

Abstract

Bearing Witness: Inner Infinity and the Ethics of Historical Response

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A typical defense of the humanities touts their role of historical transmission, with the tacit implication that in learning about the past, we also learn from it. Our participation in the ‘great conversation’ is to make us better at identifying the good, or at least improve our capacity for avoiding evil. Yet how this education is to proceed remains unclear. In cases such as Germany’s, one can even witness the backfiring of historical moralizing, which has ended up inducing numbness and resentment.

Gadamer’s formulation of historical effect or effective history [*Wirkungsgeschichte*] serves as a possible response to particular cases such as these, and to the fraught relation between historicity, education, and our moral lives in general. Built into the structure of Gadamer’s historically effected consciousness is an ethical task of constant re-engagement with the past. We belong to history more than it belongs to us, and if we are not satisfied with moralizing narratives, then we have to ask ourselves what story is calling to be told.

The source for this task of constant retrieval, as Gadamer underscores, is not located ‘in’ historical material, as if it were a matter of finding more information. Rather, the source of historical transmission lies in the encounter with historical experience itself. Gadamer accounts for an opacity at the core of historicity, a horizon of experience that can never fully be retrieved into present understanding because it forms the temporal ground that we arise from. It is in this irretrievability that Gadamer finds an ethical imperative of infinite conversation. What remains missing in Gadamer’s account, however, is a thorough analysis of how exactly this irretrievability bears an ethical valence, and what it is like to experience concretely that moral weight of historical transmission.

The works of Levinas and W. G. Sebald are crucial in this regard. Levinas articulates a temporality ‘beyond history’ precisely to circumvent getting mired in historiographical moralizing, which does not at all capture what he takes to be the past’s ethical claim upon us. Yet he also underscores that the ruptures of history that uproot us into ethical relation do not come from an external beyond, but from within experience. Most of Sebald’s works—fictional and non-fictional—thematize exactly this interior source of what Levinas calls the ‘absolute past,’ and the difficulty of engaging in any straightforward hermeneutic conversation with it. Both thinkers exemplify the challenge of historical transmission while making palpable its moral force. They thereby also intimate the historical self-understanding of which the humanities are in such dire need.