

Reseña.

# **Review of "Ethics and Time in the Philosophy of HistoryA Cross-Cultural Approach. London, New York and Dublin: Bloomsbury, 2023" 20.**

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Ethics and Time in the Philosophy of History. A Cross-Cultural Approach* edited by Natan Elgabsi and Bennett Gilbert. London, New York and Dublin: Bloomsbury. 2023. ISBN: 9781350279094. eBook: 9781350279117.

The book *Ethics and Time in the Philosophy of History*, edited by Natan Elgabsi and Bennett Gilbert, delves into the “philosophy of history” and its dialectic with the nature of time, existentialism and morality.<sup>1</sup> The publication comprises 15 chapters subdivided into five sections (these sections have unequal extensions; for example, the last section contains just one chapter, and section 4 includes five chapters).

The book is a collection of essays that studies and reflects on “classic” Western philosophers of time, existentialist philosophers, and/or philosophers of history: from Plato and Augustine of Hippo up to G. W. Hegel, Martin Heidegger, and Emmanuel Levinas. Nevertheless, this book also contains chapters dedicated to reflecting on non-Western philosophy of history, philosophy of time, and moral philosophy, which is one of its most considerable merits. Concretely, about non-Western philosophy, the book contains a chapter that studies the existentialist philosophy of the Japanese philosopher Hajime Tanabe (chapter 8 written by Takeshi Morisato), includes a chapter on the Māori posture on time and the Māori philosophy of history (chapter 11 by Georgina Tuari Stewart), and contains a chapter that surveys the existential nature of anthropology from the Jewish and Latin-American perspectives (chapter 15 by Ruth Behar). Moreover, *Ethics and Time in the Philosophy of History* provides a chapter that usefully reflects

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on the unjust execution of the indigenous “social fighter” Louis Riel by the State of Canada (chapter 1 written by Réal Fillion), and a chapter that applies Walter Benjamin’s ideas to analyze some political events in the Global South, concretely, in Chile, Argentina and South Africa (chapter 4 by Rafael Pérez Baquero).

I have determined that each of the 15 chapters of the book tackle one of the following two main topics: A) the impact of history (i.e., the past human events and facts), the discipline-of-history (the discipline that critically studies history) and the historiography (i.e., all kinds of written narrations-explanations of history), on the moral life and human emotions, or B) the conceptualization or (ontological) definition of time and its relation with history. Each chapter tackles topics A and/or B with, of course, a very different academic/personal perspective, and through the work of diverse thinkers or diverse theoretical/philosophical approaches. Topic A is addressed in chapters 1-3, 5-6, 8, 13, and 15, as I detail in the next paragraph. Topic B is addressed in chapters 2, 7, 9-12, and 14.

*Topic A: the impact of history, the discipline-of-history and the historiography on the moral life and human emotions*

In Chapter 1 Fillion declares, as an example of an assertion on the impact of historiography on moral life, that “The philosophical questions raised by historiography are typically epistemological, but also ontological, aesthetic, and, most importantly, ethical” (p. 27). This chapter definitely delves in the dialectic between historiography and ethics when reminds us that *reading “historiography” implies a moral responsibility*: “Kalle Pihlainen has argued, reading history carries with it its own responsibility, and as readers, we should not expect simply to be served a sense of the past” (p. 32). Ethan Kleinberg (chap. 2) interestingly reflects on the role of fictional and literary “ghosts” as an example of how to existentially confront the past and “provide a moral scaffold for our future” (p. 41). Hans Ruin (chap. 3) reflects on what it means (morally and academically) to inherit a tradition of studying what he identifies as “social ontology of being with the dead” (p. 54); among other questions, he asks what to do with Karl Marx’s “philosophy of history” as a theoretical heritage (p. 57), and he provides a much needed general deliberation about the “heritage studies” from academics such as François Hartog, Pierre Nora and David Lowenthal, who “delineate the history of state sponsored attempts to manage historical remains. [...] [and] describe when, how, and why... cultural heritage becomes a sociopolitical entity” (p. 59). Nora

Hämäläinen (chap. 5) produces a stimulating argumentation in favor of not judging, morally speaking, persons in the past with the moral standards from the present and from our sociocultural context; I disagree with this intellectual position, although I consider that Hämäläinen's argumentations are quite solid. Chiel van den Akker (chap. 6) delivers a well-argued analysis of conscience, "agency", and moral responsibility from pre-Modern times (specifically in Greek tragedy) and Modern times (specifically in Hegel). Morisato (chap. 8) takes a useful dive into Tanabe Hajime's "death philosophy" and its nexus with historicity, especially with our present historicity understood as a "nuclear(-death) age". Jeffrey Andrew Barash (chap. 13) gives us a study on "collective memory" and its possible ethical implications; his chapters analyzes "collective memory" both at the historiographical level and the sociopolitical level and reminds us that such a conceptual category can directly influence the ethics of specific human groups: "collective memory does not only concern commemorations, [...], or the transmission of a past heritage but first and foremost the vast reservoirs of signification that *nourish latent sources of interpretation situated at the basis of group identities*" (p. 234) (my emphasis). Behar (chap. 15) delivers a very personal deliberation on the labor of those that practice anthropology, in particular on the "weight" of the personal history in developing a/their anthropological study, and how such personal history/background can connect or disconnect the researchers with the persons that were the "object" of the/their study.

*Topic B: the conceptualization/description of time and its relationship with history.*

In Chapter 2, Kleinberg concentrates his efforts on explaining how "the totality of history is conceived in terms of progress" (p. 43), in other words, he explains history's time as generally conceived as linear-progressive; furthermore, he analyzes the impact on humans of what he calls "Surges" of the past (pp. 46-49). Roberto Wu (chap. 7) studies important ontological categories such as "vestiges", "events", or "presence"; this chapter leads to consider particularly important the study of the "vestige" for comprehending the past-present dialectics because the "vestige", in Wu's words, always "produces a gap that cannot be completely fulfilled, for while it persists in the present, it also bears inscriptions of a remote time that refuse presence. [...] [It] redirect[s] our understanding to orientations of meanings in nonlinear patterns" (p. 128). Megan Fritts (chap. 9), using Alexander Jech's ideas, provides a splendid explanation on how *losing our dear ones ontologically affects the time-history of our being*. Anne Sophie

Meincke (chap. 10) digs into “Heidegger’s thoughts on the diachronic dimension of selfhood specifically” (p. 174), and she creates a chapter that must be of enormous interest to Heidegger’s specialists. Interestingly, she concludes that for the German philosopher “a comprehensive and satisfactory explanation of personal identity ultimately requires an investigation into the so-called historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) of Dasein, which is rooted in Dasein’s temporality. Things do not have a history but Dasein has—” (p. 182). Stewart (chap. 11) examines the Māori’s idea of time, concretely the “whakapapa concept” which is critical in understanding Māori’s (social, cultural, and ontological) philosophy as “knowledge of whakapapa had both social/ethical value and economic/instrumental value” (p. 202); whakapapa “in its totality provides the ground or fabric of Māori philosophy, whereupon the basic principles of mana and tapu operate on the cosmic/spiritual polarities, and the ongoing work of maintaining them in balance” (p. 204). Benda Hofmeyr (chap. 12) delivers a dissection of “time”, “truth” and “eschatology”, in Emmanuel Levinas, explicitly studying the books *Time and the Other* and *Otherwise than Being*; one of the chapter’s virtues is *Hofmeyr’s clarity in undoubtedly establishing that Levinas has a nonteological conception of time* (pp. 220-222). Finally, Jan-Ivar Lindén (chap. 14) performs an analysis of time in the "historical" which lead him to study the ideas of renowned thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine of Hippo, Laplace, and Georg Simmel; this demonstrates the complexity and the vast history of what Lindén calls “historical ontology”.

By this point, the reader of this recension is very aware of the philosophical and cultural variety of texts edited by Elgabsi and Gilbert. However, this variety does not demerit the book; on the contrary, it demonstrates the richness of ways to examine (the dialectic between) historical and/or metaphysical time and ethics.

I also celebrate that this book walks off the simplifying division of "philosophy of history" into i) “speculative philosophy of history” and ii) “critical/analytic philosophy of history”, a dichotomy from which I have also walked away. The editors emphasize from the beginning that “the kind [of philosophy of history] we explore throughout this volume is different from both of these [“speculative” or critical-empirical-epistemological], as [...] It is existential and responds to core problems at the intersection of time, culture, and ethics” (pp. 9-10).

Indeed, the philosophical reflection on history (i.e., past human events per se) and historiography (i.e., narrations on past human events) goes beyond i) finding a (transcendental) sense in history in general; and it goes beyond ii) the (epistemological) musings and propositions on how to study the human past and how to apprehend, comprehend and understand it. To reflect on history and historiography is not only to reflect on metaphysics, ontology, or epistemology, but also on morality, emotions, personal existence, politics, cosmovision, society, and culture. Elgabsi and Gilbert's book proves how the "philosophy of history" could and *must* transcend i) and ii).

I would like to marginally comment that *Ethics and Time in the Philosophy of History* would have profited from a different book architecture (a different subdivision and distribution of the 15 chapters), and this to provide more clarity to the reader (it was unnecessarily baroque to divide the book into five sections instead of two or three). The chapters do have different extensions; it would probably be better to homogenize their length. And it would be great to have an extended version of each contribution, as I consider that each of them needed more space.

Lastly, I hope my description of the themes of each chapter incites the specialists and non-specialists on moral philosophy and *philosophy of history* to delve into this text, which, I must say, could also be read, as is a now traditional feature in this kind of edited books, in a nonlinear and/or non-complete manner.

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