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Do historians (of education) need philosophy? The enlightening potential of a philosophical ethos

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Do historians (of education) need philosophy? The paper suggests that historians do not need philosophical doctrine or (meta-)theory, or philosophical method, but that in so far as historians (as Koselleck states) are “writing their own time anew” and are “rewriting the past” (and so enlighten their present), they might find some help in a particular philosophical ethos: an ethos of discomfort or “attentive study”. First, how Koselleck describes the price that (famous) historians have paid for writing their own time anew and for rewriting the past will be sketched. This price entails, as will be argued, an uncomfortable exposition and estrangement of the researcher or writer. It is then suggested that such exposition and estrangement is also what is at stake in the ethos of a particular philosophical tradition implying exercises or askēsis of uncomfortable exposition (or attentive study). This ethos will be sketched following Foucault, calling himself a “historian of the present”, not in order to intervene in the many controversies amongst historians surrounding his work but in order to support the initial suggestion that philosophy might be of some help for historians. Moreover the article will indicate how philosophy in this sense is intrinsically an educational endeavour (philosophy as education or paideia), although not an issue of learning (acquiring knowledge or competence).

Keywords: philosophy; ethos; Foucault; Koselleck; attentive study; exposition

Do historians of education need philosophy? This question, offering the starting point of our contribution, is inspired by Martin’s review article “Do historians need philosophy?”¹ The question, Martin suggests, following Rorty, is not whether philosophers can help, but whether *philosophy* can help? The first answer, according to Martin, is that at least the sort of philosophy that Rorty has elaborated is of no use, as Rorty himself acknowledges. Rorty wishes “that more historians and literary critics would realize that theory is optional, and that there is no need to situate oneself in philosophical space before writing one’s book”.² Martin agrees with this statement, at least to the extent that historians make non-methodological presuppositions, but wonders whether the same is true for methodological ones. Therefore he considers possible contributions of philosophical theories such as logical positivism (with its “covering-law” theory of explanation leading to a war between quantitative and traditional historians) or narration theory (i.e. the one of Hayden White) concluding that

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¹R. Martin, “Do Historians Need Philosophy? (Review of “The logic of history: putting postmodernism in perspective” by C. Behan McCullagh),” *History and Theory* 45 (2006): 252–260.

²R. Martin, “Do Historians...”, 252. Rorty declares similarly regarding education: “I am dubious about the relevance of philosophy to education.” R. Rorty, “The dangers of over-philosophication: Reply to Arcilla and Nicholson,” *Educational Theory* 40 (1990): 41.

“historians don’t need it to become better historians”³ since it seems that in the end these theories have no methodological implications. However, Martin argues, a bottom-up approach (such as used by Cullagh whose book he is reviewing), which examines historical studies themselves (their assumptions, conceptual instruments, etc.) as a kind of second-order reflection “and [which] on that basis advances a view of how historical studies should be understood or done”⁴ can help. Historians can learn from it “in the course of learning their craft”.⁵ For example, they could learn about the “standards of rationality” that underlie historical work, or about distinctions between “three kinds of historical narrative – common sense structures, colligatory patterns, and summary interpretations – and then several varieties of each of these. And so on.”⁶ Well, one could probably try to argue that the same goes for historical-pedagogical research and that at least in the sense of a second-order reflection on historical pedagogical research philosophy could help. However, in this paper we would like to suggest that there is maybe still another way in which philosophy might help, or, more precisely, that there is a particular tradition of philosophy which could have indeed some meaning for historians *as researchers and truth tellers*. We want to suggest that historians need neither philosophical doctrine or (meta-)theory (which is what Martin argues), nor philosophical method, but that in so far as historians, as Reinhart Koselleck states, are “writing their own time anew” and are “rewriting the past”⁷ (and so enlighten their present), they might find some help in a particular philosophical “ethos”: an ethos of discomfort or “attentive study”, implying that philosophy is not in the first place a theory but an activity (a way of life) and that this activity is not an accumulation of knowledge but a kind of exercise, an askēsis. First, we will sketch how Koselleck describes the price that (famous) historians have paid for “writing their own time anew” and for “rewriting the past”. This price entails, as we will argue, an uncomfortable exposition and estrangement of the researcher and is, in the cases that Koselleck reports, related to Fortuna. We will then try to show how such an exposition and estrangement is also what is at stake in the ethos of a particular philosophical tradition implying, however, not Fortuna but exercises (or askēsis) of uncomfortable exposition or attentive study. We will further sketch this ethos following Foucault, calling himself a “historian of the present”; not, however, in order to intervene in the many controversies amongst historians surrounding his work (and to defend or criticise his work), but simply in order to support our initial suggestion that philosophy might be of some help for historians. Moreover, we will indicate how philosophy in this sense is intrinsically also an educational endeavour (philosophy as education), although explicitly not an issue of learning (of acquiring knowledge or competences).

We emphasise that we only want to make a certain suggestion plausible. In order to argue it substantially, we would need to elaborate on the difficult and complex issue of (historical) “experience” (which is also what is at stake in Koselleck’s essay), which we can but superficially touch upon in this context.⁸

³Martin, “Do Historians ...,” 255.

⁴Ibid., 253.

⁵Ibid., 260.

⁶Ibid., 257.

⁷Reinhart Koselleck, “Transformations of experience and methodological change,” in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner and Others, foreword Hayden White (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 79.

⁸For a discussion of this notion of experience in a way which is relevant to the present essay, see M. Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

Reinhart Koselleck: the price for “insights of lasting duration” or the “epistemological” potential of being vanquished or banished

In an inspiring “historical-anthropological essay” entitled “Transformations of experience and methodological change” Reinhart Koselleck relates transformations of historical experience to changes in historical method and to what he calls “epistemological gain”.⁹ In a semantic prelude he first indicates, referring to Jacob Grimm, how “historical method” and “experience” once converged in the procedures of active inquiry and trial. Hence, “he who experiences is thought of as someone *going* where he will inquire”.¹⁰ Experience and historical method, thus, imply a sense of active movement, trial, exploration, inquiry and personal involvement. “The receptive experience of reality and productive exploration and inspection of this lived reality condition each other and belong together inseparably.”¹¹ We do not want to recall the way in which Koselleck then describes “epochal waves of experience” and tries to relate them to “historical-anthropological constants”, but we want to have a closer look at the last part of his article where, interestingly, Koselleck relates methodological processing of historical experience and the writing of illuminating history, which leads to epistemological profit, precisely to profound *transformations* in the experience of the writers, and particularly to the “precarious situation”¹² from which they are writing, exemplified in the conditions of living in exile, being vanquished or banished, being a loser or having failed. He elaborates this through various examples, as in the case of Thucydides. “Thucydides rewrote previous history, and, insofar as he newly wrote it, it was written in a way different from everything prior”,¹³ but this epistemological “progress” seems to be conditioned by his failure: “Finally, Thucydides’ very own, unique change of experience has to be taken into account.... His failure as a general....”¹⁴ Or concerning the knowledge of Tacitus: “It was knowledge gained by someone who was inextricably enveloped by circumstances, someone who was existentially vanquished.”¹⁵ Or regarding Comynes, Machiavelli and Guicciardini who could judge “stereoscopically”, writing in exile.¹⁶ Whereby Koselleck arrives at the conclusion: “Many of the epochal waves of experience discussed so far that have necessitated the rewriting of previous history were first perceived and methodologically processed by the vanquished. This leads us to the assumption that we are facing a historical-anthropological constant here....”¹⁷ And this constant may well be formulated as follows: “The condition of being vanquished apparently contains an inexhaustible epistemological potential.”¹⁸ Without going into the question of how exactly we have to understand “anthropological constant” here, it is, for our purpose, interesting to take note of the characteristics that Koselleck attaches to this condition of the vanquished and the particular “epistemological” effect it has.

Koselleck explains that the first experience of the vanquished is “that everything happened differently from how it was planned or hoped”¹⁹ and that things worked out

⁹Koselleck, “Transformations of experience ...”.

¹⁰Ibid., 46 (emphasis added).

¹¹Ibid., 46.

¹²Ibid., 77.

¹³Ibid., 67.

¹⁴Ibid., 66.

¹⁵Ibid., 78–79.

¹⁶Ibid., 79–80.

¹⁷Ibid., 75.

¹⁸Ibid., 83.

¹⁹Ibid., 76.

differently than intended; they were out of control. The vanquished or banished are in “a precarious situation”,²⁰ and in a situation of “absolute estrangement”.²¹ The surprise that things work out differently than intended imposes a perspective which allows a reconstruction from a distance, which is specified, through the case of Thucydides, as the perspective of both parties, winners and losers (“he was on both sides”). “This was the consciously reflected distance of the vanquished and the banished”,²² even, or better, precisely because he himself finally belonged among the losers. And also Machiavelli, Guicciardini like Comynnes, being vanquished and writing in exile “learned to judge ‘stereoscopically’”.²³ According to Koselleck (adding plenty of other examples), this leads to histories “that are resistant to every ideology critique and remain methodologically shielded.”²⁴ Their particular experience gave them *access to a truth* that did not lose any of its applicability. It is, he says, an attractive hypothesis, “that precisely from the unique gains in experience imposed upon them spring insights of lasting duration and, consequently of greater explanatory power. If history is made in the short run by the victors, historical gains in knowledge stem in the long run from the vanquished.”²⁵ And, very importantly, this “knowledge” is in fact a rewriting of history implying also writing their own time anew, transcending the common standards or/of knowledge and, thus, not remaining within an established discipline, but in fact exposing its limits and “moving gradually and toward an open future”.²⁶ So the knowledge is in a way turning back on the writers who are, as individuals and as subjects of their time, at stake or at play in their writings. The vanquished transpose their experience into a kind of knowledge that “remains accessible beyond all change of experience. This might offer some comfort, perhaps a gain. In practice, it would mean saving us from victories. Yet every experience speaks against it.”²⁷

Let us comment briefly. First of all it seems that Koselleck points clearly to a transformation of the subject happening to writers of history, being removed from their status and condition by things which happened differently than intended and thus overcame them (as a kind of Fortuna, one could say), as price that they (have to) pay(have paid) to have access to a truth “resistant to every ideology critique”. It is important to note that Koselleck indicates how this transformation is related to “a precarious situation”, a situation of someone deeply and existentially (personally) implied and at stake and “absolutely estranged”, which nevertheless puts him at a distance, which is not the distance of the neutral observer or spectator but a distance “gained by someone ... inextricably enveloped by circumstances”, gained by a vanquished, banished loser, who fundamentally *accepts (or has to accept)* that things are not working out as they are intended and gains from his position, which is in fact a having-been-removed from one’s position, a kind of “objective” insight. It is this precarious situation and the transformation it implies that allows for what Koselleck calls an epistemological potential, but what we rather would prefer to call an enlightening, illuminating or “alèthurgical” potential. Indeed, when we take it in a strict sense, epistemological gain refers to an increase in the field of knowledge (episteme) and needs to remain within the standards of knowledge in order to be counted as such. However, not only is the “gain” all but purely on the level of knowledge since the insights have clearly an existential meaning

²⁰Ibid., 77.

²¹Ibid., 78.

²²Ibid., 77.

²³Ibid., 80.

²⁴Ibid., 78.

²⁵Ibid., 76.

²⁶Ibid., 81.

²⁷Ibid., 83.

on the level of experience (and of the lives of those involved), but moreover, as Koselleck himself indicates, they imply precisely a transcending of the common standards of knowledge, a truth beyond established truth. Both the existential-experiential aspect and the operation of transcending make us to suggest to speak rather about an enlightening or alèthurgical potential, the latter referring to truth as alètheia, as revealing, bringing into light. In the same vein, we consider it not necessary to see what is at stake here as “progress”, as Koselleck calls it, including in itself a certain (modern) idea of history. For our purpose it suffices to speak of illuminating or enlightening *potential*.

Koselleck points to the fact that it is a kind of knowledge that is “stereoscopic” and “resistant to ideology critique”, which is “generation-deep” and whose truth therefore implies an illumination not only for the writer him/herself but also for his/her “public” of readers, in the past and in the present. This (epistemological or) illuminating potential is clearly not referring to the fact that the knowledge is the knowledge of the losers and not only of the victors. That is what would meanwhile be the common argument – related to critiques of Eurocentrism, gender-bias, logocentrism, etc. – that we could write different histories if we were to take into account not only the victors, but also the losers or vanquished, for example, not only the colonists but also the colonised, not only the bourgeois but also the proletarians, not only men but also women, etc.²⁸ So, the point of Koselleck’s remarks is not that we should turn attention to the forgotten (vanquished, lost, ...) mass of men and women and their daily life to allow the “subaltern” (Gramsci) to speak. It has nothing to do with “history from below”.²⁹ No, it is knowledge from “both sides”, objective knowledge so to speak, but not the objectivity from an outsider, someone who would not be involved, but a “stereoscopic” objectivity so to speak, gained from a “precarious situation”. It is this precarious, uncomfortable situation implying an absolute estrangement which allows for the distance and entanglement, for the subjective involvement and objective distance (if one still wished to maintain this distinction) that offers true insights. From this situation spring “insights of lasting duration and, consequently, of greater explanatory power”, “far-reaching insights into history”.³⁰ Their truth being at once of epistemological

²⁸It is obviously not the need for a counter-history to which Koselleck is pointing here. And of course Foucault’s work “had an undeniable appeal for those who wanted ... to hear the voices of history’s excluded ... and to attend the unsaid”. Catherine Gallagher and S. Greenblatt, *Practising New Historicism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 67; see also Foucault’s own remarks on the “savoirs assujettis” in the first course of his lectures at the Collège de France in 1976: Michel Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société. Cours au collège de France. 1976*, (Society must be defended. The Collège Courses. 1976) ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 1997). But the point of Koselleck here is entirely different. However, Gallagher and Greenblatt also indicate that, even as “counterhistorian”, Foucault wrote from a special “position”, which had to do with a particular personal involvement: “Foucault’s rhetoric of personal involvement stood out from that of other counterhistorians, first, by the sheer complexity of his account of the relation between himself and his anecdotes, and, second, because of the impossibility of that relation ever seeming satisfying or reassuring.” It was related to “a heightened sense of being on the extremities of the historically knowable, at the very edge of what we could know, cognitively, about the past” (ibid. 70–71). And, referring to Foucault’s disturbing experience and his uneasiness reading Borges (see the opening of *The Order of Things*), they outline how “this queasy encounter with ultimate disorder, this thinking *in extremis*, turns out to be the dread that often drives disciplines toward the discovery of new orders, which are always apprehended, or intuited, in the interstices of the given cognitive grid ... by emitting flashes of a horrific outside to any conceivable historical order, [it] puts one beside oneself, momentarily beyond a merely cognitive relation to one’s task” (ibid. 72) (emphasis added).

²⁹J. Sharpe, “History from below,” in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 25–42.

³⁰Koselleck, “Transformation of experience...,” 76.

and existential value (i.e. returning upon the way of life, the existence and experience – thought and action – of those involved as writers and readers).

Now let us recall that the condition from which they are writing is one in which they are totally out of control, where things do not obey their intentions, where they are delivered, at risk and at stake or at play existentially. A disturbing, precarious and uneasy situation including them and putting them, so to speak, “themselves aside” and “beyond a merely cognitive relation” to their writing.³¹ It is this condition which we want to call a condition of *uncomfortable (precarious) exposition*, to be distinguished from a clearly defined position (for example the position of a scientist within an established discipline orienting him/herself to its standards and procedures, or the established positions within a social order – the position of general, counsellor, but also professor or teacher who have a view on the order of the situation and judge it). It offers occasion to an experience, as Koselleck states, “which cannot be learned or substituted”.³² It cannot be translated into method or procedure which can be *simply* applied at will, but this condition has to be lived, its existential price has to be paid, as Koselleck also suggests when, referring to Marx’s writings on the Revolution of 1848–1849 and the uprising of the Commune, he points to the fact that “he wrote *as* a person who was vanquished, if not *like* someone vanquished”.³³

But let us try to avoid misunderstanding. We are aware that we are giving Koselleck’s analysis a particular turn, neglecting the whole anthropological discourse he elaborates and not following (at least not entirely) the conclusions he is making with regard to anthropological constants and their relation to experience. The only point we want to make here, in order to support a certain answer to the initial question of whether historians need philosophy, is that of the “epistemological” (enlightening) potential of primary experiences referring to a certain price to be paid, a price which consists of an ex-position (moving or being removed from one’s position, being put aside oneself) and an “absolute estrangement” and is related to a precarious situation and the acceptance of the radical relativity of our intentions. So the price to be paid is that the writer of history is him/herself *at play as subject*. It is this price which allows for a “stereoscopical view” that gives access to a(n) (existential) truth beyond established truth, illuminating our (the writers’ and the readers’) historical experience.

The ethos and askēsis of philosophy: the price for illuminating truth telling

Let us now, in order to further address the question of whether philosophy can help, turn to a particular tradition in philosophy which, as we want to suggest, could be interesting here, since it is a tradition in which there seems to be a price to be paid for having access to truth which shows important similarities to the one we have been talking of following the indications of Koselleck. The tradition of philosophy to which we want to refer here invokes that philosophy is not in the first place about (meta-)theories and theses, principles and doctrines but that it is referring to a way of living related to a certain ethos which is not simply an attitude but a set of practices, which as Faust tells us and Foucault reminds us,³⁴ allows us to have an “insight in the game of forces that constitute our existence” (which we could relate to “the better explanations” that Koselleck refers to). Faust is, as we know, a philosopher and one we can assume to belong indeed to the tradition of philosophy to which, with Foucault, we would like to point now.

³¹See quote in note 27.

³²Koselleck, “Transformation of experience...,” 78

³³Ibid., 82

³⁴Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France. 1981–1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 27.

In order to develop what is at stake in philosophy in this particular tradition, which can be called the ascetic tradition³⁵, we rely upon ideas that were developed by Michel Foucault in his latest works and lectures. One of the questions that became of central importance for Foucault, related to the otherwise central issues of power and subjectivity, was the following question: How can people have access to the truth? Or how can people become truth-tellers?³⁶ According to Foucault, two traditions in Western history can be distinguished that each answers this question in a particular way.³⁷ The first tradition, which is still dominant today, claims that knowledge offers access to the truth and that in order to attain true knowledge certain conditions related to the act of knowing and the position of the knower have to be taken into account – and the main task of philosophy, then, is to reflect on this (pre)condition and on the limits of (valid) knowledge³⁸. This tradition has culminated in modern scientific research and academic enquiry:

... we can say that we enter the modern age (I mean, the history of truth enters its modern period) when it is assumed that what gives access to the truth, the condition for the subject's access to the truth, is knowledge (*connaissance*) and knowledge alone.... That is to so say, it is when the philosopher (or the scientist, or simply someone who seeks the truth) can recognize the truth and have access to it in himself and through his acts of knowledge alone, without anything else being demanded of him and without his having to alter or change in any way his being as subject.³⁹

Access to truth here is in fact secured by method and evidence. A less common tradition, following Foucault, claims that access to the truth requires a particular alteration or *transformation of the self*, i.e. it implies a “movement of the subject himself”,⁴⁰ a displacement (“un déplacement du sujet lui-même”⁴¹). While in the first tradition in principle everyone has access to truth (if conditions at the level of knowledge, i.e. method, are taken into account), this second tradition of philosophy postulates *the transformation of the mode of being of the subject*. It:

... postulates that the subject as such does not have right of access to the truth and is not capable of having access to the truth. It postulates that the truth is not given to the subject by a simple act of knowledge (*connaissance*), which would be founded and justified simply by the fact that he is the subject and because he possesses this or that structure of subjectivity. It postulates that for the subject to have right of access to the truth he must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become to some extent and up to a certain point other than himself. The truth is only given to the subject at a price that brings the subject into play. For as he is, the subject is

³⁵Foucault also uses the term “spiritual tradition”. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15ff.

³⁶We refer to Fearless Speech (1983) and the lectures of Foucault: Michel Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres: Cours au Collège de France 1982–1983*, (The government of self and others: The Collège courses 1982–1983) recordings housed at the Institut de Mémoires de L'Édition Contemporaine (IMEC–Caen), 1983; Michel Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité: Cours au Collège de France 1983–1984*, (The courage of truth: The Collège courses 1983–1984) recordings housed at the Institut de Mémoires de L'Édition Contemporaine (IMEC–Caen) 1984; Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, in *Ethics. Essential Works of Foucault*, Vol. I. ed. P. Rabinow, trans. R. Hurley et al. (New York/ London, Penguin, 1997), 303–320.

³⁷Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*...

³⁸This is the tradition that Martin is referring to when he is speaking of philosophy as a second-order reflection. See above.

³⁹Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 17.

⁴⁰Ibid., 275.

⁴¹Michel Foucault, *L'hermeneutique du sujet. Cours au collège de France. 1981–1982*, (The Hermeneutics of the Subject. The Collège courses 1981–1982) ed. Frédéric Gros (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2001).

not capable of truth.... It follows that from this point of view there can be no truth without a conversion or a transformation of the subject.⁴²

So, in this tradition of philosophy there is a price to be paid in order to have access to the truth. In the first one also there is a price, but this price is related to conditions of knowledge. In the second tradition the price is a transformation of the self, a number of operations and modifications to make one capable of the truth, affecting the mode of being of the subject, the structure of her subjectivity itself. So, the price is so to speak an existential one. Foucault then explains that there may be different forms in which this conversion or transformation may take place:

Very roughly we can say ... that this conversion may take place in the form of a movement that removes the subject from his current status and condition.... Again, quite conventionally, let us call this movement ... the movement of *eros* (love). Another major form through which the subject can and must transform himself in order to have access to the truth is a kind of work. This work of the self on the self, an elaboration of the self by the self, a progressive transformation of the self by the self for which one takes responsibility in a long labour of asceticism (*askēsis*).⁴³

And Foucault calls precisely this asceticism “philosophy”, an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought.⁴⁴

Now, following the lead of Foucault, and also “quite conventionally” so to speak, one could think of adding “fortuna” as one of the forms in which the *transformation* might take place, besides “eros” and “askēsis”. Indeed, we would like to suggest that the particular transformation (and the *price*) that Foucault is pointing to, as condition to become a truth teller (in *our* time and history and about *our* time and history), shows many important similarities to the one (related to “fortuna”) we have been describing following the indications of Kosseleck. And so we could turn the argument round: the way in which Foucault describes the work of philosophy and more particularly the way in which he describes the condition of transformation involved in its exercises could offer indications of how philosophy could be of help for historians, at least for those kind of historians that Kosseleck is referring to. Therefore, we want to turn now briefly to the way in which the work of philosophy (and more precisely his own work as philosophy) is conceived of by Foucault, placing himself in what was called above the second tradition of philosophy. In this tradition, then, philosophy is not to be identified primarily as a certain knowledge (or meta-knowledge/meta-theory) or method, but as an activity. This activity is not the production or accumulation of knowledge but “an exercise of thought”, which is not a playing with thoughts, but a bringing the subject into play. It appears as a work on the self which is an exercise of displacement (or estrangement or disengagement), i.e. an exercise of transformation at the existential-ethical level giving access to truth: “he must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself. The truth is only given to the subject at a price that brings the subject into play.”⁴⁵

⁴²Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15 (emphasis added).

⁴³Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15–16.

⁴⁴Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, Vol.2 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Viking, 1986), 9.

⁴⁵Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15.

Foucault, for sure, is not the only one to understand philosophy primarily as work on the self,⁴⁶ but he gave (t)his work on the self a particular emphasis and a particular content, which is the more interesting in our context here, since he also considered (t)his work on the self, i.e. philosophy, to be of crucial importance for him to write his works as “a historian”, albeit a “historian of the present”.⁴⁷ For Foucault this work on the self as an exercise of thought, i.e. as philosophy, entails a “déprise de soi”, an (absolute) estrangement or displacement requiring a particular research ethos which he himself recognised as a traveller (estranging, displacing, depriving) ethos and which P. Veyne characterised as an ethos of “attentive study” in his article on Foucault revolutionising history.⁴⁸ And indeed Foucault himself has pointed often to attention – “attention sans limite”⁴⁹ or even “extrême attention”⁵⁰ – as the state of mind crucial to arrive at enlightening insights. Here it is important to distinguish clearly this attentive attitude from a judgemental attitude in which the present is judged (according to principles, criteria or standards of validity). The attentive attitude, rather, implies curiosity and acceptance. *Curiosity* not simply as a kind of cognitive relation but as a care for the present (emphasising the “cura” or care in *curiositas*), a curiosity regarding what is happening *to us* and what is new in our present. *Acceptance* of the present not in the sense of acquiescence or resignation, but as a way to allow oneself to be “present” (in the present). Indeed, being attentive is the opposite of being absent (in English attention relates to “attend” with its different connotations of care – attend a patient; the lamps; of being at – attend the church; of being present, of listening to, of going along). Being absent means that we are not there, that we are captivated by the horizon of expectations, projections, perspectives, visions, views, images, dreams which are ours, i.e. by our intentionality – which constitutes us as a subject in relation to an object(ive). We could say that the state of mind of someone who has an object(ive), an orientation, is the state of mind of a subject (of knowledge) within an existing regime of truth. To be attentive is not to be captivated by an intention or a project

⁴⁶Wittgenstein: “Work in philosophy – like work in architecture in many respects – is really more work on oneself. On one’s own conception. On one’s way of seeing things. (And what one asks of it.)” In: L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. Von Wright (in collaboration with Heikki Nyman), trans. Peter Winch, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 16. And see of course also the work of Pierre Hadot: Pierre Hadot, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975). See also the historical work of Ian Hunter inspired by this idea: Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Ian Hunter, “The history of theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2006): 78–112; Conal Condren, Stephen Gaukroger and Ian Hunter, *The Philosopher in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁴⁷“But, then, what is philosophy today – philosophical activity, I mean – if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? In what does it consist, if not in the endeavour to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known? ... It was a philosophical exercise. The object was to learn to what extent the effort to think one’s own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently” *Ibid.*, 8–9.

⁴⁸Paul Veyne, “Foucault Revolutionizes History,” in *Foucault and his Interlocutors*, ed. A. Davidson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 157.

⁴⁹Philippe Artières, “Dire l’actualité. Le travail de diagnostic chez Michel Foucault,” in *Foucault. Le courage de la vérité*, (The courage of truth) ed. Frédéric Gros (Paris: Puf, 2002), 23. We could say that the main objective here is not to achieve historical truth and thereby produce knowledge. The purpose is to transform the subject engaged in historical and philosophical thinking. So it is not about correspondence with a past, but about trying to bring into existence a new reality, to invent new possibilities. The past is read through the lens of a present situation. This point would be worth further investigation since in all the examples of great historians Koselleck offers these historians are related to the political situation of their time, and as we know Foucault related what he called the ethics of the self, the work on the self, as the only point of resistance to political power – as inventions of freedom.

⁵⁰Michel Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?” in *Dits et écrits*, Vol II: 1977–1988, ed. D. Defert, F. Ewald and J. Lagrange (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1389.

or a vision or perspective or imagination (which always give us an object and catches the present in a re-presentation). Attention does not offer me a vision or perspective; it opens up to what presents itself as evidence. Attention is lack of intention. Attention entails the suspension of judgement and implies a kind of waiting – in French attention relates to “attendre”, to wait. Being attentive means that the will to subject under a certain regime of truth is neutralised and the energy with which the subject (of knowledge) projects itself in the objects is exhausted. Attention in this sense implies and enables a being-present which puts the subject at stake in its curiosity. This curiosity entails knowledge, but the validity of this knowledge lies not in its conformity with (scientific) method, but in its illuminating potential, i.e. in the first place its usefulness for a certain care of the self, for one’s life in the present *opening up a space to see, think and live differently*.

This attentive attitude asks for a labour of askēsis, an exercise or work on the self in order to leave behind the judgemental attitude. And this work is what “removes from the present status and condition” (and thus ex-poses); it is, as Artières suggests, the active moment of “doing” something to (with) oneself, which reminds us of Koselleck’s remark that “he who experiences is thought of as someone *going* where he will inquire”,⁵¹ adding that the “receptive experience of reality and productive exploration and inspection of this lived reality condition each other and belong together inseparably”.⁵² In this context it is worth pointing at some concrete features of this askēsis (or “philosophy”) in the case of Foucault and maybe, first of all, at the fact that it includes not only a certain *practice of the mind* (a disciplined and sustained reading, studying, ... – Foucault spoke about “une transformation studieuse, une modification lente et ardue par souci constant de la vérité” which he distinguished from “une illumination soudaine”⁵³) – but explicitly also a certain *practice of the body* since the work on the self is beyond a merely cognitive relation (it is not about “knowing oneself”). It involves a particular physical relation towards one’s “present”, i.e. a *physical* encounter with texts, events, places, archives, ... (implying sometimes bodily abhorrence or exhaustion encountering these archives⁵⁴ or copying them; or physical pleasure and excitement visiting locations, etc.). The body is not at a distance, but appears as an instrument to diagnose that present (and in that sense experience it).⁵⁵ It could be at once an instrument to measure the intolerable, painful character of the present, and an instrument of investigation and of thought. This practice of the body had different forms but one was precisely the voyage or travel, involving not only visiting different places, but walking for long hours and long distances, which Foucault estimated to be necessary for his work, one reason being that it implied always in a certain way a “face-à-face”. The *déplacement* as a

⁵¹Koselleck, “Transformation of experience...,” 46 (emphasis added).

⁵²Koselleck, “Transformation of experience...,” 46.

⁵³Michel Foucault, “Le souci de la vérité,” in *Dits et écrits. Vol II: 1977–1988*, ed. D. Defert, F. Ewald and J. Lagrange (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1494.

⁵⁴For example: “Je suis embarrassé de dire qu’au juste j’ai éprouvé lorsque j’ai lu ces fragments et bien d’autres qui leur étaient semblables. Sans doute l’une de ces impressions dont on dit qu’elles sont ‘physiques’, ...” Michel Foucault, “La vie des hommes infâmes,” in *Dits et écrits, Vol II: 1977–1988*, ed. D. Defert, F. Ewald and J. Lagrange (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 238. First published in *Les Cahiers du chemin* 29 (15 janvier 1977): 12–29. We can refer also to Gallagher and Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, for a discussion of the meaning of Foucault’s injunction to be open to the impact of *experiencing material residues* (i.e. bodily experiences) of the past as a rupture in the smooth workings of normal historicist narratives. This necessity of bodily experiences, thus, could function as a means to disturb the neutralising effect of contextualisation and normalisation upon experiences.

⁵⁵Philippe Artières, “Dire l’actualité. Le travail de diagnostic chez Michel Foucault,” in *Foucault. Le courage de la vérité*, (The courage of truth) ed. Frédéric Gros (Paris: Puf, 2002).

physical experience (in its various forms) belonged to the work and contributed to produce the *attention*, so crucial in many ways. Philippe Artières writes that Foucault travelled “avec une attention exacte et vigilante, à saisir, au détour d’une page ou d’une rue, l’éclat d’une étrangeté tapie là, inaperçue”.⁵⁶ He speaks in this context about a “corps voyageur” (a travelling body) which is echoed in Foucault’s own characterisation of the kind of intellectual he wanted to be: “the one ... who incessantly displaces himself, doesn’t know exactly where he is heading nor what he’ll think tomorrow because he is too attentive to the present”.⁵⁷

This attention, produced by a particular practice of the body and the mind, should allow for a “view from above (*une vue plongeante*)”,⁵⁸ a broadened and elevated vision which reminds us of the “stereoscopic view” Kossleck was alluding to. “It is the self’s view of itself from above which encompasses the world of which we are a part and which thus ensures the subject’s freedom within this world itself.”⁵⁹ Or as he writes elsewhere: “Sure of having travelled far, one finds that one is looking down on oneself from above. The journey rejuvenates things, and ages the relationship with oneself.”⁶⁰ The work of diagnosis, the work of the historian of the present, that which brings insights in the sense of an al-*ĕ*thurgical truth, requires a taking of distance from oneself, “une mise à distance de soi”, which clears the view. This clear view does not imply being outside (i.e. absent in a certain sense) or on the right side (for example the side of the exploited or the poor), but displacing oneself with regard to it and to every side, so to speak. Therefore it is also related to an uncomfortable ex-position, to a condition of “discomfort” or to a “precarious situation”.⁶¹

In this context Artières points at the ways in which Foucault tried to expose himself (thereby bringing himself into discomfort) in subverting his status of author and in making the functions he was assigned (like those of professor, teacher or universal intellectual) inoperative. He wanted “to lose his face”, as he once said himself, not being related to a position and leaving behind the traditional forms of diffusion of thought. Therefore, the work of the historian of the present as an “exercice de déprise” (which is an exposition) implies, besides an “épreuve physique” (a physical experiment) and a studious practice also inventing new ways of writing and speaking (or truth-telling) to which Foucault himself referred once as a kind of “radical journalism”.⁶² A radical journalism since this truth-telling cannot simply refer to the existing standards and criteria as it is precisely putting these

⁵⁶Michel De Certeau, “Le rire de Michel Foucault,” in *Histoire et psychoanalyse entre science et fiction* (History and psychoanalysis between science and fiction) (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 59.

⁵⁷Michel Foucault, “The End of the Monarchy of Sex,” in *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1966–1984*, ed. S. Lotringer, trans. John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1984/1989), 155.

⁵⁸Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 282.

⁵⁹Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 282. It would be interesting to investigate how for all the examples that Kossleck gave of historians “writing their own time anew” (so enlightening their present), “the insights of lasting duration” they produced were, and maybe in the first place, ways “to ensure their freedom within the world”. We should thereby recall that freedom for Foucault does not mean “free will or right, but rather the capacity to invent new modes of living”, new possibilities; see also Edward F. McGushin, *Foucault’s Askēsis. An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007, XXII). See also R. Fillion, “Freedom, Truth, and Possibility in Foucault’s Ethics,” *Foucault Studies*, 3 (2005): 50–64.

⁶⁰Michel Foucault, “The Use of Pleasure,” 11

⁶¹See also: Michel Foucault, “For an Ethics of Discomfort,” in *The Politics of Truth: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, Vol. 1, ed S. Lotringer and L. Hochroth (New York: New Press, 1997). See also: Maarten Simons, Jan Masschelein and Kerlyn Quaghebeur, “The Ethos of Critical Research and the Idea of a Coming Research Community,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 37 (2005): 817–832.

⁶²Michel Foucault, “Le monde est un grand asile,” in *Dits et écrits*, Vol. I: 1954–1975, ed. D Defert, F. Ewald and J. Lagrange (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1302.

at stake, rewriting its own time and its past anew. A radical *journalism* since, even if it is writing about the past (as in the case of Foucault), it is also writing the present anew out of curiosity (“care”) about that present (which is also one’s own present). A radical journalism since it implies a personalisation of the truth through the one who speaks, but also an exposition of the subject itself who speaks in this expressed truth.

Thus, the ethos of discomfort and attentive study which puts “one beside oneself”, which “wrenches one from oneself” and which at least “momentarily [puts one] beyond a merely cognitive relation to one’s task” entails particular work on oneself. We are always already engaged in a certain practice of the self and of relations towards others, and it is the change of this practice and the transformation of the subject involved which produces effects of truth, which invokes or produces “des déplacements ou des ruptures épistémiques”.⁶³ In this condition the research is not orientated towards the norms or criteria of established science, it is not about legitimising and judging, but it becomes a kind of experimental or experiential practice, where what is at stake is not a position, but “experience” in the sense of “what is happening to us” and exposing (i.e. revealing and questioning) the limits of the epistemological field of truth. What is uncomfortable in this practice is not only the lack of a (scientific) tribunal and laws (principles, standards) to look at and judge the present, but is being oneself part of this present, bringing one’s own position into play. Therefore (historical) research as far as it is about writing one’s time anew and rewriting the past is always in a certain sense autobiographical.⁶⁴

The price has to be paid: askēsis as e-ducational practice (and not as learning)

Do historians (of education) need philosophy? There is no clear answer to be derived from what we have developed, but there could be the suggestion that if there is any help to be expected, then it could be the help of philosophy as a particular askēsis, as a particular exercise of thought that means a certain education, a certain set of practices preparing to become attentive, i.e. also estranged from oneself (from one’s intentions). Stated differently one could say that, if we follow Foucault, the price to be paid in order to have access to the illuminating truth is a transformation of the self and that philosophy understood as exercise of thought – i.e. as askēsis or, as Hunter writes,⁶⁵ as *paideia* – can be conceived as one way in which this transformation can take place. This philosophy as *paideia*, in the case of Foucault, consists of practices of exposition and *déplacement* (estrangement) which bring the subject into a precarious and uncomfortable situation, put it in play. Askēsis, then, does not refer to practices of self-denial, but to particular intellectual and physical exercises or to practices of the mind and the body “whose special role is to permit attention to and transformation of the self”,⁶⁶ this transformation being, as Foucault explained, the condition for illuminating truth telling.

Philosophy in this sense is neither an accumulation of (foundational) knowledge, nor an awareness of presuppositions or limits (of validity) and cannot be learned by historians, as Martin wrote, “in the course of learning their craft”.⁶⁷ It is not about learning standards,

⁶³Judit Revel, “La pensée vertical: une éthique de la problématisation,” in *Foucault. Le courage de la vérité*, ed. Frédéric Gros (Paris: Puf, 2002), 85.

⁶⁴John Rajchman, *The Freedom of Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

⁶⁵Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 23.

⁶⁶Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments...*, 21–22.

⁶⁷Martin, “Do Historians...,” 260.

limits or distinctions,⁶⁸ but about elaborating a certain ethos of attentive study through the constant labour of exercises which always have to be performed anew and cannot be acquired as competences or capacities for which one can be qualified (once and for all). This ethos of attentive study or discomfort is not referring to method and is no pure “attitude”, it cannot be applied simply at will, nor is it “at one’s disposal”. Moreover its subjects do not remain untouched, but are engaged and involved since it is finally about a way of living, about a set of practices that bring the subject into play and this is, as we would claim, precisely what (historical) experience is about. These experiences “which cannot be learned or substituted”⁶⁹ defeat “the possibility of subjective Bildung so often seen as the fruit of experiential learning, as well as the process of contextual normalization”.⁷⁰

This allows us to return to the start of Kosselleck’s essay where he retained from Grimm that “he who experiences is thought of as someone *going* where he will inquire”.⁷¹ Experience and historical “method”, thus, imply a sense of active movement, trial, exploration, inquiry and personal involvement: bringing oneself into play.⁷² This experimental activity (movement, trial, exploration, inquiry) of “*going*”, and of bringing oneself into play or of “*being present*” in the many connotations we have tried to indicate, are constituting, we would suggest, the philosophical ethos which might allow for illuminating truth telling or, in the words of Kosselleck, for “epistemological gain” of lasting duration and existential relevance. We are not acquainted sufficiently with the work of all the figures that are discussed by Kosselleck as being great historians (or have not inhabited their work long enough) but we would nevertheless risk the hypothesis that all these figures are, in the sense we have tried to point to above, “historians of their present”. We would suggest that they still have something to tell us, that they can inspire us, because they were/are present in their work and were at the same time so to speak “present in their present” which is another, in our opinion very accurate, way of saying that they were (extremely) “attentive” and paid the price of acceptance, of discomfort and estrangement.

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⁶⁸Ibid., 257.

⁶⁹Kosselleck, “Transformation of experience...,” 78.

⁷⁰Jay, *Songs of Experience...*, 259.

⁷¹Kosselleck, “Transformation of experience...,” 46 (emphasis added).

⁷²Let us point to one more indication which could support our claim that philosophy as we have understood it here, as an (active) uncomfortable practice of de-privation (literally making public, bringing into play, i.e. being “present”) of the self, could be of help to (certain) historians. This indication is to be found in what Fabian, the well-known ethnographer, writes about the “epistemological potential” of “being out of our minds” which he calls also experience or passion – as (active) drive and (passive) suffering – as a condition for knowledge and hence “objectivity”: “In our tradition passion has always been denounced as an impediment to reason. Yet, how else than by giving room in our theories of knowledge to passion – indeed, to terror and torture – can we hope to deal objectively with the peoples and cultures whom Western imperialism made the subjects of brutal domination as well as of ethnographic inquiry?” Fabian shows how extraordinary (physical!) states influenced by fever and fatigue (but also by opiates), states which imply the loss of control and losing one’s position, actually served to enhance the capacity for understanding and insight, contributing to substantial gains in ethnographic and anthropological knowledge. Johannes Fabian, *Anthropology with an Attitude: Critical Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 32. See also: Johannes Fabian, *Out of our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

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