

History and Judgment – Introduction

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This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.

– Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) p. 257.

In this rather enigmatic image, Benjamin’s angel lingers by history, unable to turn away because he cannot make sense of it. Perhaps what makes the excerpt so compelling is the fantasy of historical judgment contained in it: that understanding the past can somehow redeem us. Political actors will often invoke ‘the judgment of history’ as a yet unrealized vindication for their acts even while historians struggle to assess what we can, and cannot, judge from other centuries. Certainly, historical identity and the ability to judge are generally recognized as fundamental on an individual, interpersonal and political level. Both our relationship to the past and the narratives we create shape our present identities, while our ability to reason, reflect and then judge shapes our vision for the future and who we would like to be. It is indeed tempting to believe that by combining the two we can, as Benjamin fantasizes, make ourselves – and our histories – whole again, and construct complete, meaningful identities.

Yet the relationship between history and judgment is far more complex, as the papers in this volume will attest. While diverse in content and in academic discipline, all congregate around the twin themes of history and judgment, and each draws the reader’s attention to a puzzling and problematic aspect of their relation. Indeed, they range from an analysis of the difficulties facing history as a discipline, as seen through the lens of an empire’s fall, to philosophical discussions of the human capacity to render historical, aesthetic and ethical judgments at all.

Csilla Kiss, in her essay “We Are Not Like Us. Transitional Justice: the (Re)construction of Post-communist Memory,” reviews the various theoretical and practical conceptions of transitional justice, and shows how they cannot be successfully applied to the post-communist situations of different countries in Eastern Europe. She also shows how transitional justice is torn between past and future: at the same time responding to a desire to judge history and settle scores on the one hand and an attempt to enable an identity that leads to a positive future for the nation on the other hand.

Adam Kozuchowski displays problems of history as a discipline in “Why and How do States Fall? The Case of Austria-Hungary in the Inter-War Historical Discourse,” a survey of various responses to the fall of the Austro-Hungarian empire in Central European historiography from the decades between the two world wars. By depicting the wide range of interpretations of the fall, Kozuchowski shows how the fall of the empire lends itself to various interpretations of its causes – interpretations that can perhaps be easiest explained by appeal to the authors’ political affiliations and personal history, and which make a single judgment of the history seem virtually impossible.

Ingvild Torsen’s essay, “The Metaphysical Discipline of Aesthetics: Martin Heidegger and the End of Art,” illustrates how history also informs philosophical reflection. Aesthetic judgment is by no means ahistorical, although aesthetic theory has a tendency to think of itself as such. By comparing Heidegger’s understanding of the possible death of art with the respective end of art theses of Hegel and Arthur Danto, she shows how the understanding of the past and future of art is primarily a philosophical problem for Heidegger. It is in the end metaphysics, and especially aesthetics, that deprives art of its importance in the age of modernism. This means that what the art of the future needs is a philosophy of art that is post-metaphysical.

The importance of judging what belongs to history for geography becomes evident in **Alexander Vezenkov**’s contribution: “History against Geography. Should we always think of the Balkans as part of Europe?” Vezenkov shows that the understanding of the Balkans as a separate region, inherently European, is at best a skewed construction, at worst a falsification of the history of this region. There has been a struggle to pull the Balkans westwards, so to speak, in the political, national and scientific discourses of the 20th century, which underestimates and covers up the region’s indebtedness to the “Asian” and Muslim culture of Anatolia.

In “Hegel, Evil and the End of History,” **Eric Michael Dale** takes up the question of history and judgment in the philosophy of Hegel, by questioning the relationship between two famous Hegelian claims: that his philosophy of history is best understood as a theodicy, that is, a justification of the ways of God, and that it represents the ‘end’ of history. Dale deflates the so-called ‘end of history’ thesis in Hegel by arguing that those who identify it have misunderstood Hegel’s attitude to the future. Hegel, according to Dale, sees his philosophy not as an *end* to history, but as a culmination; recognizing his historical thesis as a provisional justification of God thus problematizes our understanding of theodicy.

Sophie Loidolt's paper, "The 'Prophet and the 'Histor: Arendt and Levinas on Judging," examines the possibilities – and difficulties – of judgment in the wake of massive historical trauma. Loidolt situates Emmanuel Levinas' suspicions regarding our faculty of judgment, which is called into question by the call of the Other, in relation to Hannah Arendt's writings on political judgment. Rather than presenting these reflections as excluding one another, Loidolt employs the figures of the Prophet and *histor* to argue for the necessity of both positions, in a world ethically altered by the vagaries of history.

Arendt is also the focus of **Alice MacLachlan**'s paper "An Ethic of Plurality: Reconciling Politics and Morality in Hannah Arendt," in which she argues that those who dismiss Arendt's conception of political judgment as problematically 'amoral' have failed to note the specifically *political* ethic she articulates. By focusing particularly on the discussion of forgiveness in *The Human Condition*, MacLachlan insists Arendt's refusal to legitimize moral critiques of the political sphere remains consistent with her 'ethic of plurality.' Arendt requires an ethical component to political judgment and political action, and she grounds both in care, or responsibility for the world (*amor mundi*).

Our ability to think and to render judgment about the world is part of what makes the conscious mind unique; in his paper, "What 'Science of Consciousness'? A Phenomenological Take on Naturalizing the Mind," **Thomas Szanto** tackles the unique status of consciousness among other objects of scientific inquiry. Rather than siding with either the reductivist or the non-reductivist camp in contemporary philosophy of mind, Szanto questions the underlying philosophical assumption that consciousness can be rendered just one more object of inquiry, and that this is the best possible explanation of our conscious nature. In order to critique this position, Szanto returns to the phenomenological approach of Edmund Husserl.

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