

[About CA](#)

[Journal](#)

[Contact CA](#)

[Links](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Editorial Board](#)

[Permission to Reprint](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Webmaster](#)

#### ABSTRACT

A general tension in contemporary aesthetics can be described as existing between objective truth claims and historical relativity. The former is generally represented by the Enlightenment approaches and its descendants that ground aesthetic judgment in rationality. The latter characterizes the postmodern appeal to historicity and the exposure of historical prejudice. Following mostly the hermeneutical philosophy of Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Dupr , this paper argues how aesthetic theory, defined by either pole, inadequately accounts for historicity. In response to this critique, this paper attempts to navigate between these two poles in returning to an analysis of the nature of history and its phenomenological and ontological significance. It is in the very depth of the historical experience that aesthetics gains its greatest fecundity by means of its commitment to meaning and communication within history.

#### KEY WORDS

history, historicity, historicism, hermeneutics, phenomenology, ontology, Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Dupr , MacIntyre

#### 1. Introduction

"If history is the disclosure of Being, then *truth* is present at each stage never completed but always in movement."<sup>[1]</sup>

The challenge tacitly confronting any aesthetic theory of interpretation is how to account for our historical situatedness. It is precisely here that atemporal methodologies, e.g. structuralism or Kantian aesthetics, must respond to the question of historical understanding that affects all philosophical claims. Paul Ricoeur refers to this problem as an uneasiness where the regulative idea of truth runs counter to our sense of existential situatedness but also paradoxically draws us ahead into a sense of unity: "The idea of truth gives us an uneasy feeling within our historical condition makes it seem disturbing and deceptive while making us long for a fullness of knowledge in the unity of immutability."<sup>[2]</sup> Ricoeur speaks of this as the *aporia* of history, a term I shall be borrowing. In general, it is this conflict between historicity and objective truth claims that characterizes the postmodern reaction in aesthetic theory. <sup>[3]</sup> Historical understanding is not so much described by a 'participation in' as by a 'subjugation to' history itself. When historicity is ignored or remains unchallenged, the subjugation becomes a defeating one where historical understanding is constituted by a vicious circle from which we cannot escape. Marjorie Grene observes that if understanding the past aesthetically, historically or philosophically attempts to disclose an understanding *about* the artifact of the past itself, then all diachronic interpretation is subjugated to historical causation whose causes are themselves covered over by more elusive historical events "historicity destroys itself."<sup>[4]</sup>

This points to a curious paradox of philosophy that we shall consider below: Philosophy may account for historicity but it does so only by means of a rational, atemporal discourse on it. If this is true, aesthetic interpretation of art and texts, or what is often referred to as an 'aesthetics of receptivity,' is but another victim that must eventually succumb to historical

reduction. In regard to the epistemology of postmodernism, how can postmodernism escape from this, even if it accepts historicity as the determining factor of aesthetic understanding? The answer is that postmodernism generally refers the explanation of the historical *aporia* to some other reason. Thus while postmodernism sees itself as coming to grips with historicity, at least in its conscious acknowledgment of historical contexture, it is arguable from an epistemological point of view about whether or not it really has in fact taken it fully on board.

In this essay I argue that the radical determinism attributed to historicity arises when we fail to regard temporality beyond a linear progression, a sequence of "nows," or what Heidegger refers to as "vulgar time."<sup>[5]</sup> My argument does not ally itself to either an objective or postmodern position but attempts to navigate between the two. I propose in response to the objective drive of aesthetics that the key to releasing ourselves from the constraints of a radical historicism does not lie in finding and securing a methodology for aesthetics that can stand outside the historical *aporia*. It lies rather in turning away from the epistemology drawn up according to objectivity and objective criteria which belongs to the natural and physical sciences. While this seems to be a simple reiteration of postmodern attacks against Enlightenment philosophy, it can be argued that the Enlightenment preoccupation with objectivity still holds sway over our common understanding insofar as we tend to think of interpretation as getting at the meaning of something that we can secure above and beyond the artifact. In this way, the meaning interpreted means more than the artifact itself. This securing is what Susan Sontag repudiates, observing that it leads to a theory of art that attempts to create a methodology for securing and entrapping meaning more broadly.<sup>[6]</sup> Both the artifact and the interpreter become imprisoned by a philosophical exigency to find meaning. The sense of searching is by no means a neutral one but is, on the contrary, through its application of methodology, a rather violent imposition of philosophical and existential prejudice. It is here, in this way, that the will to interpret stems from a false conception of the self (i.e. as transparent).

On the other hand, the tendency of postmodernism, which is often seen to be nihilistic, is to suspend any meaningful affirmation beyond individual desire and concern.<sup>[7]</sup> Thus, by its epistemological nature, postmodernism denies the natural human inclination towards unity. To be sure, it would deny this inclination as being an illusion based on the fact that such knowledge, *vis-à-vis* the Enlightenment, is impossible and does not account for historical specificity, let alone individual free will. But this claim is really an epistemological expectation that in itself predetermines the possibility of human understanding. It is impossible not to think of unity insofar as it is unity that allows distinction and difference to emerge.<sup>[8]</sup> But this does not mean that an understanding of unity is transparent or readily graspable. Indeed, as Heidegger would say, it is what provokes thought and therefore rightly constitutes the continuous path of thinking.<sup>[9]</sup>

In response to postmodernism, I argue that its reliance on historicity as a critique is in the end displaced by a reliance on social, psychological and cultural factors that influence historical epochs. Thus in postmodernism history is no longer the operating locus of human understanding. Rather, the postmodern sleight is to rely on an interpretive foundation that makes sense of historicity. Therefore, there are causes to a historical disposition: desire, power, embodiment, cultural values or any other factors that render the self more

opaque to reason.<sup>[10]</sup> While in one sense these factors indeed make up the texture of human existence, they ignore the potency of the historical *aporia* that postmodernism first appealed to by refuting Enlightenment claims to truth and reason. Indeed, it would seem that a taxonomy of desires or a geography of cultural background is only another methodology used to make sense of history in the same way that such philosophies as Kant's *Critique of Judgment* attempts to make empirical judgments universally valid.<sup>[11]</sup> If this is true, any mapping of an aesthetics of receptivity can be subjected to the same historical *aporia* that postmodernism first raised. In other words, is not our making sense of the historical background of desire and cultural milieu itself a construct of our historical preoccupations and prejudices? The vicious circle emerges once more that Grene refers to as "intellectual suicide."<sup>[12]</sup>

What, then, is a possible resolution? My thesis concerns a return to the depth of historical experience itself. I propose that freedom from historical defeat lies in aggravating the historical problem in a way that makes it the point of reflection at which the interpreter remains or is reminded of his/her fragile relationship to the flow of history. The point is not to resolve the historical *aporia* but to understand its hermeneutical demand. I shall follow the basic theses presented by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur<sup>[13]</sup> that show interpretive prejudice to be a sign of our openness to understanding itself and, therefore, to other historical epochs, rather than a limitation or constraint placed upon our understanding.. While this openness in no way guarantees the success or accuracy of any interpretation, it does suggest that the legitimacy of any interpretative act is not in its being correct but in its ability first to recognize its situation within history and therefore, then, to be able to account for its specific historical presuppositions and assumptions. It is here that the interpretative commitment to meaningfulness can finally be freed up and understood, not as an axiom or possession of meaning and truth, but as a wager or hope to disclose something that stands as an open interpretation of the past, in order to widen a self-understanding of the present.

## 2. The General and Objective Appeal of Aesthetics

In this section we shall consider the main impetus of aesthetic theory, as it was inherited from Enlightenment philosophy, to apprehend the art object as a mode of truth.<sup>[14]</sup> Despite the varied theories involved in aesthetics, the current and general view that sees the validity of aesthetics in relation to objectivity and truth—whether psychologically, rationally or structurally grounded—is characterized by an atemporal nature. While sweeping in its application, the force of this argument is directed at the philosophical presuppositions involved in the general methodology of contemporary aesthetics. As such, it is not meant to discredit any one theory but to exaggerate the general understanding that holds sway in our present age despite what may be said or shown to the contrary. I assume that by exaggerating and in fact caricaturizing the situation, we can better see the obstacles at play.

Having said this, the general account of aesthetic theory implies that aesthetic analyses and justifications for the perception of beauty find their legitimacy as theories if they appeal to a common ground of objectivity. In appealing to a universalized perception of beauty, aesthetics is as much a theory of the real as it is a theory of beauty and so it shares with modern science the notion of finding a common structure or pattern by which human subjects can judge

their experience of beauty. Otherwise, an aesthetic theory becomes merely one opinion among others and the significance of beauty recedes into relativism. The interesting paradox in aesthetics is that even if it attempts to secure and legitimize the subjective nature of sense perception, it must do so by rational means that stake their claim on how objective their argument is.<sup>[15]</sup> How is this relation at all possible? That is to say, how can a non-rational experience and a rational mode of explanation coincide? The answer is only if there lies a common ground of experience between the two fields. Baumgarten therefore refers to the rational and aesthetic judgment as being "analogous."<sup>[16]</sup> This view generally reflects the rationalist center in Enlightenment thinking that sees reason as constituting the basis of all knowledge. It is an assumption about reason that is not only inherent in the Enlightenment attitude but the modern one as well. If this were not the case, why should we seek to explain or understand the process of sense perception and aesthetic judgment? This assumption is so true that we find scientific terminology entering into the discourse to explain non-scientific understanding.<sup>[17]</sup>

As we can see, the critique of historicism confronts the claim to objectivity head on. John Millbank, though not allying himself to postmodernism and historical radicalism, summarizes this critique aptly in reference to an analysis of Kant: "Prior to any theoretical grasp of objectivity, and as the pre-condition for it, the aesthetic judgment isolates a discrete object snatched from the continuum of time, and thereby actually occludes as Kant astonishingly admits the reality of this flux."<sup>[18]</sup>

Perhaps the most striking and ironic case in point is the historical foundation of objective methodologies. Here it is the inheritance of the Enlightenment metaphysics that informs the birth of aesthetics. This inheritance is itself something that arises out of a specific and unique historical relationship. In this case, the Enlightenment philosophical attitude is one that believed it stood imperialistically at the forefront of the history of philosophy and could somehow rise above its predecessors. Thus the preoccupation with objectivity is itself a product of a non-objective phenomenon, i.e. history, the Enlightenment discourse.<sup>[19]</sup> After all, there is no omniscient view of history, even in hindsight. The risk of avoiding this historical relation and precedent in a responsible reflection means, to some extent, to be reduced to the conditions that gave rise to the present ones. For example, the positivistic approaches to myth during the early twentieth century are characterized by an historical determinism in which it was assumed that indigenous and primitive cultures were expressing only a crude scientism and etiology in their stories. Accordingly, one can say that in general aesthetics cannot be free of temporality; it must account for it.

But if not free, then cannot this relationship be productive? What is the nature of interpretative claims? How can an assertion of meaningfulness at once lie within the domain of truth and yet be open to reinterpretation and dialogue? The key lies in refiguring an understanding of the historical *aporia*.

My own argument lies in a affirmation of the analogous relation between aesthetic perception and reason. But, unlike the aesthetics that arose in the Enlightenment, I do not hold reason within a de-ontological, worldless context. That is to say, the reasonableness -- or what we denote in the notion of objectivity -- of aesthetics as an interpretation of meaning lies in the manner in which the historical flux that seems to undermine all certainty can be understood

productively, i.e., history as participating in reason as well. To be sure, the use of the word 'reason' is a controversial one, insofar as it is often seen as being grounded in the Enlightenment. But we must bear in mind that I am referring to reason in an ontological sense in which being and reason participate in one another. This relation is impossible for the Enlightenment since, with Descartes, existence itself was doubted. It is only after Heidegger that we can once again begin to think being as givenness and real presence and of reason as participating in both human being and being itself. Thus, for Heidegger reason is no longer constituted in and by the subject. We shall refer to this in more detail below as it is fleshed out by the *aporia* of history.

### 3. The *Aporia* and Openness of History

How is the historical situation open to meaning and not, in the end, distortive of it? That is to say, how is history productive and not reductive? The posing of these questions is already bound within history. They themselves are provoked by particular historical concerns that arise in reflection due to philosophical necessity. To be sure, philosophical necessity is also historical, and so it points to a curious dialectical relationship between historical contexture and philosophical exigency. As I will argue below, it is this dialectical relationship that characterizes the openness of history and makes the *aporia* of history productive and not futile.

The historical *aporia*, in which things are present with meaning and yet this meaning is not fully disclosed, is by no means a historical phenomenology, ultimately explainable by historical causation. For if it was, the ability for us to perceive a difference between the modes of being of things would not be possible. Perception itself would be reducible to temporality, in which case we could not stand outside of the temporal flux. Phenomenologically speaking, the proof of our ability to stand outside temporal flux is evinced by the fact of our raising the question in the first place. But to look for a ground zero where we can see such an ecstatic relation is impossible since we are already and always outside (ecstatic) time. Heidegger refers to this in terms of our sense of past ("having-been"), future and present: "*Temporality is the primordial 'outside of itself' in and for itself.* Thus we call the phenomena of future, having-been, and present, the *ecstasies* of temporality. Temporality is not, prior to this, a being that emerges from *itself*; its essence is temporalizing in the unity of ecstasies."[\[20\]](#)

Heidegger's understanding of the ecstatic relationship to temporality is centered on Dasein's "care." By our raising the question of historicity, the question of the meaning of history is possible, because human thinking naturally and by virtue of being human is grounded in concern and intentionality. The correlation between this phenomenological analysis and the power of sight is by no means accidental. The power of sight, for humans, is allied with the ability to understand. When we say "I see," we mean, "I understand." To have a perception is already to be involved in an understanding.[\[21\]](#) Heidegger sees this in the manner in which we naturally look towards the horizon of things. He writes, "The existential and temporal condition of the possibility of the world lies in the fact that temporality, as an ecstatic unity, has something like a horizon."[\[22\]](#) The horizon would not be perceptible without a unity that human understanding perceives when trying to make sense of things in general. The horizon in this way de-limits the limitation of temporality.[\[23\]](#) That is to say, human understanding affronts the historical situation characterized by limitedness and

transience. History is no longer a cause to which we must reduce our understanding, but is the milieu which we must account for in understanding the nature of philosophical inquiry and dialogue.

Similarly, it is according to this Heideggerian thesis of temporality that the notion of interpretive prejudice is made productive. Unlike the Enlightenment, which conceived of an objective beginning through rationality, modern hermeneutics sees prejudice as the mark of one's openness to interpretative meaning. Gadamer writes, "Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply the conditions whereby we experience something whereby what we encounter says something to us."[\[24\]](#) But what is experienced? History?

No doubt there is a historical experience, as it were. But there is something else that makes this historical experience meaningful and that is being itself. Metaphysically, being is first. That is to say, without being there is no possibility in which any thing can have a historical presence. Phenomenologically however, we cannot perceive the primordially of being prior to history, for they are co-emergent. But rather than get caught in a situation of the chicken versus the egg, we should recognize that the first concern of thinking is being and not history. This is evident in the question of selfhood and otherness that addresses the self and the other ontologically first. The self and not history is always the primary locus of philosophical reflection, for no thought can emerge without the homelessness in being initially perceived by the self about the self. It is not until later that the conception of time and history become involved in a more complex reflection on how understanding of either can be articulated. Indeed, this truth is reflected in the history of philosophy itself, beginning with the Greek concern for being over temporality[\[25\]](#) and continuing into more recent claims to self-awareness in the postmodern appeal to historicity.

But this concern for being by no means displaces the significance of history. Indeed, it is history that aggravates the question of the meaning of being. That is to say, it introduces the problem of multiple interpretation and finitude. Time is always passing; one's hermeneutical relationship to an object of art is always changing, like Heraclitus' river. So we are left then with the problem of mediating between two poles: the first concern of the meaning of being which gives to human understanding the very means of stepping outside the reduction of history and the *aporia* of history that would seem to defeat any definitive meaning of being by introducing finitude and multiplicity. How to navigate between the two?

#### 4. The Temporal Key

In this section I suggest that the central problem concerning the understanding of historicity in a productive way has to do with the understanding of temporality. That is to say, we tend to speak of temporality and history as if they are two unrelated phenomena. Temporality is a phenomenological question, while history is a more accessible fact of human existence. We all know history in the sense of past events and encountering artifacts of the past; we know history by the limitations placed upon the present view, that history is a puzzle that we attempt to solve. But we do not necessarily know temporality except as a passing away, and we do not think temporality and history together insofar as the events inscribed in history, as a story, outrun the fleeting sense of time as passing away. History, in its fixation in texts, artifacts and cultural memory outlasts the sense of passing



and is instilled more with a sense of mystery where what is lost is somehow still present.

In history, the past endures; in temporality, all is fleeting. Indeed, implied in a sense of history is also a sense of judgment, that is, from critical to moral e.g., questions of taste and questions of moral correctness. Interestingly, if history is involved in aesthetic interpretation, it is precisely here that Ricoeur sees it as moving beyond the aims of phenomenology. [26] Is there some correlation between the fixation of history in writing and cultural memory and aesthetic judgment? A radical historicism would say "no" since the correlation itself is subject to the reduction of historical conditions. Perhaps, then, the way out of the historical mire lies in returning to the phenomenological dimension of history i.e., temporality. Through this approach we can separate the judgmental aspect of historical understanding that often becomes the target of radical historicism from its assertion that judgments are value-laden with historical prejudices.

One can say that despite the fixation inherent in historical discourse, the event of discovery and meditation upon past events itself participates within the context of history. This, as we have observed, is the basis of the historical reduction of human understanding: no one stands outside history. But concealed in this is a far more significant phenomenon that goes to the heart of the historical reduction. That is to say, the force of the argument that no one stands outside history gathers its momentum because it recognizes that the point from which one interprets history is itself a passing away subject to hermeneutical circumstances. (This is ok.) Any point of interpretation loses its claim to objectivity and validity by the very fact that it, too, is situated in a non-omniscient, non-objective milieu of being, that is, a being-in-the-world that is always passing away.

But why is this not initially confronted as a problem in our understanding of history? Why is it that a historical understanding always strives towards meaning and not contextual qualification? In the same way that history outlasts temporality and the loss of events through its inscription, I should say that it is the interpreter's situatedness in a meaningful culture and tradition that allows him or her to gain a foothold within the continuously moving narrative of humankind. Ricoeur observes that the otherness of history is precisely that which provokes the interpreter's identification with it. Otherness is not the sign of an ontological distance but a hermeneutical relation: "Otherness is radicalized to a degree when difference is no longer seen as the variable of an invariant . . . but as escaping from any kind of subjection to models. . . ." [27] Thus, the point from which one interprets history appears to be secured, situated and grounded in a meaningful relation to history itself that is not open to folly or deception. This sense of certainty and urgency is characterized by a sense of philosophical necessity. Kant would have never been so sure of the need of his three critiques (i.e., "What can I know?", "What ought I do?", and "What may I hope?") unless the age in which he wrote did not in some way demand it.

The philosophical necessity of the Enlightenment is indeed one which is characterized above all by the need to discover and create new approaches to a seemingly newly revealed universe (i.e., one without inherent meaning or teleology). [28] In this sense, it is not so much that Enlightenment philosophy, characterized by its rational approach, assumed that reason is the saving power, but, more accurately, that

the Enlightenment saw their philosophical necessity as one in which a path and common ground needed to be secured in face of the new post-Galilean universe. The general notion of common sense then became not only the center upon which existence could be secured, but also was transformed into an elaborate epistemology contradicting the very commonness of its appeal. [29] Reason was at once the highest and least accessible power.

Thus one can say that both the passing away of time that undermines historical certainty and the philosophical necessity that one takes as stemming from and disclosing a meaningful interpretation of history, despite being in history, are both genuine poles within the historical relationship and do not extinguish one another. Their interrelation is not one of combativeness but of dialectic. To see this more clearly, let us follow through with our argument concerning temporality. In this proposal I attempt to follow Heidegger's understanding of temporality. He writes:

The temporal is what must pass away. This passing away is conceived more precisely as the successive flowing away of the "now" out of the "not yet now" into the "no longer now." Time causes the passing away itself; yet it itself can pass away only if it persists throughout all the passing away. Time persists, consists in passing. It is, in that it constantly is not. This is the representational idea of time that characterizes the concept of "time" which is standard throughout the metaphysics of the West. [30]

Time is that which we only know by its passing away. And so time eludes us in our attempt to isolate it, for we cannot isolate the point in a sequence of "nows" and say that *this* point is time. While this alludes to the paradox of understanding time which is perhaps most well-known from Augustine's *Confessions* (Bk XI), Heidegger is also stating something very subtle, for he concludes: "This is the representational idea that characterizes the concept of "time" which is standard throughout the metaphysics of the West." This statement suggests that the understanding of time is itself a product of the engagement with being, in being. In this case, time is understood as a "representational idea" that is moreover supported and given credence by "the metaphysics of the West." What is at stake here in this statement? Is Heidegger asserting that time is simply a construct of the human mind that can never be accessed, an *a priori* in human reflection?

Inaccessibility is a Kantian feature and not a Heideggerian one. [31] We can observe that even in the metaphysics of the West, of which Heidegger is critical, [32] there still lies a glimmer of the true thinking that he sees originating with the ancient Greeks, such as Heraclitus, Parmenides and Anaximander. Insofar as time is concerned, what remains a glimmer of true thinking in the metaphysics of the West is that its understanding of time mirrors, or is the correlate of, its understanding of being. That is to say, because being and thinking no longer coincide for Western metaphysics, the immediacy of time as temporality can no longer coincide. Being is no longer the first thought, as Aquinas once said; rather, doubt of being is the first thought. Modern philosophy is always seeking the source of being elsewhere, behind the appearance. [33] Directly related to this, the understanding of time becomes a conceptual concern. What is the concept of time? This question is asked scientifically,



as if we can arrive at an absolute determination of time itself. But according to its nature of passing away, time is precisely the one concept that we cannot know except by virtue of its fleeting nature. Does this suggest a vain relation to time or that time is the ultimate relativity?

In proposing these ambitious questions, let us draw back from the boundaries of metaphysics. I wish to make a modest observation: Because being is non-coincidental with time in the modern understanding, an understanding of time loses its contexture. That is to say, with this coincidence removed there is a formidable obstacle that hinders us from adequately reflecting upon the nature of passing away. The dislocation between temporality and being removes the ground upon which time can take shape, that is, take shape in being. Because being is that which is no longer taken to be given and because existence is doubted, time floats away and we seek its nature philosophically as if it could have significance apart from being.<sup>[34]</sup> This observation should not be astonishing. If the primacy and givenness of being are doubted and being is that which "reveals itself only through time,"<sup>[35]</sup> then how can time be understood essentially, for it has no being to which it can be related? Rather than undertaking a metaphysical discussion of time, I wish to point to the fact that we can glimpse the nature of time by seeing it phenomenologically as constituting the horizon of being in its passing away. Temporality is then the passing away by which being *is*. This is evident in our understanding of the horizon of time itself towards which temporality moves. The key term is 'horizon,' for it suggests at once a meaningful relationship to being in temporality and a constantly moving milieu in which no thing or view can possess truth.<sup>[36]</sup> It is this fragile quality of being that I believe provides the ground upon which the historical reduction can be confronted. I say " 'confronted ' and not 'surmounted' because the condition of being in temporality is one that can never be overcome. And the inability of overcoming does not suggest an essential lack of our being; rather it points to the exigency of human being to always be engaged and aware of its relationship to the temporal horizon. It is this constant, participatory nature of human understanding that I shall refer to as 'fragility.' We must now see how this horizon bears upon aesthetic interpretation.

##### 5. Philosophical Necessity and Historical Necessity

Let us restate the historical nature of aesthetics: It is an engagement with the past insofar as a work of art is an artifact of history. The horizontal nature of temporality suggests that historical understanding in some way has this same horizon; that is to say, history, in looking at the past, looks towards the future. This is true in the sense that generally an understanding of the past is undertaken in order to understand the present and where the present may lead. Yet, more significantly, we should observe that this understanding that aims to take into account of the past and the future is also a reshaping of the past and the future. This places a unique onus on human being.

The fragile relationship of human understanding is at the center of historical necessity. That is to say, our present concerns are the impetus for looking at historical artifacts themselves (myths, art, instruments, texts) in order to learn from the past so as not to repeat it; to gain a new understanding through the rebirth of sources to renew a tradition in order to give shape to the future; and to learn of past rituals and myths in order to show the narrowness of our own (what Ricoeur refers to as the *peripetia of logos*). Indeed, to understand history so as not to repeat it is possible not because the historical events are those that

repeat, but because we recognize that despite the change in history, there is a similar historical necessity that must be addressed. Insofar as this necessity repeats, we are asked to change what is happening. This impetus to change not only affects the present and future, but is itself a change of the past; we interpret the past differently in order to learn from it. This, in turn, suggests that the objectivity of the historical past is only in the events that have occurred; how we understand it is always involved in an interpretation. And, as we know, there is no objective interpretation. A disinterested interpretation is, therefore, one that is not authentically objective but fails to fully commit to the significance of historical understanding. [37] Thus, historical understanding is not only a discovery but a translation that changes history itself. The fragile relationship is therefore a very potent one and here is where the postmodern concern is most persuasive, for it seeks to keep in check any rational dominance that would try to assert a meta-narrative of history itself. The fragile relationship is the hermeneutical locus point from which the past is refigured and the future is prefigured. Dupr  observes:

"Any interpretation of the past aims at understanding the present. Yet in the process of doing so it affects the future as well and thereby the very development of the real itself. Those who in a particular epoch impose a new pattern of meaning on the life and thought of their time do more than apply a different film of thought to an indifferent reality. They transform the nature of reality itself. If the preceding carries any metaphysical weight, it would be contained in the unoriginal thesis that Being must not be conceived as a substance unmoved by thought." [38]

Dupr  points towards a complex involvement in history that has immense implications. According to Dupr , we can say that the fragile relationship is characterized by a mediation between the philosophical necessity we explored in the previous section and the historical necessity specific to the moment in which one attempts an interpretation. Thus, the interpreter is always engaged on these two fronts where he or she is addressed by a philosophical necessity according to the historical conditions of the present age, while at the same time engaging with the artifact of the past that is also addressed to the philosophical necessity uniquely figured according to the historical concerns of its time. Furthermore, the interpreter is not excused from the future to which reflection is bound to give shape. The dialectic of philosophical and historical necessity constitutes the dynamics of responsibility of aesthetic interpretation that we shall develop in more detail in the last section.

An example of this kind of engagement in interpretation is a somewhat misleading request insofar as we are naturally and already involved in this relationship to historical and philosophical necessity. Yet precisely because it is natural and characterized by alreadiness, this involvement can go unrecognized. I believe the hermeneutical works of Louis Dupr  (*Passage to Modernity* and *The Enlightenment*) are some of the most exemplary of recent studies that account for a historical acknowledgment of conditions and concerns in relation to the needs of the current philosophical epoch. Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* also takes this approach in his consideration of the broken discourse inherited by moral philosophy that has gone unnoticed. At one point he even states that as a result of our uncritical inheritance of the

Enlightenment metaphysics, "It is no wonder that the teaching of ethics is so often destructive and skeptical in its effects upon the minds of those taught." [39] MacIntyre refers to an example that we can use by way of analogy. In the section where he looks at taboo in pre-modern cultures (Chapter 9: Nietzsche or Aristotle?), he notes that part of the reason why taboos are something that lose their intelligibility over the years is because their original context dissolves, and thus so too do the rules that give reason and credence to them. MacIntyre writes in elaboration of this point:

"In such a situation the rules have been deprived of any status that can secure their authority and, if they do not acquire some new status quickly, both their interpretation and their justification become debatable. When the resources of a culture are too meager to carry through the task of reinterpretation, the task of justification becomes impossible." [40]

The analogous significance of the taboo example lies in the loss of the memory of the original context, which itself is something natural to history's temporal quality the passing away of time. While history outlasts any one person, it exists only insofar as there are people who exist. Thus, historical memory is based on transmission and is therefore indeed fragile and incomplete; that which we can see as running parallel to a culture's resources in MacIntyre's example. Resources involve memory, myth, institutions as collective memory and so on. The point is that while this need of historical memory is in some sense a lack, it is natural to existence and so therefore is also a productive impetus. The insufficiency of historical memory is the very catalyst by which things need to be recalled. Furthermore, this recollection is not a mere recovery of facts but is a reflection in order to understand the past. So the historical conditions are those that cannot and should not be dismissed in an interpretative philosophy. I should say in this sense that historical situatedness is the power that drives us into reflection, in just the same way as we arrive *in medias res* in a Shakespeare play in order to understand what is taking place, what is at stake and what levels of perception and understanding are driving the play to its lawful end as a tragedy or comedy.

This is why philosophical reflection is characterized by the presence of hope, that is, the hope that one is within truth so that the shape given to the future by thought is no betrayal or peril. It realizes that it cannot claim to possess the truth since it cannot predict what effects its thoughts may provoke. [41] One can say that the act of interpretation is the intricate and fragile involvement in a dialogue between past and future interlocutors made contemporaneous in the present moment of reflection. But if this is so, then what power and responsibility do interpretative claims have on history, on being?

This complex affair is what properly marks the domain of aesthetic communication. It makes a judgment in the understanding of the artifact in order to have meaningful bearing on the present and towards the future only through a reshaping of the past.

## 6. *Aisthēsis*: Commitment and Communication

Understood as pure receptivity, the Greek *aisthēsis* also expresses the possibility of pure communication: communication between what and/or who? In view of the

preceding analysis, I want to say there is a double communication between philosophical and historical necessity inscribed in the moment (the present) in which the interpreter engages with the artifact and the philosophical and historical necessity in which the artifact exists (the past). It is important to note that philosophical and historical necessity are never realms or epochs that can in themselves be secured, as they are always subject to the passing away and flow of time in which the interpreter comes to them. Does this simply not repeat the viciousness of historical reductionism only more elaborately?

No, because the emergence of communication in the aesthetic moment is one which stakes an interpretation of the artifact in order to engage with the possibility of being itself i.e., the ontological potential of the meaning of being. The commitment of interpretation is that it should mean something; this is its wager that it has something to say, to disclose. It in no way can be final as if it provided a lasting hold on truth. Yet this is not to say that it is relative and soon to be surpassed. The involvement of interpretation in historicity assures that its claim is subject to the conditions under the horizon of time, that is, for lack of a better description, that its truth is only activated within the our conscious involvement in the dialectic of the double communication. It is this self-reflexive participation in history which constitutes the openness of human understanding, whereas Heidegger would say of language as such that it lies before itself as the letting lie before of being. [\[42\]](#)

If this hermeneutical attitude is plausible, then aesthetics rightly denotes the difference between a natural scientific attachment to objectivity and a human scientific concern for commitment (to being) and communication (to one another throughout history). This manner of aesthetic engagement is itself a manner of reflection concerned with the question of the meaning of being from an expressly human scientific approach, as opposed to a natural or physical scientific approach. Thus, the validity of an interpretation in aesthetics is not in its validity according to proof and objectivity. Rather, it stakes its claim on how the dialogue with civilization past, present, and future is opened, maintained and always engaged with. "Historical understanding," writes Ricoeur, "does not have any *meaning* proper to itself. On the contrary, it acquires meaning when it becomes the motivating principle of philosophical searching which is actually ventured and engaged in." [\[43\]](#)

If, as Ricoeur states, history has no meaning proper to itself, we can say that history is another mode of disclosure of the meaningfulness that, in fact, informs it. That is to say, if philosophy asks the question of the meaning of being, it is this meaning that informs the historical unfolding, and in turn, this unfolding takes shape according to the specific and unique historical dispositions of an age and how they ask the question of the meaning of being. And thus, while philosophy aims at Truth, it is in history that Truth becomes meaningful. This surely is the crux of meaning in Heidegger's observation that being is only disclosed through time. And therefore, this double communication can be the only measure by which interpretation can be productively critiqued. The temporal nature of understanding brings back continuously the onus of having to remain in a mode of reflection where we acknowledge the philosophical necessity in terms of how it has emerged according to its historical specificity, not only with regard to the artifact and its age, but also self-reflectively in our own situation with its own distinct prejudices. This double communication therefore constitutes the genuine moment of aesthetic judgment. Ricoeur writes on communication:

. . . on the road that ascends from my situation toward the truth, there is only one way of moving beyond myself, and this is *communication*. I have only one means of emerging from myself: I must be able to live within another. Communication is a structure of true knowledge. . . . The history of philosophy is a philosophical work with multiple detours all heading toward self-clarification. . . . self-clarification, even if this clarification is never finally achieved but always further unfolding, driving history forward . . . We have to bear in mind after all, that the nature of being is that it is in a state of becoming in time.[\[44\]](#)

It is clear from this analysis that there is no clean formula or method one can follow in aesthetic judgment. It can never clear the ground in order to stake its claim since the ground is involved in history, always passing and never allowing omniscience. This places the importance of human thinking on its dialogical nature and not, as modern thinking often tends, its axiomatic structuring. Thus, the notion of the double communication involved in historical and philosophical necessity of the artifact and the historical and philosophical necessity of the aesthete is not offered as a methodology but as a preparation that can never be surpassed.

Perhaps this process seems monotonous since it cannot have a terminus because it is an activity that occurs in being. But if we are to take aesthetics according to its original Greek historical necessity, we get a glimpse of the depth of meaning in the Aristotelian understanding that *bios theoretikos* is the highest form of doing. History itself is not the ground of meaningfulness; being is. History, by virtue of its *aporia*, ensures that this ontological meaningfulness constantly remains the mystery that, according to the Socratic observation on wisdom, provokes our wonder. Or perhaps, according to our own philosophical and historical necessity, we may prefer a less grand manner of speaking: Our refiguration of history through reflection is the only means by which we can avoid the risk of being reduced to it. In this, history is not lost or distorted, but comes into its own as the story of human being, reflectively and constantly retold by human being. It follows that history is not a dead past but the advent of meaning, that is, a meaning that must come through it.

#### Endnotes

[\[1\]](#) Karl Jaspers as quoted in Louis Dupr 's *Passage to Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p.8.

[\[2\]](#) Ricoeur, Paul, "The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth," *History and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 42.

[\[3\]](#) Novitz, David, "Postmodernism," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Berys Gaut and Dominic MacIver Lopes (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.157-59.

[\[4\]](#) Grene, Marjorie, "The Paradoxes of Historicity," in *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Brice R. Wachterhauser (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), p.176.

[\[5\]](#) Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), p.302, H329.

[6] Sontag, Susan, "Against Interpretation," in *The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern*, ed. Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (Boston: MacGraw Hill, 1995), p.459.

[7] Novitz, David, *ibid.*, p.157.

[8] Ricoeur, Paul, "Notes on the Wish and Endeavor for Unity," *History and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), p.194. At the same time, Ricoeur sees the fruitful thinking on unity arising from the fact that, while unity is primordial, any philosophy of meaning must deal with how multiplicity, error, and falsehood can be encompassed by it. This in fact is the heart of the matter of his hermeneutics of texts. See, for example, his "The Problem of Double Meaning," *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), pp.62-78.

[9] See, for example, Heidegger's views on what provokes thought or calls us to think in *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 35. See also Heidegger's understanding of truth as that which presupposes us rather than that we presuppose truth in thinking, *Being and Time*, p.209, H227-28. In this sense, what provokes thought is truth, the truth that we as humans apprehend but cannot fully explicate. We are thus called to thinking.

[10] John Cottingham therefore makes an appeal to analytic philosophy to take into its reflection the contributions of psychoanalysis. What he calls the "synoptic ethics" of the past that attempted a blueprint for moral action does not adequately cope with individual psychical problems, or *akrasia*. *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the Passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[11] Crawford, Donald W., "Kant," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, pp.51-52.

[12] Grene, Marjorie, *ibid.*, p.176.

[13] See such works as Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinscheimer & Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2003) and Ricoeur's various hermeneutical essays in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdés (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992) and *History and Truth*.

[14] Dupré, Louis, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp.78-79.

[15] See, for example, Louis Dupré's study of the birth of aesthetics in Baumgarten, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, pp.101-11.

[16] Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750) 42, as quoted in Dupré's *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, p.103.

[17] Structuralism is one such example. Also see Sarah E. Worth's "Narrative Understanding and Understanding Narrative," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 2, 2004, accessed August 16, 2005; available from [www.contempaesthetics.org/pages/article.php?articleID=237](http://www.contempaesthetics.org/pages/article.php?articleID=237).

[18] Millbank, John, "Beauty and the Soul," *Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press



International, 2003), p.5. He refers to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp.105-9.

[19] Alasdair MacIntyre refers to modern moral philosophy's inheritance of the Enlightenment concern and discourse as a broken one. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1997), pp.1-5.

[20] Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, p.302, H329. All italics are Heidegger's.

[21] Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* is one instance. See Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin's "Art and Embodiment: Biological and Phenomenological Contributions to Understanding Beauty and the Aesthetic," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 3, 2005, section 4, accessed August 16, 2005; available from [www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=291](http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=291).

[22] Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, p.333, H365.

[23] Heidegger recalls the ancient Greek understanding of boundary in this positive, productive sense that runs counter to our modern notion of boundary as a limitation: "A space is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free, namely within a boundary, or *peras*. A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its presencing*. See "Building Dwelling Thinking," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Alfred Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p.154.

[24] Gadamer, Hans-Georg, "The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem," *The Hermeneutic Tradition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), p.152.

[25] Thus we can recall Parmenides' *To gar auto noein estin te kai einai*, "Being and thinking are the same." Plato's question in the Republic "What is justice?" can be seen as the central question of late, ancient Greek thinking as it relates directly to the question of the good life. We should note, in view of this, that the question of justice is located in the question of knowing the self.

[26] Ricoeur, Paul, "Phenomenology and Theory of Literature," *A Ricoeur Reader*, pp.446-47. The aim of phenomenology is to clarify and explain while aesthetics brings in the act of judgment.

[27] Ricoeur, Paul, "Narrated Time," *A Ricoeur Reader*, p.348.

[28] Dupr therefore refers to the Enlightenment not so much as the age of reason but as the age of "self-consciousness," where what pervades all thinking and emotion is "[t]he loss of the person's central position in the post-Galilean universe . . . ." *The Enlightenment*, p.53.

[29] Arendt, Hannah, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), pp.283-89.

[30] Heidegger, Martin, *What Is Called Thinking?*, p.99.

[31] Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, p.102, H110: "He [Kant] only wishes to show that all orientation needs a 'subjective principle.' But 'subjective' means here *a priori*. The *a priori* of directionality in terms of right and left, however, is grounded in the 'subjective' *a priori* of being-in-the-world, which has nothing to do with a determinate

character restricted beforehand to a worldless subject." Also see his "Science and Reflection," *The Question Concerning Technology*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp.164-67, where he speaks of how being's essence is presence and not sourced elsewhere.

[32] See, for example, his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959) and "What is Metaphysics?" *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.82-96.

[33] Dupr  argues that this has occurred due to a lack of adequate response by theology during a critical span of time that can be said to begin with the nominalism of the Late Middle Ages. The key feature in this metaphysical inversion is the loss of the understanding that nature is imbued with meaning and reason. It is the mark of modern philosophy that reason is constituted by the subject. See his *Passage to Modernity*.

[34] Dupr  shows how the concern for absolute Time and Space (via Newton) was possible only because "science" became increasingly understood as an objective manner of taking hold of a mechanistic nature that had no meaning. Time and Space, though regarded in absolute terms, were concepts to be epistemologically defined as ideas and not teleologically as metaphysical principles pointing towards a divine goal. *Passage to Modernity*, pp.74-79.

[35] Dupr , Louis, *Passage to Modernity*, p.8.

[36] The use of the word 'horizon ' is indebted to the work of Gadamer. See Gadamer's *Truth and Method*.

[37] See Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, Volume 1, trans. Kathleen MacLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp.114-15, 124-25.

[38] Dupr , Louis, *Passage to Modernity*, p.10.

[39] *After Virtue*, p.112.

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] Ricoeur, Paul, "The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth," *History and Truth*, p.55.

[42] See Heidegger's understanding of *logos* as *legein* in *Early Greek Thinking* trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1984), p.90.

[43] Ricoeur, Paul, "The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth," *History and Truth*, p.51.

[44] Ricoeur, Paul, "The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth," *History and Truth*, p.51.

Todd S. Mei  
Theology & Religious Studies  
University of Kent  
Canterbury, UK  
[tm56@kent.ac.uk](mailto:tm56@kent.ac.uk)  
Published May 24, 2006