

Working Draft only**The Will to History**

Ladies and gentleman, friends and colleagues

When Prof. Curtin was liming the pitch for my return to Gustavus after fifty years, he suggested that this paper be *a little more philosophical*, and so it shall be. Yet be at peace: I shall not present one of those tedious confessionals about *the way I feel about it*. Feeling, however sincere, is not philosophy until it has faced answered three critical questions – *What, actually, does it mean? Whereon is it based?* and *What follows from it?* Most home-grown philosophers are too busy having opinions to get around to critical reasoning, yet that is precisely what philosophy requires.

So critical reasoning shall it be, though not one of those technical disputations in which philosophers hone their tools. Those, too, have their place. Would-be philosophers who fail to hone their tools on the history of philosophy and on philosophical analysis soon grow dull themselves. Yet the proof of a tool is in the using. Philosophy needs to use its tools to shed light in our cave, speaking critically yet understandably both *urbi et orbi*, to its community and to the world.

Then how shall we go about doing philosophy today? I would suggest we think of philosophy as *a disciplined effort to see clearly and articulate faithfully the meaning structures of lived experience*. That you might recognise as Edmund Husserl's definition of phenomenology in *Ideen I*. Yet as philosophers still we still need to ask, *What does that mean?*

It means first of all that we are concerned with philosophy as a disciplined effort *at seeing and understanding*, not as idle musing about our "feelings". It is a systematic attempt *to see* and *to articulate* what we see, as all scholars need do. Majoring in philosophy does not mean you can switch from studying to *having opinions*. Philosophers, too, need to observe and give reasons for what they say thereof.

The difference is in *what* we observe. While empirical scientists observe concrete particulars, to do philosophy we need observe *ideal patterns of meaning* rather than their instances. For those, Husserl used the German term *Wesen*, then meaning the typical patterns of the way something is. Unfortunately, that

word has been compromised by later philosophy. Today we might do better with examples than with definitions.

Rather than citing classics like Max Scheler's study of *Ressentiment*, Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death* or Husserl's own *Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, let us take an example we have all once lived, the experience of first love. All of us surely remember how the world blossomed roses around us as we floated on a cloud, perfectly convinced that life would be fulfilled with (and impossible without) a particular significant other whose name we have long since forgot. We were so convinced that our experience was completely unique, capable of being captured by poetry – and *for us*, so it was. We felt deeply offended when someone, a full year wiser, told us it was just a phase and that we would get over it.

Yet they, too, were right, only speaking a different reality. We were speaking of our personal experience, unique to us – the “*how I feel about it*” factor. That is useful psycho-hygiene and inspiring poetry, though not overly informative. Our year older room-mate was speaking generically, of the *type of experience* through which we happened to be passing. They were speaking of *love as such*, as an ideal type which exhibits a definite pattern of meaning, reasonably constant regardless of who is experiencing it – or whether anyone is. What they said was informative for any human subject, perhaps even to us though we thought it so *unfeeling*.

The distinction is one between the personal living of an experience, which is intensely subjective and personal, and the ideal meaning pattern of that experience which is independent on whether anyone is actually living it. Some of the finest examples in fact come from fiction, but, being generic, can help us make sense of an actually lived and intensely personal experience. That is the difference between *particular instances* and *ideal types* – and also between *True Confessions* and philosophy.

The example is trivial, the principle is relevant. The cutting edge of philosophy is not just an ability just to empathise but its ability through that empathy *to see clearly and articulate faithfully the essential meaning-structure of human living*. Only thanks to that is it not a stream of random opinions. It can observe and articulate the intersubjectively valid meaning structure of an experience – the idea, Plato would say - and so shed light on particular instances. Without that, it would be little more than a confessional.

Yet the proof of a tool is in the using, we said. We now need actually to use philosophical insight to light the obscure corners of our cave. That is what we shall do today as with a bow and a smile to prof. Curtin as we make this presentation *a little more philosophical*.



Specifically, I should like us to consider two patterns of experience which I shall call somewhat arbitrarily *living in time* and *living as history*. I shall spare you a report of what philosophers have written about time and history over the centuries. Perhaps Saint Augustine summed it up best in his *Confessions* when he wrote that he knows perfectly well what time is – until he tries to speak about it. He might have been speaking for all of us.

In any case, we are not interested in time *per se* but rather in modes of our *time experiencing*. How do we imagine time? When challenged, most of us tend to come up with the image of a long line of moments, one like the other, somehow passing through us or perhaps we through it. Every event has its place on our time line, making it “September 16th”, “the night before Christmas” or perhaps “the day the stray cat drowned in the well”. That is the time marked by our clocks, so familiar as to seem real.

Yet it is not what we live. Perhaps a better metaphor would be a road we walk with milestone awaiting us by the wayside. The assumption here is that those events, from our birth to our death with all in between, are somehow *there*, in a place called “the past” or “the present”, so that if we could only travel in time, we could visit them out of their season.

Or so it seems, though on critical reflection that again is not it. Our past is not *somewhere there*, back down the road a bit, waiting for us to return. The past *is no more*. Nor is our future all ready there somewhere, awaiting us. *There is no future yet, as there is past no more*. There is only the present, with its memories and anticipations.

So today I remember looking over my shoulder fifty years ago when last I left Gustavus with all my the possessions loaded in an old station wagon, heading down along the river toward LeSeur and on to a future that was yet to be. At that moment, though, there was only the long anticipated present, now past. Stressing the verb *is*, we can say that, literally, *there is no time*.



Having sketched that with all the drama we could muster, we need back down and see how time comes about. Yes, at any given moment there *is* only the present, but that present is laden with the past and pregnant with the future. When you split an oak, you often find within a sapling encased by successive sap layers. In a beech or a maple you might find the fine capillaries of fungal growth that once weakened its fibre, setting the stage for its demise in the next ice storm. In all things living, past events are encoded in the present, preparing possibilities of a future.

It is no different with humans. The things we have remain are encoded in us as the tar in a smoker's lungs. Sometime it is by choice, as the language I learned and let lie dormant within me till life called it up. Or it can be wholly involuntary, as the habits of fathering of which I was not even aware until my children charged me with behaving just like their grandad. It is such encoded traces of what is no more that allow me to imagine what is not yet.

That is how time is born of memory and anticipation. If at every moment we forgot all that had gone on before, we could not even be aware of change. Every moment would be self-contained as a still clipped from a strip of film, and we should be prisoners in that frame. Only our ability to remember the previous frame enables us to imagine a new next frame – and so give our present a sense of movement and direction. People deprived of imagination live entirely at the mercy of the moment.

A French philosopher of my youth, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, did extensive research into this topic. He worked with veterans of the First World War who had suffered brain damage resulting in total memory loss. Unable to remember that things had once been other, neither could they imagine that things could change again – say, that winter would not last forever, as it often seems in Minnesota. Those patients lived not in time but solely in a given moment, unable to learn from the past or plan for the future.

Or not altogether, because they had not only minds but also bodies, with traces of what had been and possibilities of what might be. Though they had no reflective memories, their bodies bore traces of pleasurable and disagreeable sensations, leading them to seek the one and avoid the other. Without imagination to guide their behaviour, their bodies supplied their sole motivation. They did not look forward to a future or fear it, wholly content or at least resigned

to the present. They simply grew hungry and would wish for food. As long as their needs were met – food, drink, warmth, reassuring sensations – they were as content as dazed shoppers in a supermarket.

To be sure, that is not the happiness of adult humans, only something rather like the contentment of infants or small animals. We could say that it is a purely “natural” happiness, undisturbed by critical reflection, just taking things as they come. Such is time structured by our bodily needs. We could call it *natural*, undisturbed by reflection, just one moment after another, each charged with traces of what had been and pregnant with possibilities of what might be, but neither remembering nor anticipating, just – in the words of a long ago musical – “doin’ what comes natcherly.”

For it is not only infants and small furry animals who live content in a natural cycle of *birth–copulation–death*. Such can be the rhythm of all human life when deprivation or affluence dull our imagination. There is spring, full of hope, there is summer, a time of burgeoning growth, there is the fall, a time of fruition with a hint of decay, and finally winter, the time of death and reconciliation. But not forever, for spring comes again, as it always had. Nothing in time is forever; there is always another season. Yet nothing in time is unique, for the new is always a return of the same. Nietzsche spoke of it as *the eternal recurrence of the same*. In the Bible, Ecclesiastes writes, *The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be, and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun. All things are full of weariness, the mouth cannot utter it. (1:9).*

That sounds melancholy, perhaps because the author of Ecclesiastes had moved a step beyond the cycle and reflected on it. Yet to those who are fully absorbed in living it, that is just the way things are. When we do not reflect on life but simply live it, such *living in time* need not be melancholy at all. Nor need it be bestial or primitive. Through the ages, all over the globe, humans and entire civilisations have so lived in the cycle of nature’s time, whether we describe it as *need-production-consumption*, or familiarly as *birth-copulation-death*. They may have done so in affluence or poverty, with pomp or weariness, in happiness or grief, yet it is still the same natural cycle, ever returning, leading nowhere.

That, incidentally, is why speaking of a consumer *civilisation* seems a misnomer. The term *civilisation* traditionally meant a civil achievement, rising above our animal endowment. What we call *consumer civilisation* adds no new

dimension, only intensifies what is naturally given. Strictly speaking it is neither civilisation nor culture, only a consumer variant of the *living in time* we share with woodchucks, cockroaches and blue herons. It remains wholly enclosed in the cycle of which Ecclesiastes speaks so wistfully – perhaps because he glimpsed, beyond the eternal cycle, a promise of *life as history*.



Here some clarification is badly needed. So far we have been speaking of a natural phenomenon, given by the rhythm of our bodies, the cycle of *living in time*. *History* is a reality of a different order, uniquely human – and specifically an European conception. Over the natural cycle of living in time *life as history* superimposes the idea of a meaningful story, leading from somewhere to something. That is a *cultural, human* reality, not a “fact of nature”. Simply as a matter of fact, we and all living things live in time, in a fixed cycle of periodic changes. It takes an *act of will*, the *will to history*, to weave those changes into a meaningful, unrepeatable whole which gives each moment a unique significance as a bridge to somewhere, not just a re-enactment of the same.

Perhaps a humble metaphor will help. Consider, if you will, the very ordinary act of shaving. That is an event in time if ever there was one. What point is there in shaving when tomorrow I shall need a shave over again? There is a pervasive feeling of futility about the whole exercise. That is *shaving-in-time*.

I can approach my shaving quite differently. As I stretch my strop to hone my razor and make my brush dance in the mug of soap, I can rejoice that I have woken into another morning. As I watch my stretched skin emerge smooth and clean I can think of the woman who smiles at me in the metro. Perhaps today she will notice how smoothly shaven I am and something new and wonderful will enter into my life. That is *shaving-as-history*, a step between what was and what might be.

Since I am not sure whether my metaphor explained as well as entertained, let me add some explanations. When I speak of history, I do not mean by it simply *times past*. History is a way of transforming time’s cycle into a story. The present is part of that story just as the future, and not simply because both are constantly becoming past. Time becomes history not when it is past but when humans see its moments as contributing to a progression, not just repeating a cycle. When we speak of *living-as-history*, we are thinking of a particular mode of

leading the moments of our life, not simply being carried along by them. It is as a story I live that life can have the meaning it lacks when I encounter it as *just one darned thing after another*.. A moment, absurd in itself, acquires meaning when we see it as a bridge between what has been and what might be.

Take yet another example: “*Here I stand, God helping me; I can do no other.*” To someone who knows nothing of the story the picture of a pudgy monk with a hammer at a cathedral door, isolated as a frame snipped from a film, can appear grotesque, simply absurd. When, though, we see it as a moment of a history, as the culmination of a long grappling with the ideal and the corruption of the Church, culminating in church renewal and a transformation of Middle Ages into modernity, it becomes meaningful. Meaningless as time, life gains meaning when we come to it with a *will to history*, a will to understand in context. That does not mean remembering much but anticipating little. Rather, it means *seeing the present as a link between what has been and what might be*. As *history*, life is no longer an eternal recurrence of the same. Grasped as history, life becomes an ongoing story.

Yet what transforms mere *life-in-time* into *life-as-history*? We have watched how time is born. Now how is history born of time – or popularly, how does *just one thing after another* become an open-ended, meaningful story?

The Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, to whom I devoted one of my books, suggested that the mode of seeing *life as history* was born of philosophy. Once humans start posing questions, critical reflection breaks up the matter-of-fact obviousness of cyclical time. Life can no longer go on in its mindless natural cycle.

Winnie-the-Pooh, the beloved Milne-and-Shepherd bear of my pre-Disney childhood, provides a fine example. Each morning, Christopher Robin drags Winnie down the stairs by his leg, head banging on step after step. For Winnie, that is just the way it is. Then one day the thought occurs to him, “There must be an easier way of getting down the stairs.” In that moment, life ceases being just *the way it is*. It becomes a story, from problem to solution. Or it could so become, if Winnie, distracted by the day’s play, did not revert to the unquestioning mode of *living-in-time*.

Or on a less whimsical note. In the cycle of time, the child’s bewildered question, “Why did Grannie have to die?” has an obvious answer. *That’s the way*

it is. *Old people die. And stop bothering me, I'm busy.* Still, the question keeps gnawing. Why? The child cannot return wholly to its earlier innocence. Life is no longer a mindless sequence of moments. It has become a story which began *when Grannie died* and which might lead on to a seminary or to a medical school.

That is Karl Jaspers' example. There can, of course, be examples which invoke joy rather than death. The point is that life ceases to be eternal recurrence of meaningless moments when humans encounter something that stands out as unrepeatable. It can be a great joy or a great sorrow, or simply a quiet recognition of the unrepeatable quality of a moment.

For the ancient Hebrews, it was the escape from bondage, which Miriam celebrated in song and dance, and the encounter with God on Mount Sinai. Ever after, the Hebrews and their heirs saw themselves as living a continuous narrative of witnessing to their God, whether enduring suffering under the Nazis or inflicting suffering on the Palestinians. Life is a journey to God, not a cycle.

For Christians, the unique event of Jesus whom they met as their Christ similarly pegged down the cycle of time. It straightened its cycle into a story whose first chapter the beloved physician Luke wrote as *The Acts of the Apostles*. Christians have been writing successive chapters ever since, both in bloody cruelty and in loving kindness. Throughout, pointlessly repetitious *life as time* becomes meaningful *life as history* when humans no longer live simply to live but dedicate themselves to *living for* something. When humans break out of their preoccupation with themselves and peg their life to an ideal as to a distant star, life in time acquires the *human dimension of history*. The present moment, growing rich with remembrance of the old and anticipation of the new, becomes worth living.



In a way, it all sounds so obvious. After all, the idea of life as progress, of transcending the woes of the past in a better future, is central to our modern day identity. For the men and women of the Enlightenment, including your Benjamin Franklin, the *perfectibility of humans* was the great vision which laid the foundations of modernity. The Middle Ages had been a period of *living in time* for the overwhelming majority of Europeans who accepted the hopeless cycle of time as simply matter-of-course. Humans suffered, but it did not occur to them that, in this life, on this Earth, things could be different. Poverty, cruelty, exploitation,

the vast sea of drudgery with only fleeting glimpses of joy, all that seemed simply the human lot. Heaven might be different, the privileged might glimpse it even now, but the world is the old world yet. On earth, we live in time.

The age we call *modern* was born with the shift from *living-in-time*, changeless and cyclical, to *living-as-history*. It was born of the startling realisation that *things could be different*. We all share a common humanity. Even drudges can claim the dignity of their humanity. Life could be less deprived and depraved, less cruel and demeaning. The crucial task was to break the resignation to eternal recurrence with the hope of something new. Replace slavery with freedom. Create a republic of liberty, equality and brotherhood in place of the monarchy of masters and serfs. The eternal *human lot* could become an open-ended story, reaching out for a better future. To *live life as history*, projecting a future and striving to realise it, came to seem as the hallmark and fulfilment of humanity. When Europeans and their American heirs came to think of *life as history*, as progress to a better future, a new age had begun.

By the 19th century, progress seemed both a fact and a moral imperative. The great moral obligation now seemed to be leaving the Earth a little better place than we had found it. That became the source of a new ethic. Good is whatever replaces weary old with something shiny and new. Good is whatever is *progressive*, nudging the world closer to the ideal. Bad is whatever tends to preserve the privileges of the few while blocking the path of progress for the many, leaving the world bogged down in the same injustice and suffering.

The choice seemed unambiguous. Who would choose a serf's subjection over the glorious freedom of a citizen? Who would have a barber apply leeches rather than take antibiotics? Who would discard the hard won achievements of science and entrust power to people who believe that this flat earth was created about the time of the first pharaonic dynasty? To live fully seemed to mean reaching out beyond the old to a new. To live a selfish little life confined to the perennial repetition of the same seemed downright sinful - and in the glorious age of progress certainly less than fully human.



Or so at least it seemed to most of us still fifty or even thirty years ago. Yes, there had always been people who benefited from injustice and wanted to perpetuate it. There have also always been people too ignorant or slothful to

embrace the brave new world. Most people, we thought, took pride in progress. Surely only knaves or fools dissented– and they were too few to reverse the march of history to peace, justice and good will toward all.

Yet today the glorious age of liberty and justice for all seems to be giving way to an age of hate and fear as for most people greed becomes a virtue and violence a way of life. The powerful few dictate to the many and the loud silence the reasonable. The freedom of *life as history* which was to lead to an age of peace, justice and care seems to have led to an orgy of fanaticism and greed until the question is only whether an apocalyptic war or an environmental catastrophe will put an end to it first.

What went so terribly wrong? Among the disenchanted pioneers of progress, not normally given to quoting the Scripture, you are likely to encounter metaphors from the Gospel of John about the Light that came into the world and the humans preferred darkness *because their deeds were evil*. Their ideal was right and just altogether, only it was too noble for depraved humans. Humans cannot change the world – or themselves. Any attempt to do so, however noble, must inevitably end tragically. The new wisdom seems to be that it is far better for humans to reconcile themselves to their lot. They may not do much good but at least they will not do much harm, either.

Such had been the conservative conviction at least since the Book of Ecclesiastes six centuries before Christ, though we paid it little heed. The state of the world may be regrettable, it ran, but it is what it is, and any attempt to change it will only cause more harm. To think we can change *human nature*, whatever that may be, will do more harm than good. The lot of humans is *life in time*. Any attempt at *life as history* is *hybris*, undue pride, and will end in tragedy.

Even without invoking the Holy Writ or some nebulous *human nature* there is significant empirical evidence that ideals have an uncomfortable way of turning into their opposite. Humans may be rational, but both privation and privilege have a way of distorting human judgement. Free trade, promising prosperity to all, has in fact the effect of producing a polarization of senselessly rich and the abjectly poor. Religion, once a prophetic voice of vision, has all over the world become the embodiment of blind passion, whether in Christian fundamentalism, Jewish ultra-orthodoxy or Moslem radical Islamism, all preaching pride and intolerance. Democracy, once a shining hope, has in many countries come to

mean a rule of the rich over the abjectly poor, in others a smoke screen for conquest. Even in many traditionally democratic countries public will and need are manipulated by corporate interests and proving no match for them.

Humans living in desperate poverty, unable to feed their children, will resort to desperate measures. Stripped of human dignity, they will reach for weapons to win respect. Since the affluent countries have saturated the third world with weapon exports, they have not far to reach. Yet limiting arms exports would endanger a highly profitable trade. The privileged need their disproportionate incomes to maintain consumption and manipulate public opinion. To many observers it seems a vicious circle, each cycle more destructive than the one before. Would we do better to abandon the entire hope and project of *life as history* and revert to the familiar cycle of *life in time*?



Ladies and gentlemen, we opened this lecture by saying that the task of philosophy is to use its insight to shed light on the contours of our lives. Here those contours are beginning to emerge:

At the core of our current turmoil there is the question of *living in time* and *living as history*. Was the hope of transforming the age-old human lot an expensive mistake? Would we have done better to accept our lot with all its oppression, suffering, humiliation, and not even dream of liberty, equality, brotherhood? Instead of seeking to make history, would we have done better just to *live in time*?

To many people it seems that the idea of progress has gone sour. The thrust for prosperity has produced environmental degradation. The vision of democracy has spawned a populist nationalism feeding on hate and fear. The ideal of social justice has been choked by a pandemic of greed. When I lectured about democracy in Bulgaria, the response I encountered was *We don't want anarchy and poverty, we want order*.

After the fiasco of Yeltzin's democracy, most Russians seem to welcome Putin's strong hand. I was in Moscow for the Day of the Great Victory a year ago and heard President Medvedyev praise the three pillars of state – the military as a symbol of national pride and guarantor of order, wealthy merchants as the masters of the socio-economic system and the ultraconservative Orthodox Church as the guardian of morals. That is not a design to conquer the world, just

a reversion to traditional *living in time* under the tutelage of the military-industrial complex.

In the other great power, China, the promise of affluence and the threat of force keep people from any illusions of *life as history*. The Western infection of striving for liberty and justice has been replaced by daily drudgery relieved by visions of *richness and wealth*. Even in the United States, once the great model of democracy, we are witnessing a hateful violent resistance to any vision of progress toward social justice. The great temptation seems to revert to a regime that pushes all problems forcibly out of sight, reverting to the illusion of power abroad and *peace and prosperity* at home, at least until the next crash.

Our own European Union is clinging to the great achievements of social democracy, yet there are unmistakable signs of an eroding tax base for social infrastructure. Fundamental democratic rights – the right to health, the right to education, the right to a secure old age – are eroding and the social consensus with them. In Hungary, the racist militia – the Hungarian Guards – are parading again. In Belgium ethnic strife threatens the viability of the country. The hope of a viable European government is being held hostage by Irish greed and Czech intransigence. All over the world, globalization is turning the hope of freedom into an anarchy of greed presided over by corrupt corporations, as the recent banking crisis showed.

Has the time come to give up the vision of *life as history* and to settle for *living in time*, just *doing what comes naturally*, while leaving world's great concerns to some invisible corporate hand to work out? To forget it all and just live our lives and loves?



As a private person, I can understand the temptation to return to the New Hampshire clearing where once I lived at peace while letting the world to straighten out its problems as best it could, as long as I had peace in my soul. As a philosopher, though, I know that is an irresponsible illusion. Ours is not a question of private peace versus public tumult. The question at stake is how we shall go about being human, whether in time (and nature) or in history. Once we have opted for the freedom of *life as history*, we closed off the option of simply *living in time*. In accepting freedom from what once we called *the human lot*, we

have accepted the responsibility for history. We have accepted responsibility for the way our dwelling with others and with the Earth will impact all of us.

We have made our lives so interdependent that we can no longer depend on each individual to shift for him/herself. Together we need accept the responsibility for assuring the wherewithal of human dignity for everyone. That does not mean just equal access to food and shelter, to help in sickness, to education, to care in old age, though it certainly means that. Most of all it means freedom from fear, freedom from hate and freedom from humiliation which go to assure human dignity. We humans have become so powerful and populous that we cannot afford the kind of social injustice that drives the many to revolt and the few to arm themselves to suppress the many. Social injustice is unacceptable because it leads to conflicts and wars.

We have made those conflicts so destructive that we cannot just let them run their course as when we fought with swords and arrows. Today's wars not only kill and maim entire populations but also cause so much collateral damage to both social structure and nature as to threaten the very survival of our civilisation. Wars may be "natural" but we have made them so deadly that it is highly problematic whether either culture or nature could survive them. We need accept responsibility for making conflicts soluable and wars unthinkable.

Finally, we have damaged the structure of all life on earth far too much for nature to repair the damage. If we wish to continue living on this earth, we need to accept our responsibility for learning so to live as the fit the demands of our civilisation within the limits of Nature's possibilities. Were we to revert to *living in time*, living our private lives and allowing hatred and social injustice to lead to ever deadlier armed conflict, intensifying the devastating impact of our civilisation on nature, we should be making a social, military and environmental collapse of our civilisation unavoidable. There no longer is a choice. Having once opted for life as history – and having thoroughly botched the opportunity it gave us – we can no longer revert to private lives in nature and time. Willy-nilly we need to accept the reality and the responsibility of *life as history*.

Let us hope, though, that this time we shall do a better job of it. That means letting reason, not passion, guide our decisions. It means meeting others in mutual respect, not in fear. It means learning tolerance and generosity of spirit instead of greed and hatred. As I look at the ground we have covered, the past we

bear within and the future for which we have accepted responsibility, I think philosophy has its task cut out for it.

Erazim Kohák, Professor emeritus of Boston University and of Charles University, Prague, is currently Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Global Studies of the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Science of the Czech Republic in Prague.