry was set off by government-sponsored enterprises: Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Wall Street then copied this model, which was crazy, because the securitizing banks no longer cared about the quality of the mortgages they were originating and selling on – hence the notorious 'liar loans'. And after the bust, state capitalism came in ever more strongly, and not only in China. The Chinese trajectory is instructive: Deng Xiaoping, partly inspired by Thatcher's example, initiated the search for a free market economy, but this line was not sustained – it already stalled under Hu Jintao and has since been reversed. I have been working in China for over twenty years and have witnessed the changes. There were great entrepreneurial figures, going from rags to riches – and potentially back to rags again, or into prison. It was the most ferocious competition, with hundreds of contenders and a ruthless, relentless weeding-out process, that produced superstar companies like Baidu, Tencent and Alibaba. And in the end the Communist Party steps in and captures them. The great private entrepreneurs, like Jack Ma, are all gone, all disappeared from public life.

I am watching this clampdown with a lot of worry. And you are right that analogous tendencies have taken hold in the Western countries, which I find terrible. The Green New Deal and similar programs are left fantasies looking to the state to push through pet projects. The degrowth movement is, as far as I am concerned, a disastrous misjudgment of the way forward for solving any crisis. If you force everybody into semi-poverty by reducing living standards, all you generate is an enormous amount of strife – just look at the Yellow Vests [in France]. That is no route at all. The only route runs through unleashing productivity gains and new technologies, and thereby generating the solutions and resources for a transition into continuing progress. In any event, I am very impatient. In however many years I have left, I want to see these transformations happening. I do not want three more decades of the same. We are living through the robotics revolution, the AI and computational revolution in its various stages, the internet transformation, the potential of the metaverse – and what I see are state interventions, government regulations, compliance regimes, taxes, and entrepreneurial freedoms being curbed. One cannot even freely hire and fire around the globe with remote workers. There are so many things that I, as an entrepreneur, feel I cannot do, or wonder why I am bothering to do. All the entrepreneurs I know – and I know many – want to change the world; they want to do things. The money they make fuels their projects. People cite the net worth of this or that founder, but net worth is invested capital working for you, me, and everybody. When you appraise the super-rich, you should compare consumption standards, not net worth, because net worth is not being consumed – it sits in factories pumping out goods that other people consume. There are a few Russian oligarchs I dislike, with their yachts and apartments in various cities – but how much can that amount to? It is nothing like the GDP of a country. Look at the consumption standards of Warren Buffett and ask what drives a man like this, and consider how much such figures contribute to allocating capital resources in ways that work for everybody. That is my conviction.

As to Niklas Luhmann's *Ecological Communication*: yes, I find this interesting, and we do see the phenomenon he describes – ecological alarm does not 'reach through' to the function systems in the way activists hope. I do not know that anything can be done about this on the level of an overarching super-system, because in Luhmann there is no overarching system: politics is separate, everything is separate. Still, I prefer these system dynamics and evolutionary processes. Because in the end one thing is clear: if you let the evolutionary process unfold, it delivers ever higher levels of material and, potentially, social freedom. We do not know how, and we cannot plan it, but we know that if we let it rip, it delivers. How do I know? It has been doing exactly this since 1800. Today I can go online and within two minutes have a ticket to Melbourne; I lean back, enjoy a few meals, have a good nap, watch five movies, and voilà: I am in Australia. Time and space have been compressed. And people who have never worked a single hour in their lives – students in their late twenties – do this routinely, and this will continue. How was all of this delivered? By capitalism.

And in the later stages of capitalism, with its expanding degrees of freedom, I am looking towards a stateless world society.

China and Japan, by the way, may be in a position similar to that of Wilhelmine Germany 120 years ago. They too are becoming defensive about copying and absorbing foreign influences. They want Chinese values, a Chinese character. When you work there, you have to accommodate their pride and patriotic feeling, because they are re-building a proud nation, and develop overt nationalist tendencies, including external assertiveness. Unfortunately, that is a problem. For Germans of my generation, growing up in the 1960s, national pride was beaten out of us in the great belated reckoning and de-Nazification of our parents' and grandparents' generation. That made my generation very anti-national and cosmopolitan. In China, unfortunately, this is not the case, nor in Japan. It is telling that when Japan first set out to catch up, it adopted everything Western lock, stock and barrel – neoclassical architecture, Western dress – and once it had achieved technological and organizational modernization, the traditional kimonos and the celebration of traditional Japanese culture returned. The pattern recurs now in China, and the USA too is quite nationalist these days. I worry about this. It resembles the self-mystification the Germans once indulged in, and we will see more of it as long as this dangerous re-emergence of geopolitical blocs persists. Nationalisms are being whipped up. In China it is extreme, because the whole population participates: if something Korean gives offence, everything Korean is blocked, all products are boycotted. This is a dangerous mood.

We were talking about the tension between typification – technology, science, functionality – on the one hand, and creativity, aesthetics, beauty on the other. My project is precisely to rationalize these categories and bring them into an explicit rational discourse: categories that seem to escape rationality, where one supposedly must withdraw into pure intuition and reckon with something that rational discourse cannot reach. I have a fully rationalized theory of beauty, of aesthetic values, and of the necessity of aesthetic revolutions. This already comes through in my early PhD thesis. I cite Manfredo Tafuri, the Marxist architectural historian, who recognized that some of these movements, including the modernists, registered new dynamics out in the world that were changing how the phenomenal world would come to look. At first, sensibilities reject the new phenomena because they contradict inherited ideals of beauty, and one wants to keep them away. Industry was kept outside the city; the genteel city showed none of it. Then the railway arrived in the city, it was draped in a traditional palace facade. When industrialization happened, it took a long time before its forms became aesthetically accepted. What was required was an aesthetic revolution: making that which is life-enhancing also loved and attractive, rather than awkwardly semi-rejected. For society to progress, ideas of beauty must be historically updated with respect to the morphologies and phenomenologies of those environments that represent the forward-looking, the future-oriented, high-productivity, life-enhancing potentials of a technological civilization. The Futurists were the figures who said: we love speed

and machines, and we want more. That is what was and is needed. One can reprogram one's sensibility to update oneself, and one needs to do so in order to function better in a world that now functions differently. We need to overcome nostalgia – the attachment to those outmoded forms which are dysfunctional now, even though they used to represent the height of functionality. The rational treatment of these matters requires us to critically reflect, but then also to intuitively despise the old and to love the new. We cannot avoid navigating the world aesthetically. Our updated judgements must become our second nature. As creative and critical designers, we need a language or terminology of formal description that allows us to identify and distinguish not only ways of functioning but also formal compositional relations, and then to see how these formal repertoires tie in with ways of functioning that are vital and forward-looking. Again, on top of this comes the evaluative layer, where we learn to love what works. Designers need both critical reflection and intuitive internalization, so that we can design fast and fluently. The end users of our designs only need to acquire the aesthetic sensibilities, without critical analytical grasp.

We intuitively recognize and are conditioned to be attracted to what benefits us, but this conditioning can also be assisted. There are social currents; we learn from each other, through experiences, but also through involvement with peers, with fads and fashions. There can be periods of tension, during historical transitions, and periods of settled consensus.

The early years of the German Werkbund mark the beginning of a momentous period of transformation and aesthetic revolution. There are revolutionary periods of transformation, of aesthetic relearning and "the re-evaluation of all values," to use Nietzsche's famous dictum. The great heroes of modernism – starting off in the early years of the Werkbund – were such revolutionaries, and something similar holds for Zaha Hadid and the comparable figures who worked from the 1980s into the 1990s. They were revolutionaries transforming sensibilities, bringing the built environment and the world of design into line with new conditions of a much more intricate societal differentiation and complexity, via brand new compositional moves like interpenetration, layering and collage. In this period, we were urged to learn to love the dense chaos of Tokyo because that was where prosperity was happening, whereas before we had learned to love the pristineness of windswept, cleanly separated blocks, everything zoned in its own place, nothing forced to communicate, everything running undisturbed in parallel under a command-and-control system. That was modernism articulating Fordism.

As far as I am concerned, there is no mystique left in architecture. There is no regret. The creative process is a form of evolutionary mechanism: one must run quasi-random generative processes to expand the repertoire, and then maintain an alertness in selecting and analyzing. The generative part is largely random; one can heuristically constrain the search space, but in the end, there is no generation, no learning, no progression without randomness. This is upsetting for rationalist designers, but it must be accepted.

To Marko [Ristić]: this is a bit of a challenge, I have to say, and I do not accept it. I am certainly not arguing for a return to some kind of Renaissance figure, nor am I critical of subjecting the canon to critical scrutiny. Not at all – I want this scrutiny. What I am critical of is the politicizing discourse. You might not be fully aware of what is happening in architecture: the cultural critique, academia, critical journalism, the universities – particularly the most advanced, elite universities – are not engaging in critical discourse with the actual tendencies in urban development and architecture. They write them off in a one-liner: this is a neoliberal, commercial sell-out – and say: don't even look, just ignore. They throw us – all the major architects – under the bus, and denigrate everything that is going on in the advanced countries.

Instead, they look to the global south, to the favelas, to marginal conditions and say: we want to help you. But the favelas do not need the help of New York or London left intellectuals. They need plumbing. For a hundred years it has been clear what is lacking, and the solutions are on the table. That is the problem I have with this "critical," "academic" discourse.

And in the end, the verdict I deliver is that this is the end of architecture. Architecture is inherently a discursive discipline, an academic and theory-guided professional practice. That is how architecture was founded, over and against tradition-bound building, in the Renaissance, through someone like Alberti. Alberti was a man of letters, a writer, a political theorist, an innovator. He wrote about the good city, both in its physical-organizational and in its institutional form, and about the good household in the villa and how it ought to function. He was consciously innovative.

The Renaissance architects also, for the first time, designed complete buildings and complete cities in advance of construction – the ideal city.

Of course, tradition-bound building itself passes through many stages and phases. But to move against and beyond tradition, one needs a division of labor and a theoretical discourse. This way a much-accelerated development can be achieved. Now we are collapsing back into a craft, because architects proceed without being exposed to a germane critical discourse; because the critical-reflective discourse has abandoned them, they just execute what the client or the planning system dictates. It is essential for architecture not to collapse back into craft. That collapse is the end of architecture. This is why I cannot accept your criticism.

Part II

Željko Radinković
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory

I am particularly interested in the role of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory in your concept of architecture.

At one point in *The Autopoiesis of Architecture* you say the following: "Luhmann's theory is presupposed here as the conceptual framework within which architecture might be re-described. Architectural theory is thus able to draw on

the resources of a sophisticated conceptual apparatus for the re-elaboration of its own self-description against the backdrop of the challenges of contemporary society. Architecture learns how its self-descriptions might be embedded within a coherent, general account of modern society" (Schumacher 2010: 178).

It is therefore a concept of self-description which, however — I would argue — certainly has both extra-systemic causes (reasons) and extra-systemic consequences (and this applies to Luhmann himself as well).

In his debate with Luhmann, Habermas emphasized the absence of normativity within Luhmann's systems theory. Habermas, however, argues that not only normativity but also technicality is inherent in the meaningful structure of human experience (and life). According to him, norms are counterfactually stabilized expectations that are secured against selection pressure on various levels of action for practical purposes. Technicality, by contrast, refers to the co-performance of an abstract sequence of selection steps which, due to this very abstractness, is relieved of the need to co-perform meaningful references or to co-consider the world.

In hermeneutic–phenomenological terminology — going beyond Habermas — I would say that systems, in their indifferent relations, can relate only to the purely contingent environment and never to a meaningfully structured world. In other words, systems have only the environment, not the world.

Thus, the conditions of possibility for both normativity and technicality (of the system) ultimately lie in meaning-constituting experience and life itself.

In your lecture at the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade yesterday, we heard that you oppose political or societal regulations that hinder the contemporary differentiation of the architectural system — that is, a differentiation adequate to the complexity of our present time. Even though I largely share the aversion to ideologically motivated regulation, I would like once again to point to the rootedness of systemic differentiation in meaning-constituting relations of life. In this sense, we must also assume the a priori of prescriptivity, which is antecedent to any deteleologization of the system.

In this sense, worldliness is not ideological as such, but constitutes an a priori framework for the very possibility of internal systemic differentiation.

Andrea Perunović
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory

Your book, *The Invention of Modern Design* issues from a doctoral dissertation and is without any doubt a valuable historiographical document about the German Werkbund, in particular its early years. And I have learned a great deal about this topic from the book. Yet, the subtitle of the book announces something more than that – it announces a *historical-materialist analysis* of the German Werkbund. The issue I would like to raise here, is that the reader remains somehow puzzled in this respect, if not disappointed, after reading it and discovering that, not much of the historical-materialist methodology, or critique to be more precise, was employed faithfully in the argumentation.

In this sense, my first set of questions would be:

Why did you choose to ascribe to historical materialism seemingly nominally, while somehow neglecting it throughout the argumentation afterwards? And moreover, what is your understanding of historical materialism? Could you please expand on this a bit? If I may, I would propose a Benjaminian critique, or distinction, in this case, according to which there is a historical materialism that can be understood as a theoretical automaton, behind which is hidden a theological principle that Benjamin has criticized: he says that it is "small and ugly and must be kept out of sight" (2006: 389). On the other hand, there is the historical materialism that *brushes against the grain of history* and that characterizes the "true" historical materialists. To which one do you subscribe? Or rather, to which did you ascribe back then, and to which would you ascribe today? I ask this particularly in connection to the idea of progress, which Benjamin saw as [I am paraphrasing] "a storm blowing from the Paradise in which the wings of the Angel of History are caught leading him to the future backwards, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high". To try to put it in plain terms: how do you see the idea *progress*, and more specifically, how is it linked with architecture today?

My second set of question is more focused on the German Werkbund itself:

You cite extensively the book *Art in the Age of Machine*, by one of the prominent co-founders of German Werkbund, Friedrich Naumann. His often radical stances seem to reveal something that could be understood as an *aesthetization of economy*, put into the service of national interest of Germany, bringing thus the aesthetics down to a mere instrument of the capital. Do you see this phenomenon as a certain predecessor, or a model for what Benjamin will describe as the *aesthetization of politics*, that was characteristic for the Nazi regime? Is there a historical or epistemic link between the two?

And finally, I would like to ask you about what you write in the very last paragraph of your book, I quote:

"What links our current era of Post-Fordist restructuring with the era of the early Werkbund (during the advent of Fordism) is the fact that both were times of rapid, technology-induced, socio-economic transformation, impacting the role of design in society. Understanding the historical-material logics and dynamics in the former period can and should inform our understanding and critical engagement with the recent resurgence of design and these logics and dynamics" (Schumacher 2026: 171-172).

Here also, a historical materialist analysis of this proposition seems to be lacking; in what manner does this parallel inform us?

Miloš Ćipranić
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory

My question is very simple. I would like to ask you about the question of the purpose of theory, or its use or maybe better put it, the *uses* of theory by an architect, in the historical perspective and in this very moment? I focus on the

article you published in *Khōrein*. At the beginning of your text, you say that one of the criteria for the foundation of architecture as such is architectural theory. Among other architects, in your article you mention Donato Bramante and Michelangelo. As far as we know, they did not write anything about architecture. We can agree that the history of architecture is unimaginable without treatises. However, there are some important architects in whose work we see the resistance towards writing and producing theory. Is today the producing of theory by an architect an institutional necessity or it is an institutional convention?

Sara Dragišić
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory

Reading *The Invention of Modern Design: The Early Years of the German Werkbund* gave me the impression that the book is not merely a historical study of the Werkbund but the early outline of a broader epistemology of form. One particularly relevant aspect is the way you show that typification and standardization between 1907 and 1914 were not simply industrial procedures, but techniques for organizing perception, in which form operates as a medium that translates social and economic contradictions into spatial coherence. This reading, of course, presupposes an understanding of typification as a cognitive and perceptual technique rather than merely an industrial logic: an interpretive move that may itself invite further debate. In this sense, the debate between Hermann Muthesius and Henry van de Velde becomes more than an aesthetic disagreement; it is the moment in which form acquires an operative function within the rationalization of capitalist production.

This early dialectical understanding of form acquires a different inflection when placed in relation to the essay "The End of Architecture," but also to later lectures such as "The Societal Function of Architecture," where you describe architecture as a medium that coordinates social processes through the spatial organization of communication. A further inflection of this trajectory emerges in "The Concept of Style and Parametricism as Epochal Style," where you articulate Parametricism as a methodological continuation of modernism's ambition to formulate a universal disciplinary logic. Considered in relation, these moments outline a conceptual trajectory in which form moves from being a site of social contradiction, in the Werkbund, toward becoming a procedural medium in "The End of Architecture," and finally an autopoietic topology in Parametricism. Your distinction between the mainstream architect, the avant-garde architect and the artist leads directly to the issue of how architectural systems negotiate their boundaries today: if innovation must remain internal to the discipline, is there any conceptual room left for exteriority? It is within this frame that I would like to pose two questions regarding the epistemological and ontological status of form and function in your work.

I

Negativity – variation

In your early work, form materializes and redistributes the contradictions of capitalist production. In Parametricism, form becomes a continuous topology of adaptation, where difference becomes variation. Does Parametricism mark a shift from a dialectical conception of contradiction to a cybernetic conception of adaptive variation? (Where does negativity reside: rupture, antagonism, that which resists integration?) Is there anything the Parametric system cannot absorb? Is there a risk that the continuous absorptive capacity of Parametric systems inadvertently neutralizes antagonism as a source of social change?

II

Function/the epistemic status

In Parametricism, form no longer follows function in any classical sense: instead, both appear as mutually conditioned effects of a continuously differentiated, autopoietic design ecology. Should we then assume that the form/function distinction itself has become obsolete? Is function still a programmatic, teleological category or has it shifted into a Luhmannian register of anticipatory complexity (in which architecture operates as a communication protocol that pre-structures social expectations)? If Parametricism dissolves the traditional split, what is the new epistemic status of function?

Edward Djordjevic
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory

I was introduced as a philosopher, but my PhD is in cultural and political theory. Rather unusually, perhaps, I am working on Jonathan Swift, best known as a literary figure. But I am going to say here that there is a significant overlap in temperament between yourself and Swift. I am focusing on your article for *Khōrein*, "The End of Architecture." Here are a couple of quotes and then I will tell you how they relate to Swift.

The first one is this: "the trajectory of postmodernism's own discourse mutated into a relativist, defeatist and indeed self-defeating intellectual culture that lacks the confidence to judge, project or steer societal developments" (Schumacher 2024: 29). This is one, and I would like to focus on the word postmodernism in it.

Then we have the quote that, referring to architecture, says "The discipline has self-dissolved, eroding its intellectual and professional autonomy under the pressures of anti-capitalist politicisation and woke virtue signalling" (ibid.: 3)

I chose these quotes because when you delve into the Swiftian scholarship, the theme that comes up again and again is how much these debates were present in his time. The vocabulary is clearly different for us, we talk about modernism versus postmodernism; but Swift wrote something between a pamphlet

and a book, *The Battle of the Books*, on the debate between the ancients and the moderns. But it is the same debate, and indeed sometimes given with the same arguments. In the case of 'woke virtue signaling', the debate at the time surrounded the word 'politeness', that was the word Swift used for this. And Swift had a complicated relationship with politeness. I'll read a quote from a Swiftian talking about this: "good manners were in some sense transparent rather than performative, a reliable sign of one's innate goodness rather than a pleasing front for malice or aggression" (Hendrick 2017: 860). This is the same sort of thing we referred to as woke virtue signaling. And then there is this second quote from the same text, talking about Swift's big enemies, the Whigs: "Swift regarded this Whig view of politeness as ethically simple-minded and politically dishonest" (ibid.: 861). I find this to be in the same tenor as your article.

One last thing about Swift is that Swift has a complicated relationship with politics. This is where we come to my question, because he was at once obsessed with politics, reviled the politics of his enemies, and as far as we can tell was also unable to formulate a kind of positive political position. So, his negative politics emerges in the form of satire precisely in all these texts because he is undermining all political positions. And we do not know where he stood on any issue.

And I would like to come back to one more quote from your text, "The End of Architecture." This is a wonderfully structured sentence: "Politicisation cannot always be avoided, and is, indeed, not always unproductive" (Schumacher 2024: 20)

So, I am interested, why would we want to avoid politicization? Where does the resistance to politicization come from? And if politicization is not always unproductive, when is it productive? What would be a positive or affirmative form of politics within architecture that you might be able to give us? Or is that perhaps no longer possible in architecture?

Patrik Schumacher

Luhmann versus Habermas. I actually discovered Habermas before I discovered Luhmann, and I was deep into his work in the early 1990s. I also loved Karl-Otto Apel's *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy* and its idea that science is ultimately based on certain social and political commitments. There is an interesting loop here: epistemology carries the pretense of being a presuppositionless theoretical self-assertion, but science and knowledge in fact depend on communication and community, which have a political, social, indeed quasi-constitutional force. This insight has never left me. And I am currently using a lot of Habermas for my formulation of what I call 'discourse capitalism'. I am a Habermasian on many levels.

However, I do not think you are doing full justice to Luhmann when you say, with Habermas, that normativity is absent from Luhmann's systems theory. Systems theory clearly recognizes the normative ordering of society through morality. Luhmann did not write a monograph on morality, because morality

is not a separate function system, but it is there in his theory, and he does of course treat the legal system at length. His theory recognizes normative structuring: legal norms are counterfactually stabilized expectations, stabilized against learning processes – a formulation very close to the one you attributed to Habermas.

It is true that Luhmann's own discourse is not normatively grounded or propositional in the practical sense. That is accepted; it is part of his self-conception. But I think one could find positionings in his work. He does not want to go there because he locates himself within the system of science, within sociology – and I think this self-location was not quite correct. I see a philosopher, and one projecting a certain implicit normativity. So, I take that criticism, to some extent.

I myself make no pretense of being non-propositional and non-normative. I am a Luhmannian with a political project. But I am not only a Luhmannian, because his work needs to be underpinned by historical materialism; otherwise, it remains too abstract and free-floating. Admittedly, when you look at modern societies, the immediate material pressures – the physical, material requirements of life – no longer grip directly; they seem absent, because the way we live in and cope with the physical world is thoroughly mediated through social communication.

If you get sick, the questions are: do you have the means of communicating with a doctor? Do you have the money or insurance to pay for one? When it comes to shelter, the relevant questions are: what is your legal situation – are you going to be evicted? All solutions come in the form of communication, communicative competency, rights, monetary means etc. The physicality of life does not hit us raw. It thus seems as if our sense of existence is dematerializing. But the correct formulation is rather: materiality is always mediated through communication.

So, I am not a pure Luhmannian. Materialism has to come in, and I also recognize insights from Habermas. But Habermas has a huge lacuna: economics. He knows next to nothing about economics. Luhmann is also not an economist. So, I cannot build purely on Luhmann or purely on Habermas. I need the economists and the whole tradition of economics, including figures like Hayek and Mises, i.e., libertarian economics. They, on the other hand, lack a deep sociology. Each of these traditions must be supplemented by the others. Marx remains exemplary in his comprehensiveness but not in the particulars of his doctrines.

Where you also do not do full justice to Luhmann is in this: he is, like Habermas, a theorist of communication, of meaning systems. For Luhmann, meaning is process; it is constitutive of system differentiation – the function systems are discourses. His monographic works on the function systems of modern society – on the economy, the political system, the legal system, the sciences – can be described as discourse analyses. Luhmann's systems of communication are based on practices, literatures, theories and linguistic resources, and he historicizes them. What he lacks is a materialist foundation – not meaning.

This bears on your hermeneutic-phenomenological thesis that systems relate only to a contingent environment and never to a meaningfully structured world. This is mistaken. Luhmann's "systems" are systems of communication that constitute and reproduce meaningfully structured worlds. I would insist that for Luhmann meaning is the universal, inescapable medium of both psychic and social systems. The environment of a social system is never given as brute contingency; it is always observed, that is, processed through the system's own distinctions and thereby meaningfully constituted. The 'world' figures in Luhmann as the horizon of all horizons implied in every meaning-operation. So, the meaning-constituting dimension of life you invoke is not missing from systems theory; it is built into the very concept of autopoietic meaning-systems – albeit without the a priori of prescriptivity that you posit, and I see no compelling reason to posit such an a priori. Whatever prescriptivity emerges, emerges historically, within and between the evolving systems of communication.

For me, architectural theory must be grounded in social theory, in a theory of society. You have to take your pick. My pick used to be Marx. Then, when I discovered Luhmann, I found his theory so elaborate, deep and resourceful that I switched. He offers a theory of everything social – from a fleeting meeting like this seminar up to the whole city and world society. He has the general theory of social systems and the two-volume theory of society, his *Gesellschaftstheorie*, with world society and all its differentiated communication structures, subsystems, processes and complexity reduction mechanisms. And in between, he works through his monographs: the political system of society, the science system, the legal system, the economy, and so on – an open-ended sequence. I added the discourse analysis of the function system of architecture/design. Luhmann had not anticipated this. He had not paid attention to design, the structuration of the built environment and the world of artefacts as system of communications. But it makes perfect sense, as my two-volume *The Autopoiesis of Architecture*, a commentary on Luhmann's (also two-volume) *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, demonstrates.

Within this array of function systems belong, I argue, the design disciplines of society, as a discourse. Why do I say this? The political system has its own communication practices – political treatises, policies, reforms and revolutions – and draws on a discursive tradition running from Fortescue via Machiavelli and Hobbes onwards. The same holds for the economy and for the law: all these systems are fundamentally accompanied and driven by discourse, underpinned and processed via elaborate specialized literatures. And, of course, the same holds for architecture. But Luhmann never came to architecture separately; he threw it in with art. He wrote *Art as a Social System*, but that book is really about the art world, not about architecture or design. This is a real anachronism and oversight on Luhmann's part. In the way he built up these monographs there is an enormous amount of parallelism: the same questions recur – how are these systems categorically constituted, programmed and reprogrammed – and there is a repeating and varying set or grid of categories, almost a recipe for discourse analysis. Working through this grid on

architecture was incredibly revelatory and powerful; so many things fell into place, and one could relearn and redescribe one's own field under this conceptual grid. Ultimately, though, I think this conception of function systems as systems of communications must be underpinned by historical materialism, as its ultimate grounding.

After this, I became a libertarian. Already in Luhmann one finds the doubt that there could be a single, overarching discourse – one address to which everybody could bring their grievances. That would be the super-system of politics which resolves everything, and Luhmann says: there is no such address. There is an open-ended evolutionary process, and the political system is just one system among others, with its own rather myopic view: its particular set of categories, its limitations, its particular processes of detecting and resolving issues.

From here we may move to the question of politicization. There was a point when I first started to worry about the politicization of architecture, and my worry concerned the division of labor. If one is serious about a political project, one cannot merely harangue and criticize one's colleagues in architecture seminars and lectures, in a kind of dilettante political conversation. If there are political barriers to urban justice or flourishing, to bringing forth the emancipatory city, one has to address them within the political system, where such constraints are negotiated and decided. One has to enter a political movement, forge alliances, win or acquire political power. There is something artificial and dilettante about how politics is conducted within architecture. I was an activist once; I know that in the political arena one must try to convince people with arguments in a much tougher world, where one faces not only actual parties, politicians, trade unions etc., but a whole spectrum of scholars, theorists and think tanks, as well as other committed activists. That is where political discourse emerges. And this discourse interfaces with the voting public via the mass media. To substitute for this a debate with architecture students is ridiculous. If architecture schools then occupy all the airtime inside architecture with such dilettante debates, then this means that students end up not learning their field. A caricature of a political debating club takes over: students and tutors performing a pretense politics. It is a pretense politics that gets in the way of advancing our discipline, because it absorbs all the airtime and attention.

Earlier I did not see the political barriers to architecture and urban development; I see them much more clearly now, because of this creeping state capitalism. In the meantime, I have been politicized myself, and I am out there, actually going into politics, trying to clear the barriers that are clogging up and paralyzing my own field. I am currently writing a whole series of urban policy proposals, and I have been engaging with think tanks – the Adam Smith Institute, the Institute of Economic Affairs – I am in the trenches. I have joined the UK Libertarian Party and have written their urban policy manifesto. I was also a member of two All Party Parliamentary Groups – on housing and on infrastructure.

What I realized is that the politics that swept through architecture was the wrong politics. Moreover, one cannot conduct this politics among architects. Politics has to be done in the actual political system. That is my main problem

with the politicization of the discipline. We can still work – the system is not clogged up everywhere – but in the heartlands of the advanced Western centers it is increasingly paralyzed.

Now, regarding Miloš [Ćipranić]'s question about the purpose and use of theory for the architect. There are architect-theorist-writers, and I would say the most profound theories of architecture were produced by practicing architects who knew what they were talking about – learning, of course, from others, including academic theorists and historians. But not every architect can or must be a theorist. What every architect does need is to be embedded in a movement that also includes theorizing architects and academic theorists. In the modernist movement there were key theorists, writers and critics adjacent to or within architecture, such as Adolf Behne or Sigfried Giedion. There were architects who were also major writers, like Le Corbusier or Moisei Ginzburg – many, but not the majority. Mies van der Rohe wrote only a few fragments here and there, but he was embedded, he was in the discourse, together with the more theoretically active figures at the Bauhaus – Hannes Meyer, for example, a Marxist and socialist. That embeddedness is what is needed. It was similar in the deconstructivism movement: there were two types of protagonists: On the one hand there were architect-writers like Eisenman, Koolhaas and Tschumi. On the other hand you have intuitively creative architects like Frank Gehry, Wolf Prix and Zaha Hadid – a pure, intuitive genius, but always listening, learning, present in the discourse, and using it: not generating theory but using theory, which helped those of us who worked with Zaha, for example, to select what is the next move, what goes and what does not.

One can be trained into what I sometimes call the voice-over: the discursive accompaniment one needs, even if one does not generate it oneself, in order to sift through and order the possibilities. There are also figures who are almost poets in their use of words, like Wolf Prix, or Daniel Libeskind, a semi-poet trying to theorize. Deconstructivism was also accompanied by pure theorists like Mark Wigley and Geoff Bennington. There was even a direct input from the philosopher Jacques Derrida.

But even those who do not write rely on the writers to validate and argue for their work. Theory is thus an institutional necessity, not a mere convention; without it, the movement would lack coherence, would unravel or fray. The discipline would go astray. This holds even for your examples of Bramante and Michelangelo, who indeed wrote little or nothing about architecture: they operated within a discursive culture saturated by the treatises of Alberti, Filarete, Serlio, Palladio and their peers, and their innovations were registered, interpreted, validated and disseminated through that discourse. An architect can resist writing; the discipline cannot dispense with it. Take a figure like Frank Gehry, a great contributor who insists that his architecture should speak for itself and resists theorization. But even he is a listener, and it takes figures like Eisenman to deliver the language, argument and rhetoric without which architects like Gehry or Zaha Hadid would remain easily misunderstood, even by themselves. Zaha had depended for her early sense of direction

on Rem Koolhaas, then on the wider discourse at the AA, later still I made my mark together with protagonists like Greg Lynn. There need to be people who take the broader view and sustain an argument about otherwise easily misunderstood projects. Somebody needs to pinpoint and fix via language and assertions which features of a project are essential and to be emphasized and to be taken forward, and which features are accidental, inessential, or even to be eliminated in the next project. Internally this is very important, but there are also the mediators towards the general public, the critics who write for the New York Times and similar outlets – and they, in turn, are listening to figures like Rem Koolhaas, Peter Eisenman etc. This mediation is important; without it there is no external recognition of the field's internal validations. The internal discourse, however, is prior, and more important. Can you imagine medicine without medical science, or jurisprudence without legal scholarship? Of course there is sometimes a backlash of anti-intellectualism, a demand to be left alone to build. But this should not be indulged. Unfortunately, there has been too often over-tolerance, as part of the politeness trend that weeds out critique. On the contrary: we must take each other to task and find direction collectively through ruthless mutual criticism. When it is considered impolite to criticize even a student's project, because criticism is taken as a personal attack – that too is part of the end of architecture.

Now to Andrea's questions concerning Benjamin. In retrospect, one can obviously see where things went. Take the conflict between Hermann Muthesius and Henry van de Velde over the industrial, technical, functional drivers of society and their aestheticization. This aestheticization is necessary, because people must be enabled to accommodate themselves to a new environment whose level of prosperity is compellingly higher. Muthesius was prescient, and in retrospect he is the winner of that debate: the aestheticization of the typical, of the machine form, was right.

As to Benjamin's distinction between the historical materialism of the theoretical automaton, secretly animated by a hidden theology, and the historical materialism that brushes history against the grain: I plead guilty to neither. My historical materialism is neither a concealed theology of guaranteed redemption nor a melancholy salvage operation among the rubble. What I take from Marx is the methodological premise that the development of the forces of production is the ultimate pacemaker of history, and that ideologies – aesthetic regimes included – must be deciphered with respect to their functionality within this development. But I have replaced the teleology of the automaton with the open-ended logic of evolution: variation, selection, retention – without guarantees, yet with an undeniable directionality towards increased productivity and expanded options. Benjamin's angel, blown backwards into the future while the rubble piles up before him, is a powerful image of the costs of progress, but a disastrous guide for future orientation. The rubble is real; but so are the unprecedented billions lifted into life, literacy and longevity. I face forward, not backward. Progress, for me, is not a storm from paradise; it is the cumulative, corrigible result of evolutionary mechanisms that we should

protect rather than obstruct. And its link with architecture is direct: architecture's societal function is the continuous innovation of the built environment in step with societal progress – when architecture abandons this task, it does not halt progress, but it slows and stunts it.

As to Friedrich Naumann and what you aptly call the aestheticization of the economy in the service of German national interest: I see the historical and epistemic proximity to what Benjamin later diagnosed as the fascist aestheticization of politics, but I would resist the genealogy. Naumann's project – harnessing artistic quality to German export industry and fusing national purpose with industrial culture – belongs to the era of imperialist rivalry, and my book indeed treats the Werkbund as an ideological formation of German monopoly capitalism within that constellation. There are certainly continuities of personnel, rhetoric and national pathos leading from Wilhelmine national liberalism towards later catastrophes. But the aestheticization at stake in the Werkbund was, in its rational core, the aesthetic revaluation of the products of the machine – an emancipatory, progressive achievement, which the international modern movement then later, in the 1920s, universalized and stripped of its nationalist packaging. The fascist aestheticization of politics is a categorically different operation: it aestheticizes the political mobilization of the masses precisely in order to forestall their material emancipation. The one aestheticizes production and its products; the other aestheticizes domination. To conflate them would obscure precisely what a historical-materialist analysis is meant to reveal: the differential functionality of ideologies.

Modernism's success was monumental: within a few decades it wholly changed the physiognomy of the planet. By 1965 there was urban development and modernization in Africa, in India, everywhere, in the image of these protagonists. I find this inspiring: Le Corbusier, Mies and Gropius were young men around 1910 in the Peter Behrens office; outside, it was still the nineteenth century, which had looked much the same for generations. And within their lifetimes they transformed everything. I am anticipating and working for something similar with respect to Parametricism. That is what we must achieve as self-respecting discipline that matters: We need to remake the physiognomy of the planet in the image of the protagonists who emerged in the 1990s, because ours is a similar moment of opportunity, of revolutionary transformation of society and all aspects of life, including the built environment.

But in terms of historical materialism: as I said earlier, for me the master theory is the theory of evolution, and that includes cultural evolution. There is open-endedness rather than predictability, but one must allow the competitive, selective pressures that drive progress to operate. And I believe in progress. But we must let it happen; we cannot control it or slow it down at will. We ourselves came into being through this process – now there are organic supercomputers building artificial supercomputers on a planet where once there were only bacteria and worms.

What I am saying is that I trust progress. Progress happens and continues; there are setbacks, of course, but there is cultural evolution, and it is guided

by more than one set of mechanisms. Capitalism – the freedom of exchange, contract, organization, association and competition – is one set of such mechanism: the dysfunctional firms go bust and are weeded out, while those who discover something new flourish, are imitated and attract further capital.

But there is also discourse. When most libertarians talk about capitalism, they see only this one side, the market side. I insist that there is another, equally important evolution running alongside: discourses – decentralized, open-ended, not top-down. Today, it is the flourishing of the blogosphere and the debates on YouTube, as well as journal articles and books. This discursive infrastructure is essential: every corporate calculation and decision has a huge theoretical dimension, a structure of concepts and arguments feeding into it – very many sciences, economics, engineering, technology, organization theory, political discourses. Markets and discourses together steer social evolution.

So, I believe in progress, but not in a merely Luhmannian register of meta-critique. We have to take the pretense of knowledge out, take out the obsession with trying to control everything, and remove the left fantasies of wrapping the whole process up, holding it in our collective hand, and acting only where we all agree on everything. That would mean making five decisions a year: total paralysis.

As I say, I believe in progress, but we do not know in advance where it is going. These processes inherently weed out the dysfunctional. Where are people migrating to? To where there is freedom and prosperity; they escape the tyrannies, as well as poverty. Yet we need continuous discourse to make sure we do the right thing. Freedom – including economic freedom – does not by itself guarantee that the right thing is done; it needs to be guided by discourse. We need to comment on and support the productive tendencies and weed out the unproductive ones by the force of the better argument. Certain things are obvious about the kind of society one is in: whether one is shackled, pushed around, locked up and abused; whether one must work at age twelve or fifteen, or not. People notice such differences; they feel it viscerally, even if they sometimes need an explanation why the one arrangement works and the other does not. The difficulty lies in the explanation why dysfunctionality persists. Without this, remedy is impossible. With explanation remedy becomes possible, even if it remains difficult.

One can travel somewhere and see that it works; but when one wants to imitate it, one does not know which features must be included and which can be ignored or excluded. One needs analysis to isolate the operative factors and to determine the next steps. This is where open discourse is indispensable. Discourses are accelerators. The whole point of theorizing is that we do not have to try everything out in reality; we can go beyond blind trial and error, use counterfactual hypotheses, theorize, model and simulate scenarios. This allows us to make better decisions – whether the simulation runs through words and thinking or through computer models. This, incidentally, also answers your final question about the manner in which the parallel between the Werkbund era and our post-Fordist era informs us: understanding how design ideology

functioned within the earlier technology-induced transformation equips us to recognize, see through and deliberately steer the analogous ideological and institutional transformations of our own transformation, rather than living through them blindly. The need for aesthetic revolution is the invariance here.

Now, Sara Dragišić, a very interesting set of comments. Muthesius was on the right side of history. He was avant-garde – but 'avant-garde' is a status that is only retrospectively discovered and validated: what he said was picked up in the 1920s and disseminated across the planet. Being on the right side of history, however, holds only for a time; it is not eternal. It lasts until the next shake-up. This shake-up came when in the 1980s everything that happened in the preceding sixty years was criticized as misguided and false. Modernism was a huge success, but it had to be criticized in the next stage of development, when architecture's direction had to change once more. Whatever came before becomes a steppingstone. Modernism was necessary and liberating: sixty million Germans attained, through mechanically mass-produced riches, a level of material comfort that put each citizen's standard of living above all aristocrats of the old times: a mass produced house, flowing water, electricity, television, a car in the yard and a packaged beach holiday, and effective medicine in case of sickness. What had to be given up was individuality: the nine-to-five, the modernist satellite cities, commuting, suburbanization – all of that was part of the deal, and it was a good deal for what it was. But in the years that followed since the 1980s something totally different became possible. Who would now want to go back to the world of the 1960s? This does not mean modernism was a historical mistake; it was a great success. But it would have been a great mistake to continue it. So, architecture was revolutionized, and politics too was institutionally revolutionized. The Fordist economy and the matching socialist and quasi-socialist politics was no longer delivering any further progress. The post-Fordist restructuring implied the return to a new economic dynamic, facilitated by neo-liberal revolution in the political system. Postmodernism, Deconstructivism and Parametricism were architectures answer to these new economic and political dynamics. In my view, the neoliberal revolution was too timid, half-baked; as soon as the advanced economies were out of the woods, politics became complacent again and started shifting back towards the comfortable post-war consensus. Architecture after 2008 also backslided.

Regarding Parametricism and the avant-garde: the avant-garde experiments, using the art world, and draws inspiration from artists, and then the mainstream picks the innovations up; when they work, they can be further elaborated and rolled out. The avant-garde also produces failed ideas that nobody picks up and that are forgotten. What was avant-garde is determined in retrospect. It is nevertheless important that the avant-garde be instituted as such: there is so much potential innovation that we have to separate out a sub-discourse that is given the license and freedom to dip into the art world, to bring something out and push it forward within the discipline's discursive arenas. Some of these protagonists start out as avant-garde and then become

mainstream – and why not, if they have something good going, while yet others take up the exploratory role.

This also allows me to answer your question about negativity. Yes, in a sense Parametricism marks a shift from a dialectical conception of contradiction to an evolutionary-cybernetic conception of adaptive variation – but this shift tracks a real shift in society itself. Post-Fordist network society increasingly processes its differences as variations to be recombined and ordered rather than as frontal contradictions to be resolved by rupture. That does not mean that nothing resists integration. What the Parametric order cannot absorb is that which refuses legibility and lawful variation altogether – the hermetic, the arbitrary, the willfully disconnected; hence Parametricism's taboos. And on the social plane, antagonism has not disappeared; it has migrated to where I have argued it belongs: into the political system and its specific discourses. The built environment should not be the medium in which societal antagonisms are staged; it should be the medium in which the complexity that social differences generate is ordered and articulated. The absorptive capacity of Parametric systems is therefore not an inadvertent neutralization of social change; it is the disciplined discharge of architecture's societal function, while the political contest over social change proceeds in its proper arena.

With regard to your inside/outside question: architecture is an autonomous, self-referential system. Luhmann's formula is openness through closure. The system of course responds to external environmental challenges; it is perturbed and pushed, and it faces external success criteria. But these irritations are always filtered and absorbed through the system's own categories. The categories themselves must evolve in order to absorb new information and to allow for subtler information processing. The avant-garde is the route by which the discipline detects novelties and imports inspiration from beyond the field. For example, nineteenth-century architecture never recognized factories or mass housing as part of its domain. It attended only to the city of monuments – the church, the palace; the museum was beginning to enter – and it was blind to everything else as architecture. Factories were just ugly sites out of sight, outside the city center. Factories and workers housing had nothing to do with the genteel city life, nothing to do with educated society, and was seen as rough, uncultured. Modernism brought the factories and workers housing into the domain of architecture. The social revolutions after WW1 were as much a factor as industrialization itself. So yes, there is conceptual room for exteriority – but exteriority enters as irritation that must be processed, conceptualized and aestheticized through the discipline's own evolving categories.

And yet the excluded became ever more important. The railway came in. However, initially the large steel-structures were hidden behind palace fronts. The early Werkbund protagonists started to challenge this "aristocratic" attitude explicitly. Fifteen years before Le Corbusier famously published images of such structures in his articles, the Werkbund publications featured the grain silos, the raw concrete structures, the bridges that Le Corbusier later celebrated as pure architectural forms. It was the bold engineering works that

led avant-garde architects to tear up the old historicist architectural canons. This relationship with the "outside" recurred again and again: Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown with *Learning from Las Vegas*. Architects thought Las Vegas was ugly, and trivial. Venturi said: look at it! That is the world. Or take Rem Koolhaas' *Delirious New York*, celebrating "the culture of congestion." New York was a curiously ambiguous city; the modernists hated it – too dense, with towers that were all different – and wanted to wipe it out and impose their order. *Delirious New York* and *Learning from Las Vegas* are retrospective manifestos, delivering inspiration through what cropped up from outside the discipline of architecture. But it required the conscious appropriation of an architectural avant-garde – Venturi, Koolhaas – to appropriate the outside material and transform the field via vigorously stated retrospective manifestos. That is one source of innovation; the other is formal research.

Has the form/function distinction become obsolete? Not at all. The question remains how to derive form from function – for which one needs to expand the formal repertoire and proceed via trial and error. The lead distinction of form versus function delivers the discipline's task formula: giving form to function. Then there are the evaluative codes: functional versus dysfunctional & formally resolved versus formally unresolved. I speak here of the general, abstract double code of utility and beauty that is, in each historical era, given concretely applicable criteria by the historically specific style. But what counts as functional needs to be updated in accordance with the requirements of historical epochs. The functional criteria must then be re-elaborated and re-programmed. There is indeed a double code structure in architecture: alongside functional/dysfunctional stands beautiful/ugly, because evaluation is short-circuited through aesthetic values, which must likewise be programmed, and re-programmed. The distinctions as such are invariant – and not only in architecture – but the concrete programs that tell you what to identify as beautiful and what as ugly change from epoch to epoch. These programs are first spelled out in the avant-garde manifestos for a new architecture. That is what I have done for Parametricism: I published the Parametricism manifesto at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2008, where I formulated the formal heuristics and the functional heuristics, with taboos and dogmas – what to avoid and what to seek – condensed into recipes. Why recipes? Because all the designers who must push out new work all year round, need a recipe. The recipe is the style. They run with it and spread it across the whole planet in thirty years. That is what I delivered: a recipe, which I then let loose around the planet, even if not everybody understands fully why this is rational and high-performance best practice. They need to understand it just well enough so that, when questions and doubts arise, they can give an answer. And if the whole field eventually takes this up, we can, once more, change the physiognomy of the planet the way the modernists did in the post-war era. Recently, since the amazing empowerment of all work, including architectural design work, by AI, I feel again more optimistic that this will happen.

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Your work, and especially the theoretical framework developed in *The Autopoiesis of Architecture*, positions architecture at the intersection of aesthetics, society, and technology. You describe architecture as an autopoietic, self-steering communication system that structures social interaction through spatial ordering. You argue that the distinction between architecture and mere building is crucial: architecture depends on theory, innovation, and authorship, and therefore requires continuous self-reflection in order to renew its operative codes, styles, and design intelligence.

Within this framework, Parametricism appears as a post-Modernist epochal style that mobilizes computational and algorithmic capacities to address the complexity of post-Fordist networked society. Here, styles are understood not as superficial aesthetic categories but as historically evolving design research programs that regulate the double code of architectural evaluation – utility and beauty – while the avant-garde introduces an additional code of novelty. The avant-garde thus functions as an engine of architectural evolution, responding to and anticipating socio-technical transformations. Your work also situates these claims within a broader historical horizon, particularly through the example of the German Werkbund. This historical-material framing underscores architecture's long-standing entanglement with state interests, economic rationalities, and shifting cultural expectations, and suggests a correlation between transformations in design intelligence and wider societal transitions – whether in early twentieth-century industrial modernity or in today's digitalized, globalized condition.

The question of where we stand today – within, beyond, or simply as an extension of modernity – remains contested. In your lecture yesterday at the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade, you talked about the close interrelationship between contemporary art and contemporary architecture. You also emphasized the importance of modernity and the avant-garde. It reminded me of an essay Clement Greenberg wrote in 1940, *Towards a Newer Laocoon*. Greenberg argued that classical ideals became "mute" for modern society, requiring a new avant-garde paradigm. My question then is: since you describe Parametricism as today's avant-garde, would you see it as a kind of second-degree "newer Laocoon" – a response to contemporary socio-economic shifts, or as a style meant to actively drive those shifts?

A second question is the following: you argue that much of Western architecture has "self-dissolved" by abandoning its core competency of spatial organization and articulation in favor of sociopolitical messaging. Do you observe similar self-dissolving tendencies in other cultural fields?

Patrik Schumacher

For me, the concept of style encapsulates these recipes: systems of values, both aesthetic values and principles of functional validation – what we are looking for, what we are trying to achieve, what counts as well-functioning – together with methodologies for creating solutions. The concept of style is the analogue, within the design disciplines, of the concept of paradigm in the sciences; there are paradigm shifts, revolutions, and periods of normal, cumulative work. The principles, values, mechanisms and morphologies bundled in a style concern the whole built environment – not only architecture, but urban design, landscape design, interior design, product design, fashion design, graphic design – and all of these have to fit together in a complementary way within the overall social process. One can identify the socio-economic process as crucial and say that socio-economic restructuring leads to responses in architecture. In the end, architectural production is part of the economy, part of the means of production. But architecture can also be a catalyst, because it is not unimportant; it is not an epiphenomenon – it is right in the trenches of economic development. The real driver, throughout all of history, is technology, because technology is the active element that generates true, life-enhancing novelty. There are also organizational innovations, but usually the real novelty, challenge and new potential come from technological drivers – in architecture as much as in other fields. For our time, it is the computational revolution, which is unprecedented and transforms all potentials: new products, new processes, new ways of life. And technology has various aspects: there are consumption technologies that make daily life easier, production technologies that increase productivity, but we must also take communication technologies into account, such as writing, then the printing press, radio, TV, the Internet. All high civilizations are literary civilizations, as well as urban civilizations. Communication technologies are so transformative because they empower sociality and cooperation in unprecedented ways.

Printing was a great leap forward; it generated modernity. Now the computational revolution and the internet revolution, as communication technologies, are of comparable importance. And there is also the level of consumption, the consumer technologies – all the desirable things we want to have, the end products of the whole process: entertainment via millions of channels, travelling the planet at a whim, fashion, gadgets, fresh food delivered to your doorstep within minutes etc.

This brings me to your Greenberg question: is Parametricism a kind of second-degree 'Newer Laocoon'? The analogy is apt in one respect: as with Greenberg's avant-garde, a moment arrives when inherited ideals fall mute because society's underlying condition has changed, and a new paradigm must re-ground the discipline's values. But to your either/or – is Parametricism a response to contemporary socio-economic shifts, or a style meant to actively drive those shifts – my answer is: both, necessarily. Parametricism arises as a response to the post-Fordist transformation; without that real transformation it would be

an arbitrary formal game. But once formulated, an epochal style is no passive reflection; it becomes a productive force. It equips society with spatial orders and legible, information-rich environments it could not otherwise attain, and thereby facilitates and accelerates the very socio-economic dynamics to which it responds. In this respect I differ from Greenberg: his avant-garde retreated into medium-specific purity in order to preserve art from kitsch, whereas my avant-garde pushes outward, aiming to become the mainstream, the global best practice, as modernism once did. An epochal style that remained a mere question of a rarefied connoisseur taste would have failed its mission.

But I want to add something, since we are here at an Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory. The relationship of architecture to art is analogous to the relationship of architectural theory to philosophy. I observe cycles of innovation: in revolutionary periods, in paradigm shifts, the avant-garde becomes extremely prevalent and art injects itself into architecture – and similarly, philosophy injects itself, or rather is drawn into the discipline's theory. The sciences are slightly different, but there too we have periods of paradigm shift, and those are the opportunities for philosophy to come in and offer a contribution. I experienced this very strongly in the transformation from the 1980s into the 1990s: first semiology was brought in, the structuralists injecting themselves via Saussure; then post-structuralism – we were all reading Foucault and, in particular, Derrida, who was working with Eisenman and Tschumi. We felt we needed to upgrade our conceptual repertoire, our ways of talking and thinking, beyond modernism – and then came Deleuze and Guattari, whose works, especially their 'A Thousand Plateaus', was incredibly informative. The theory I would go on to call Parametricism was to a significant degree an absorption and operationalization of many suggestive concepts from *A Thousand Plateaus*. The rhizome, the assemblage, smooth versus striated space, abstract machines etc. Later, when a new paradigm has consolidated and a cumulative working through and application of these innovations proceeds, philosophy recedes again.

By the end of the 1990s, formal and conceptual brainstorming shifted into increasingly pragmatic work, for me at least, applying the new concepts to real projects. The theory seminars were substituted by software tutorials. This became a problem when I was teaching the next generation of students: one can teach them, and they run with it – they have the recipes, but they no longer know the sources. On the one hand this is regrettable, because whoever wants to be the next great innovator should know the sources that had been driving the previous cycle of innovations. On the other hand, the next cycle is probably decades away, and the current order of the day is rolling out the innovations that have matured. Perhaps there is no space for another paradigm shift right now. Perhaps it has to be like this: the focus on realization crowds out the full understanding of the philosophical underpinnings. If we only ever think in terms of ever new paradigm shifts, nothing gets accomplished.

Finally, your second question. With respect to my 'End of Architecture' thesis lamenting the woke takeover of our discipline, do I observe similar

self-dissolving tendencies in other cultural fields? Yes, though to varying degrees. The pattern is most advanced where a discipline's core competency is soft enough to be displaced by political messaging. The art system has largely converted its biennials and institutions into venues of activist signaling – although art, unlike architecture, can at least claim political commentary as one of its legitimate modes. Literary culture and the humanities departments show the same syndrome: the substitution of the discipline's constitutive questions by an itinerary of identity and grievance, coddled by a politeness that delegitimizes judgement. Even parts of the sciences have been softened, though their hard core continues to progress in exciting ways. What distinguishes architecture, and makes its case the most severe, is that its societal function is indispensable and cannot be discharged by anybody else: the built environment must be continuously innovated in step with societal development, and when the discipline abandons this task for tangential do-good agendas, nobody else picks it up. An art biennial that shows no painting harms painting; an architecture biennial that shows no architecture leaves world society without the discursive steering of its most consequential material substrate. That is why I insist on the diagnosis: the self-dissolution of architecture is not one cultural curiosity among others, but a societal problem of the first order.

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III

REVIEWS

PRIKAZI

ON THE REJECTION OF REJECTED KNOWLEDGE
WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF, *ESOTERICISM IN WESTERN CULTURE: COUNTER-NORMATIVITY AND REJECTED KNOWLEDGE*, BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC, LONDON, 2025.

Aleksandar Ostojić

"Is it possible that nothing true and important has been seen, recognized or said? ... Is it possible that the whole of world history has been misunderstood?... Is it possible that all those people have incredibly precise knowledge of a past that never existed?" The lines from Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, with which the book begins, from the very start present both the stakes, and the intention of Hanegraaff's new work: the focus is not so much on esotericism as an object, but far more on what the study of culture systematically fails to see — and, more importantly still, on the mechanisms that make invisible remain invisible.

The title was carefully chosen. Not *Western Esotericism*, but *Esotericism in Western Culture* — a shift that, as we shall see, carries an entire research strategy with it. The subtitle, in turn, joins a term Hanegraaff's readers already know well (*rejected knowledge*) to one introduced here for the first time, and which constitutes the book's theoretical novelty: *counter-normativity*.

Wouter J. Hanegraaff is Professor of History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam, in a chair established in 1999 as the first of its kind (there are only two of them in Europe), and he is one of the few authors responsible for the institutional constitution of this field. Behind him lie *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (1996), his editorial work on the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (2005), then *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (2012) and *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination* (2022). The book is dedicated to the memory of Antoine Faivre (1934–2021), the pioneer of the field, towards whose work the author adopts a inspiring and respectful stance, but also keeping critical distance.

One possible misunderstanding should be cleared up at once. Despite a subtitle that literally repeats the subtitle of the 2012 book, this is formally not a sequel to *Esotericism and the Academy*, but a completely rewritten and considerably expanded version of the modest textbook *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2013), which the author declares obsolete in

his introduction. In substance, however, the relation to the 2012 book is the key to assessing the present one — for what in 2012 was the subject of research running to more than four hundred pages is here compressed into a single chapter, and then transformed from a description into an instrument.

The book consists of nine chapters arranged, as the author himself puts it, into three triads. The first (chapters 1–3) introduces the field: "What Do We Mean by Esotericism?", "A Short History of Rejected Knowledge" and "Internal Eurocentrism". The second triad (4–6) moves from theoretical conceptualization to content: "Worldviews", "Knowledge" and "Practice". The third (7–9) treats dimensions not covered earlier: "Modernization", "Esoteric Transdisciplinarity" and "The Global Importance of Esotericism". To these are added an extensive apparatus of notes (pp. 209–259), a glossary of technical terms, a survey of sources and research resources, and a bibliography of more than forty pages. The division of labour between the main text and the notes is deliberate: the text is written for a broader educated readership, while the technical discussion with colleagues in the field takes place in the footnotes.

The methodological manner that characterizes Hanegraaff's theoretical work is already visible in the first chapter. By refusing to pose the question "what is esotericism?", Hanegraaff is in fact pointing out that such a formulation carries an essentialist suggestion: that something of the sort exists "out there", waiting to be discovered. An essentialist definition is of course inapplicable in this case since, as Nietzsche says in the *Genealogy of Morals*, only something without history can be defined (Nietzsche, GM II 13) — whereas esotericism, on the contrary, has almost nothing but history. Therefore, Hanegraaff prefers to ask what the label of esotericism has referred to through history, who used it, why, and why we have it at all. Drawing on Tanya Luhrmann and prototype theory, he shows that in practice scholars almost never reason by means of a list of criteria, but by comparison with a "best example" of the class that they already have in mind. From this follows the diagnosis of three dominant prototypes: esotericism as an enchanted pre-modern worldview (Faivre, Frances Yates), esotericism as the social phenomenon of the occult after the Enlightenment, and esotericism as a universal "inner" dimension of religion as such. None of them satisfies author, and his analysis of Faivre's four "intrinsic" criteria (correspondences, living nature, imagination/mediations, transmutation) shows that they in fact read as a definition of enchantment set against the disenchanted worldviews of modern science (pp. 9–11).

The most useful conceptual move of this chapter is the terminological distinction Hanegraaff offers as a truce in his dispute with the "discursive turn" of Kocku von Stuckrad and Julian Strube. "Esotericism1" designates a collection of historical traditions, ideas, practices and social formations grouped under the assumption that they have something in common; "esotericism2" designates the dialectics of secrecy, that is, the social regulation of access to certain forms of knowledge (p. 19). These are two different projects that come into conflict only because they use the same term. The book is concerned with the first.

In relation to Hanegraaff's earlier work, the extensive section on "the West" is new — though not in relation to the literature that has governed this question at least since Said, Hall and Mignolo, the last of whom Hanegraaff closely paraphrases on p. 200, as he himself acknowledges in a note. (p. 254) Instead of Western esotericism, Hanegraaff speaks of esotericism *in* Western culture, and redefines Western culture itself as the "Greater West":

geographically, the entire Mediterranean basin during the first two thousand years; culturally, the dialectic between Hellenistic paganism and the three exclusive monotheisms; historically, a dynamic formation whose boundaries coincide with the reach of its foundational stories, and which in 1492 ceases to be a space on the map and becomes a space in the mind (pp. 26–27). The consequence is that Judaism and Islam enter this whole in their own right, and not as preparation or background — which is the reason for two entirely new sections in the second chapter, on Jewish (p. 40 ff.) and Islamic esotericism (p. 44 ff.).

For a reader coming from philosophy, the third chapter is the center of the book. It works with the distinction between history and mnemohistory: the former deals with what happened, the latter with the how what is said to have happened is remembered and imagined. Cornelius Agrippa is remembered as a black magician and a model of the Faustian figure, whereas reading his writings reveals an extremely devout Christian for whom faith in Christ is the only reliable foundation of knowledge (p. 80). Mnemohistorical narratives win out precisely because they are simple, because they distribute guilt clearly, as the product of as a product of post-judgment, and because they are easy to remember.

For Hanegraaff, the drama unfolds in three acts. In the first, early Christianity builds its identity against Judaism and paganism, whereby the apologetic line (Justin, Clement, Origen, Eusebius, Augustine) integrates "good" paganism by way of the doctrine that contemporary scholars call Platonic Orientalism, while the anti-heretical line makes use of genealogies of darkness in which all heresies spring from a single demonic root. The Renaissance revival of this apologetic tradition, in the form of *prisca theologia* and *philosophia perennis*, acquires revolutionary implications in Ficino and markedly conservative ones in Steuco — a useful observation showing that the same conceptual material can serve opposing programmes (pp. 84–85).

The second act is Protestant. Here Hanegraaff reconstructs the line running from Jacob Thomasius and his *Schediasma historicum* (1665) — where all heresies are reduced to a single error, the belief in the eternity of the world — through Ehregott Daniel Colberg and his *Das Platonisch-Hermetisches Christenthum* (1690–91), which is in fact the first history of esotericism ever written, and written by its enemy. In parallel, the Pietist reaction of Gottfried Arnold turns the whole game around: the true heretics are the dogmatic theologians, and history should be a history of inner experience rather than of external events. Hanegraaff rightly recognizes in Arnold an ancestor of modern religionism and of the "inner traditions" model (pp. 88–92).

The third act is decisive, and it is the reason why this book ought to interest even those who have no opinion whatsoever about esotericism. Christian Thomasius frees the history of philosophy from theology and introduces eclecticism as a method: idea that the historian of philosophy should "separate the wheat from the chaff". In the *Acta Philosophorum* (1715) Christoph August Heumann uses that method to declare the entire lineage of "ancient wisdom" to be foolishness, dispatching it with almost cheerful contempt into the "sea of oblivion", with the remark that superstitious idiocies belong in no better library (pp. 93–94). In his *Historia critica philosophiae* (1742–44) Johann Jacob Brucker institutionalizes that division through the distinction between *philosophia eclectica* and *philosophia sectaria*, and his work becomes the standard reference all the way to Hegel, as well as the source from which the philosophical entries in Diderot's *Encyclopédie* were to a large extent paraphrased (pp. 94–95).

The conclusion that follows from this is not a marginal detail from the history of the discipline, but a claim about its very foundation: the history of philosophy constituted itself as an academic discipline precisely through an act of exclusion, and the canon we inherit is not a neutral choice of what is best, but the sediment of a polemic. After Brucker, *philosophia sectaria* disappears from the textbooks, the field becomes "academically homeless", and learned ignorance about it becomes a sign of seriousness.

The fifth chapter offers an analytical instrument which is, in my judgement, the most usable part of the book even beyond its immediate subject matter. Hanegraaff crosses two criteria — communicability and independent verifiability — and obtains a fourfold typology of knowledge claims: reason (communicable and verifiable), faith (communicable, unverifiable), experience (incommunicable, verifiable) and *gnōsis* (incommunicable and unverifiable), whereby the first two belong to propositional knowledge (*wissen*/*savoir*) and the latter two to knowledge by acquaintance (*kennen*/*connaître*) (pp. 118–120). The author explicitly stresses that this is an epistemological category and not a historical phenomenon, thereby distancing himself from Quispel's thesis of gnosis as "the third component of Western culture".

Up to the eighteenth century, Hanegraaff argues, *gnōsis* was not an alternative to reason and faith, but a level built *upon* them. Ficino, Pico, Agrippa, Bruno, Dee, Fludd, Khunrath and Swedenborg were erudits who had mastered the entire traditional philosophical curriculum, were deeply versed in the natural sciences of their time and were, as a rule, devout Christians; the idea that ultimate knowledge means abandoning Christian dogma would have struck them as dangerous nonsense (pp. 121–122). Only after the Enlightenment does this fabric come apart: with Blavatsky and her successors *gnōsis* becomes a polemical alternative and, as Hanegraaff puts it, turns from the decoration on the cake into the whole cake. From this follows an ironic diagnosis of contemporary esotericism: reason is praised in theory but limited in practice, while faith is rejected in theory but practiced almost universally (p. 123).

The chapter is rounded off by a discussion of "knowing how" — hermeneutic skill, but also the practical art, to which Hanegraaff ascribes four features: an orientation towards identifying and influencing life events; the need for specialized knowledge and strategies of secrecy; reliance on ritual efficacy with causes that are "occult" in the sense of being hidden from the senses; and a permanently contested, precarious status owing to the absence of any generally accepted explanation of how such practices work (pp. 130–131). The claim that the structure of such knowledge does not differ essentially from that of an ophthalmologist or a brain surgeon is deliberately provocative, but it is precisely the kind of provocation that compels thought.

The last chapter reveals why everything previously was written. Hanegraaff distinguishes three levels of his project: the descriptive (attention to neglected material), the analytical (understanding and correcting the patterns of Internal Eurocentrism) and, most profoundly, the questioning of normativity as such. First, he shows, drawing on Urs App and Julian Strube, that Internal Eurocentrism has been externalized: the patterns by which Christians demonized pagan idolatry in their own backyard became the matrix for understanding Asian, African and Latin American religions. The Jesuit Joao Rodrigues, after sixty-five years of living in East Asia and with an impeccable command of Japanese and classical Chinese, saw in Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism

nothing but the standard types of pagan idolatry, all of them derived from the Chaldaean–Persian–Egyptian root of the "genealogy of darkness" (p. 193). The road from Heumann's "sea of oblivion" to the missionary recommendation that idolatrous cults be exterminated rather than studied is shorter than we would wish; Hanegraaff follows it as far as Eduard von Hartmann and Herbert Spencer, in whom it turns into open justification of extermination (pp. 195–198).

On this basis the central concept is introduced. Following Canguilhem, according to whom "the normal" is the performance of the normative project, rather than its presupposition, and for whom every norm we take to be self-evident is actually a value disguised as a fact, Hanegraaff defines counter-normativity as the project of demonstrating that what we experience as normal may be the reflection of a hidden normative standard (p. 199). Alongside it goes *counter-normality* — the spectrum of phenomena that disturb the sense of the normal, from the paranormal in the strong sense (Kripal) to "ontological weirdness" (Erik Davis) and quite subtle experiences for which we simply "do not know where to put them" (p. 200).

Two qualifications are important and show the seriousness of the approach. First, counter-normativity is not anti-normativity: it is not a matter of tearing down norms in order to push one's own, but of questioning the very dynamics of normalization, and above all in oneself. Second, in the distinction between "Enlightenment1" and "Enlightenment2" (pp. 205–206) — the former as respect for empirical evidence, the rejection of prejudice and unrestricted freedom of inquiry, the latter as a dogmatic ideology of reason and science that builds its identity on the rejection of rejected knowledge — Hanegraaff makes it clear that he conducts his critique *from within* the Enlightenment and not against it. This is an important point that separates this book from Romantic and Traditionalist reversals of roles, in which monotheism and scientific rationality simply change places with the new heroes of the story.

In this regard, Hanegraaff formulates one of his more interesting conclusions, which also discloses an internal aporia of the research field: if esotericism as a field of research ever to become fully normal, a field recognizable as esotericism would cease to exist, because rejected knowledge would become acceptable knowledge (p. 208).

As for criticism, it might be directed at several points. The first is that the conceptual problems of gathering Jewish, Christian, Islamic, pagan and modern secular forms of esotericism under a single umbrella have not even been approached, let alone resolved (p. 27). The sections on Jewish and Islamic esotericism were, by the author's own testimony, written with extensive corrections and advice from colleagues. They are accurate and informative, yet they remain summary in relation to the ambition of the programme.

The second point is the continuous tension between radical historicism and the emancipatory project. Hanegraaff insists throughout on a bottom-up empirical approach and on theories being means rather than drivers; yet the ninth chapter is a strongly normative appeal — the political marketization of the university and the duty of the humanities to fight back. The distinction between counter-normativity and anti-normativity has to carry that entire burden, and it is left to the reader to judge how far it succeeds. In the eighth chapter Hanegraaff uses, strikingly and very accessibly, the metaphors of the gardener and the biologist, comparing them to academic researchers — the first pulling up the "weeds" and cultivating the flowers in a garden of their own making, the second seeking to understand

the ecosystem in all its complexity. At this point Hanegraaff issues a clear value judgement in favour of the second approach, with which the author of this review fully agrees; but with it, the argument moves from historical structural analysis to a normativity of its own. Hanegraaff is, admittedly, aware of the move, and will place it within the account of situatedness and the hermeneutic circle.

The third is more of a warning about an elegance that sometimes makes matters easier than they really are. With the previously mentioned distinction between esotericism1 and esotericism2, a substantive dispute is resolved by terminological convention, effectively without any confrontation. Von Stuckrad and Strube do not merely use the same word for a different project; they contest whether a "collection of traditions grouped together because they have something in common" can be constituted at all without drawing in precisely the essentialism that Hanegraaff wishes to avoid. The peace treaty leaves the front line where it was.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, this is currently one of the best single-volume entry points into the field, and one that does not conceal its own theoretical commitments. We recommend it for several reasons. First, on account of a claim that far exceeds the boundaries of esotericism as a topic: the history of philosophy as a discipline came into being through a gesture of exclusion, so that the canon we teach and write is not a neutral selection of what is best, but the sediment of a polemic whose protagonists had names, dates and very concrete theological motives. Anyone who reads this once will hardly be able to regard Brucker and Heumann again as mere bibliographical data. In addition, the epistemological typology from the fifth chapter is a portable instrument, usable in discussions that have nothing at all to do with esotericism, and may therefore be of interest to anyone concerned with science, culture and the ways in which knowledge is shaped. Third, on account of the periodization of the relation between *gnōsis*, reason and faith, which gives the researcher of Renaissance and early modern material a precise conceptual framework for what is encountered daily in the sources and almost never appears in standard accounts.

In our own context, where the study of esotericism has almost no institutional foothold and where "the occult" still functions primarily as a marker of ignorance, this book is valuable in more ways than one — for it opens the field to further inquiry in a scholarly manner, while also recalling a simple matter that is easily forgotten in research circles. Hanegraaff does not ask us to believe in the legitimacy of rejected knowledge; the radical agnosticism he espouses explicitly excludes any judgement on the truth of esoteric beliefs (he always asks after their influence). His demand involves a step back: that we notice how much of what we take to be the history of reason is in fact the canonical record of a particular idea of what "reason" decided not to look at.

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CIP – Каталогизација у публикацији
Народна библиотека Србије, Београд

1+316+323

FILOZOFIJA i društvo = Philosophy and Society /
glavni i odgovorni urednik Gazela Pudar Draško. - 1987,
[knj.] 1- . - Beograd : Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju,
1987- (Donat graf, Beograd). - 24 cm

Dostupno i na:
https://journal.instifdt.bg.ac.rs/index.php/fid
Tromesečno.
Drugo izdanje na drugom medijumu: Filozofija i društvo
(Online) = ISSN 2334-8577
ISSN 0353-5738 = Filozofija i društvo
COBISS.SR-ID 11442434