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Sense and History: At the Limits of Making

1. Introduction

Man runs up against limits of various kinds. We are finite beings in space and time: we lead our lives in a particular place, our field of vision is defined by a limiting horizon and our life is directed towards an end. Our very nature sets us limits: animals have sharper senses and superior bodily strength; computers are quicker and more reliable in counting. Our memory, our empathy, and our intelligence are constitutively finite capacities. In our action, in our effectuation, in our appearance we encounter inner and outer limits – limits of our own capabilities, resistance of things in our attempts to penetrate and control the world. A special focal point is formed by the limits of making: limits in relation to our capacity of bringing something about, of steering and using it in an appropriate way.

When we talk about the limits of making we usually talk about technical or economical making: feasibility studies (*Machbarkeitsstudien*) are precursory checks of the realizability of a project. They evaluate the suitability of the planned or available resources, and the objective chances of accomplishing a project in given schedule and in given administrative and social framework conditions. The consciousness of the limits of making has grown during the past decades, and it has become a topic of discussion on many levels – not only in relation to limits of growth, and of technology and its control, but also in relation to limits of the political and the social in securing world peace, of eliminating hunger, and of overcoming poverty and inequality. Such limits gain their virulence due to the background of technical possibilities that have simultaneously ascended to immeasurable scales, and of the modern faith in progress, which has projected its optimistic visions on all these fields of action. The awareness of the gap between the plan and the failure becomes a practical problem and carries with it something of the ‘insult’ (*Kränkung*) that Freud ascribed to the de-powered subject and de-centralized consciousness. The drastically experienced limits of making are an insult to the consciousness of modern man.

In this essay I shall not follow the traces of these limits in such breadth, but rather try to bring them into a definite focus. The topic is not the instrumental activity, which encounters the

resistance of things, but the human existence and action as such. The question is: to what extent is the human existence as such intertwined with the dialectic of doing and being acted upon, of creativity and being conditioned, of potency and impotence. It is about the forms of limit experience (*Grenzerfahrung*) that penetrate the life as a whole and that form the foundation of the particular limitations in bringing things about and governing them. This fundamental experience can be recognized in two areas.

First, the limits of making in history. In everything that human beings are and what they do, they are part of history, they have a history, and they make and leave behind a history. At the same time, however, the relation to history is discordant. Human beings, according to Karl Marx, “make their own history, but they do not make it from free bits and not under conditions that they have themselves chosen, but under conditions that are immediately found, given and passed down to them.”¹ And so their making is really a not-making; in the critical eyes the catchphrase of making history has for long refuted itself; for some it is nothing less than a category mistake.²

Second, the meaningfulness of existence. Human beings live in such a way that they always understand themselves and the world in a particular way: they form an image, a particular interpretation of themselves and of things. Their life and their relation to themselves is fulfilled in the medium of sense and understanding. It is a fulfilment in the space between construction and taking account of, between making and receiving meaning or sense. Here, too, man encounters the limit of his high-handed bringing about. As little as he is the master of history, he is the lord of sense. Thus these two dimensions are not separate complexes, but interwoven with each other. They constitute a fundament of existence, which contributes to its open potentiality, but also to its essential limitation. I shall try to open up the main lines of this constellation by reference to some exemplary positions from both sides.

¹ Karl Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*, *Marx-Engels-Werke* (MEW), Berlin: Dietz 1957ff., Bd. 8, p. 115.

² Hermann Lübke, *Geschichtsbegriff und Geschichtsinteresse. Analytik und Pragmatik der Historie*, Basel: Schwabe ²2012.

2. Construction and the impossibility of making history

(a) Kant: The ideal of an history according to plan

The idea of giving history in the hands of man does not define only a technocratic or socially revolutionary utopia. Also Immanuel Kant's sketch of a *General history from a cosmopolitan perspective* presumes the leading idea of a rational steering of human relationships: only insofar as human beings "proceed in all respects like citizens of the world, in accordance with a previously thought out plan", is a "history according to a plan" possible.³ Philosophy of history is oriented toward a rational, enlightened and morally acting human being, who is to be in position to realize the goals of shared life, the welfare of man and the peace between peoples: from this point of view history would be but putting a rational plan of action into practice. But because human beings do not, in reality, act according to this ideal, the philosophical concept of human history must be based on other foundations: primarily on the hypothesis of a caring nature, which – as Kant remarks – knows better what is good for man, and which is at the same time mightier as he is and gets its aims through.⁴ A double deficiency prevents man from 'making' history according to the requirements of the concept of history. First, there is a deficiency of moral power and of majority (*Mündigkeit*): a human being is not a pure rational being, but is subordinated to natural and egoistic passions and has his part of the defectiveness of the fallen nature. Second, he is constitutively a finite living being with limited powers who is not able to govern his destiny in a sovereign manner nor capable of collective self-determination. Because of this he is not capable of taking full responsibility of history and can never completely achieve its goals: "from so crooked wood of which man is made can nothing entirely straight be fashioned."⁵

The ambivalence of the human nature between the capacity to do good and the tendency to do bad, between transcendence and finitude, has twofold effects in the philosophy of history. On the one hand, it is expressed in the uncertainty of prediction, which cannot be based on human action and will, but needs recourse to nature, which is responsible for the orientation of all life, and – like Hegel's "cunning of reason" (*List der Vernunft*) – turns, as it were, the selfish endeavours against themselves, using the human unsociability as a means to

³ Immanuel Kant, "Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht", *Werke in sechs Bänden*, edited by Wilhelm Weischedel, Darmstadt 1966, Bd. VI, p. 34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Vierter Satz.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Sechster Satz.

socialization. On the other hand, this ambivalence makes itself manifest in the oscillation in relation to the political aims of history: Kant locates these in a federal union state on the one side, and in an extended 'state of the nations' ('world republic') on the other. The latter of these would form the constitution 'according to reason', which, however, being 'not at all wanted' by the people, has to be replaced by a 'negative surrogate', a peace guaranteeing union.⁶ In summary, Kant sketches a picture of a human history in which the enlightenment idea of an emancipated, self-determined history is restricted by a consciousness of flaws in human nature. Here the limits of making appear not primarily in the technical and instrumental, but rather in the anthropological and ethical sense – what also has influence on the epistemological question, how to define the idea of history and ground the possibility to know history. Significant is the adherence to the regulative idea of a reasonable and autonomous history, and the admission that it can be realized only partly. Of importance is alike the idea of the assistance of nature, which can eventually be extended beyond the here discussed topic of practical help. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant develops the hypothesis that nature meets us in a more fundamental way: it, as it were, guarantees us its own intelligibility and makes a meaningful relationship to the world possible – a relationship man could not establish alone. The limits of subjective making get an affirmative extension from the nature that is revealing itself.⁷

(b) The optimism of enlightenment and the utopia of progress

Among the contemporaries of Kant, some other authors expressed an unbroken confidence in the realizability of the aims of such a philosophy of history. The optimism of enlightenment we find in Turgot and Condorcet suggests a belief in the perfection of man in all areas of life: advances in search of truth, in speculative and applied sciences, in fine and mechanical arts, in the conquest of prejudice and superstition. Philosophy of history rests upon the general laws of history, which also enable us to foresee, "to steer and to speed up" the future advancements of the human race "on its way to truth, virtue and happiness".⁸ It is a conviction of unlimited perfectibility that encloses all dimensions of what is human, of vanquishing diseases, of postponing death and of the moral improvement and transformation of man: the ideal

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Zum ewigen Frieden, Werke in sechs Bänden*, *ibid.*, p. 212f.

⁷ This encounter takes place in a special way in the experience of beauty.

⁸ Antoine Marquis de Condorcet, *Entwurf einer historischen Darstellung der Fortschritte des menschlichen Geistes* (1794), Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1976, p. 193, 221.

institutions are, according to Rousseau, the ones that change (*dénaturer*) human beings in their nature.⁹ In the footsteps of such projections technological utopias follow, ranging from ideas of transforming nature or of absorbing nature in art to the producibility of the human being – ideas not altogether alien to contemporary gene technological visions. We here have extravagant projects of making that we also find in the classical social utopias (in which, however, the ideal state is typically characterized as something timeless and static that transcends history). Such belief in reason and in progress encounters disillusion and radical critique in the historicism of the 19th century.

(c) Marx: From prehistory to real history

Around the same time the postulate of a makeable history is declared as political requirement by social movements. Karl Marx connects it with a conceptual revision in the understanding of history: according to him, all the past, alienated forms of life constitute only prehistory, not the real history of man. Talk about real history is legitimate only then, when human beings can determine their interrelationships freely and bring them about independently. This, however, is according to Marx possible only after a revolutionary overthrow, which has to take place not in the institutional and political surface structure, but in the material living conditions of the society. After all, the “first prerequisite of all human existence” is “that human beings must be capable of living in order to be able to ‘make history’.”¹⁰ The materialistic turn in philosophy of history consists in the localization of the decisive factor that shapes the human relationship to nature in the medium of work. Marx takes Hegel’s idea of work as self-generation of life and extends it to social emancipation and to the conscious making of history. To make history becomes the mark of a human being who has not only achieved majority, but who has really been set free. History, which in its alienated form governs the individuals like blind destiny, would in its real, human form be a chain of events according to a “comprehensive plan of freely united individuals”.¹¹

To test the sustainability of this idea, it is first necessary to uncover its revolution-theoretical premises. Their core is in the theory of negation: the inevitability of the overthrow is based on the necessary abolition of injustice and suffering. Marx transforms the negativity in its

⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile ou de l’éducation*, in: Rousseau: *Œuvres complètes*, hg. von Bernard Gagnebin u. Marcel Raymond, Bd. IV, Paris 1969, S. 249.

¹⁰ Karl Marx / Friedrich Engels, *Die deutsche Ideologie*, MEW 3, s. 28.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 72

extreme culmination into the motor of upheaval: as a class subjected to “no particular injustice, but to injustice as such” and suffering “the complete loss of humanity”, the proletariat is called to bring about the general human emancipation.¹² Even though it cannot be denied that Marx makes use of ethical argumentation, the issue at stake is not primarily a moral objection but rather a driving dynamic: human life can do nothing else but strive after abolition of suffering and removal of all the structures in which the human being is devaluated. Marx grounds the necessary course of history on a general law of development by pointing out that the decisive factor of change and the driving force of history is the culminating contradiction between the advancing productive forces and the production and possession relations that bind them.

As is well known, many sorts of objections have been raised against this political and theoretical program. The most obvious critique from the perspective of philosophy of science (like that of Karl Raimund Popper or Arthur C. Danto) applies to the historical and philosophical prophecies which are again and again falsified by the real course of events. Another objection is of political and ethical nature. It is directed against the aim of overcoming the bourgeois-liberal system of economy for the benefit of a class-free society. Both objections open up a further field of controversial discussions, which I shall here pass over. Instead I move to a third objection, which applies to the understanding of history as such. This critique disagrees with the conceptual convergence of history and action. To apply a thought of Hermann Lübbe, history is that which takes place and happens to us, not a fulfilment of a plan of action.¹³ History is essentially not something, which is predictable, but rather something that comes about from non-intentional side-results of acting and from interference of various courses of action. The one to whom something has happened, has something (a story, a history) to tell – not the one who has executed a plan. History is a realm of contingency and factuality: and so does the defender of the ideal of a makeable history not only demand too much from the human competence to action, but commits a category mistake. If one does not simply want to re-define concepts, it is not comprehensible why that what we usually call *history*, should be the “so-called” history of the world, a mere “preparatory and developmental history”, while simultaneously the completely transparent chain of events that is formed by the immediate products of our actions is declared to be “the

¹² Marx, *Kritik des Hegelschen Staatsrechts*, MEW 1, p. 390.

¹³ H. Lübbe, *ibid.*

real history of man”.¹⁴ Typically, this conceptual rectification is linked to a substantial critique of a caricature of human autonomy or of an overloaded political vision; on the same lines that one can turn against a wrong understanding of history, one can argue against an ideological conception of politics, which passes by and skips the finitude of the *conditio humana*.¹⁵

(d) Arendt: History, action and producing

Hannah Arendt has brought out the limits of making in close connection to politics and history. Her starting point is the action-theoretical distinction between different forms of activity, which have been confounded and in that way contributed to the problems around the misguided modern civilization. The “fatal mixing up (*Vermischung*) of politics and history”, which leads to the identification of action and making of history is, in her view, based on another, ultimate confusion, which is “perhaps the most ancient sin of all western political philosophy”, namely, “the confusion of producing and action”.¹⁶ Distinguishing these two in the way Aristotle did, offers a fundament for practical philosophy. Significant is, according to Arendt, that there has been a reversal of the traditional hierarchy in the modern era, which has led to the positive valuation of work (which is counted among the natural relations) and of instrumental producing in relation to (originally interpersonal) action. The historical disappointment of not being able to make reasonable politics, experienced in an exemplary way in the transformation of the French revolution into a rule of terror, has twofold consequences: on the one hand it motivates the attempt to perceive a meaning in history, which extends beyond every particular goal of action. On the other hand it urges us to reserve priority for a controllable process of producing in opposition to social action, which always contains the possibility of getting involved with unpredictable circumstances. From these two aspects follows a conception of history, which is as a whole leaning towards the model of producing: the idea of humanity as a subject realizing its goals.

Mixing up the models of activity influences the perspectives of time: while history, according to the normal understanding, is directed towards past and intentional action towards future, in the active conception of history, the sense or meaning of history is reinterpreted as an

¹⁴ Karl Marx, *Philosophisch-Ökonomische Manuskripte*, in: *MEW*, Ergänzungband I, p. 546, 544, 570.

¹⁵ So runs the critique of Dolf Sternberger against orientations to the political along the lines of the ideal of *Civitas Dei*: *Drei Wurzeln der Politik*, Frankfurt am Main: Insel 1978.

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Fragwürdige Traditionsbestände im politischen Denken der Gegenwart*, Frankfurt am Main: 1957, p. 102f.; vgl. *Vita activa*, Stuttgart 1960.

“end” to be produced. The conceptual framework offered by Arendt makes it possible to deal with the problematic of making history in a differentiated way. According to her, the conceptual mistake in describing history is not – *pace* Lübbe – the orientation towards action as such, but rather that history is moulded upon the model of producing. History indeed has much to do with action – but with action that is realized in the interpersonal realm and engages in an open non-predictable future. It all comes to this: to conceive the referentiality of action and future not as something completely beyond the power of the subject, but as something which opens up to contingency and to experience of something new. History is essentially not makeable. But this does not mean that it should be disengaged from human responsibility and power to act, and from action that enters upon the structures of society – structures that do not stand under the subject’s control, but form a processual nexus with which the subject is confronted. The limit of making that makes itself manifest is not confined to the technical control of nature, but also touches the social and political forms of life. It does not dissociate history from the ideals of majority and of collective emancipation.

3. Makeability and non-makeability of sense

(a) Knowability of the world

From limits of making in the practical sense we shall now go to underlying limit experiences (*Grenzerfahrungen*) that precede action and are contained in the basic structure of our relationship to ourselves and to the world. They do not result from an excessive demand of the human will, from a false self-authorization of the subject, but belong constitutively to the human relation to the world, which takes place in the medium of understanding, but which none the less encounters limits and has to deal with phenomena that do not admit of being understood. The confrontation with the non-understandable points to a more general problem, with which philosophy has dealt since the beginning: the knowability (*Erkennbarkeit*) of the world. Confidence in the knowability of things has always been accompanied by sceptical doubts. These are nourished by the suspicion that the world might be unattainable and remain alien to us. Opposite to the belief that the world can be read like an open book and that the things speak to us, there is the horror in face of “the eternal silence

of unlimited spaces".¹⁷ Another topic of discussion is, from which direction the knowability of the world can be warranted. According to the classical metaphysical reading the world itself has been rationally constructed and is knowable in its structure – be it due to internal determination of essence and structure that correspond to forms of our thinking and speaking, or due to having been created by divine word and governing reason, of which human thinking has its share. According to the opposing view, the forms of thinking and speaking of the subject regulate our access to the world and warrant the stability and truth of our knowledge. Even though these alternatives, as open questions, run through the whole history of thought, it is not accidentally that the subjective and constructive potentiality of world discovery takes the foreground in the modern era, when the technical and practical power of man becomes dominant and further accelerates.

(b) Understanding and interpreting

This problem takes a special turn, if it is related to understanding with its stress on meaning – that is, to the way in which we comprehend the world and interpret the sense of life and history. The active and constructive moment of all interpretation has often been emphasized. Nietzsche's statement "there are no facts, only interpretations", is well known.¹⁸ During the past decades Hans Lenk and Günter Abel have worked out the fundamentals of interpretationism, according to which all forms of our cognitive and practical contact to the world are interpretative constructs or based on such constructs.¹⁹ This applies from basic sensations and perceptions of things, from comprehending 'something as something' (a sound as a signal, a thing as a tool) to the interpretation of lived and historical events (of a gesture as threat, of an encounter as the beginning of a story), and to the interpretation of leading one's own life. The shaping of existence takes place in the medium of self-descriptions, in which the

¹⁷ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Fragment 206 [101], in: *Œuvres complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris: Gallimard 1954, p. 1081-1358 (1113).

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, Nachlaß VIII, 7 [60] in: *Kritische Studienausgabe*, edited by G. Colli und M. Montinari, München/Berlin/New York: de Gruyter / dtv 1980, Bd. 12, p. 315.

¹⁹ Compare G. Abel, *Interpretationswelten. Gegenwartsphilosophie jenseits von Essentialismus und Relativismus*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1993; id., *Sprache, Zeichen, Interpretation*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1999; H. Lenk, *Interpretationskonstrukte. Zur Kritik der interpretatorischen Vernunft*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1994; id., *Interpretation und Realität. Vorlesungen über Realismus in der Philosophie der Interpretationskonstrukte*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1995.

human being – the ‘self-interpreting animal’ (Charles Taylor)²⁰ – gives his needs, experiences and actions their definite form and meaning. In human life nothing has the place of a *factum brutum*, but only as a *factum* that has already been understood and interpreted in particular ways.

Nevertheless, there remains controversy about the question whether (and to what extent) the interpretation arises from the thing or from the interpreter. Hermeneutics has given different answers to this question. A position, according to which understanding has to comprehend a sense contained and embodied in an expression, a document, or an action, seems obvious. And the conviction that, in an ideal case, a text should be understood as it was meant by its author, seems natural. Already the classical textual hermeneutics has, however, considered the thesis, that one ought to understand the text better than it was understood by the author. And all the more, critical hermeneutics – like the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (as Ricoeur calls this strain of thought), genealogical interpretation (Nietzsche, Foucault) and deconstruction (Derrida) – have methodologically pursued the aim to analyse expressions independently of the intentions of the agent and even against his or her own understanding, to brake fixed sense-formations, and to compose them anew from their context and from their hidden motives, against their explicit declamations.

Generally one could say that an integrative hermeneutics would jointly cover three different aspects of our relation to meaningful objects. It contains acts of reception, destruction, and construction. These are the three poles in our efforts to open up the meaning of an expression, of a text or of a tradition. In the first place it is about grasping the meaning, which is contained in a text or revealed in an historical event, and receiving it as it expresses itself in the sources and in gestures. In the second place it is about dispelling the false and apparent sense, and about clarifying how the meaning has been affected and distorted by ideological explanations and pathological behaviour, due to which the meaning has been expressed in a non-transparent manner. And in the third place it is about sketching forms of sense, re-writing texts and endowing them with new interpretations, and interpreting events in different ways.

If this all belongs to our interpretative dealings with the world and our own life, the relative emphasis on these diverging aspects forms a point of dispute in hermeneutics. This is especially obvious in the argumentation about ‘constructivist’ and ‘deconstructivist’ positions.

²⁰ Charles Taylor, „Self-interpreting animals“, in: *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985, p. 45-76.

In interpretation dissolutions of forms of sense, as well as an arbitrary constructive will, raise questions about not meeting the demands of an appropriate understanding of text, of history, or of social practice. Against these a somewhat 'more conservative' concept of understanding imposes itself, which indirectly shows a common point of both dispelling and constructivist tendencies: both have their roots in the subjective intervention of the one who receives the meaning. The crucial question is: when understanding something, whether and to what extent are we confronted with our own creations, with a constitutive contribution of the interpreter, or with a given, immanent sense of the subject matter?

That the construction of meaning has limits seems in many respects obvious. We cannot endow a poem with an arbitrary interpretation without missing its sense. The constructive sketch of sense has to be anchored in the subject matter it is about. This applies also where there seems to be no stable sense available – unlike in the cases of a text passed down to us, or a historical event. Also in the case where I ask myself how I understand myself and how I want to lead my life and shape my future, the question is not about voluntary self-definition. The self-understanding, in which I find my identity, has to suit me, has to be related to my needs and long-term wishes, and is normally connected to my earlier self-descriptions and experiences of myself. Neither should we leave the encounter with a work of art – also when it involves experimenting with new ways of expression and reception – in the hands of arbitrary interpretation and form-giving. It, too, is indebted for its consistence to what such a shaping of form “is about”. This is the case also when it is not possible to formulate the ‘meaning’ of a composition or of a poem in unambiguous sentences or to round it up in a final explication. Even a deconstructive adaptation of history cannot turn the true core of reality into a mere perspective configuration. But of course, a creative contribution is part of every self-discovery, of every vivid adaptation of history, and of every productive reading of a text. The aesthetics of reception has brought out the irreducible participation of the reader in the emergence of the textual sense, and Walter Benjamin has defended the thesis that every text has to be exposed to never-ending re-writing and translation in order to bring to expression what is contained in it. Nonetheless, such a constructive development is not autonomous, but refers to the matter, which is articulated in it. Neither sense-production nor sense-reception can dispense with this foundation, and sense is not something set by the subject. It is received, not merely made.

(3) Responsivity

This genuine limit of our ability to make appears in various ways. On the one hand, it encounters us as a negative limitation. We do not command the sense of that, which happens to us, and we cannot set down arbitrarily the meaning of history and of our life. We do not in a sovereign manner determine the meaning of texts and of things. But on the other hand, this awareness of being limited is only the negative side of a two-fold positive experience – of the givenness of sense and of our receptivity to sense. In this reversal Hans-Georg Gadamer locates the main insight of hermeneutics, which sees understanding not as a method, as something that is subjectively regulated, but as an event in which we are involved: “Not what we do, nor what we should do, but what, along with our willing and doing, is going on with us, is what raises the question.”²¹ Sense is, eventually, not a creation that has been produced, but a process, described by Gadamer (together with Heidegger) as a process of truth (*Wahrheitsgeschehen*), in which something becomes manifest and can be understood.

From this perspective both the meaning of any given thing and the limits of making appear in a new light. On the side of the things, it is not merely about untangling and interpreting an object of sense, but in some respect about a self-revelation and speaking, directed to us. Hermeneutics reformulates the metaphysical thought that knowledge is “a moment of being itself and not primarily an attitude of the subject”.²² It is a reversal, which gets an expression, among others, in form of language about things. On the side of the subject, a dialogical receiving and answering beyond passive receptivity corresponds to it. Various authors in the phenomenological tradition have described the relationship of the human being to the world as a fundamental responsivity. Especially Bernhard Waldenfels has dedicated appealing analyses to this phenomenon.²³ The dialogical relation to the world characterises forcefully the late works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, where it makes an appearance under the keywords ‘Reversibility’ and ‘Chiasm’. He characterises the work of an artist not as consisting in producing a work, but as something, which brings into completion a communication with the world. The artist, who is addressed and spoken to by the things in the world, makes a reply to them and takes an initiative the starting point of which, however, is in the things. The action of painting makes visible a movement, which comes from within the things. In the most

²¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, Vorwort zur 2. Auflage von *Wahrheit und Methode*, Gesammelte Werke 2, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1993, p. 438.

²² H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Gesammelte Werke 1, s. 462.

²³ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Antwortregister*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1994.

comprehensive way this reversal has been discussed by Martin Heidegger in his later writings. There it presents itself together with a fundamental disempowerment of the subject: the relation of the subject to reality is at the end not based on a subjective stance to being, but on “the relation of being to the human being”, who by “speaking merely gives expression to the unspoken word of being”.²⁴ In all stubbornness of his language Heidegger formulates a forceful thought, which brings out the singular position of man. The human being has a special relationship to the world, which opens itself and makes it possible for us to listen and to reply – a dialogue, in which we at the same time actualize our own essence.

4. Closing remarks: Limits of making – here and beyond

What appears in the meaningful relation to the world is a peculiar reversal of limit experience. From the side of that, which does not give itself up to understanding or to construction of sense, a preceding encounter takes place, an original event of being given. The interpretative activity, too, has to do with “sense that encounters it” (Roland Barthes)²⁵, and the constructivity of knowing with the initial “givenness” of that which “shows itself” (Jean-Luc Marion)²⁶. Therefore the task of phenomenological description consists, according to Heidegger, in “that, which shows itself in the way it shows itself out of its own, and in the way it admits to be seen out of its own.”²⁷ But this self-manifestation is of course not autonomous like divine revelation. It does not only precede human speech, but is also dependent on it. A reciprocal dialogical relationship occurs between claim and reply. In this relationship responsibility has a special, sense-constituting function. And so the limit of subjective making is transformed, not merely by the (ability) to receive, but also by the subject’s own activity – somehow by a peculiar “making”. In this “making”, however, that which evolves and becomes manifest is the potentiality of the other, not the subjective high-handedness.

What thus comes to full effect in the horizon of hermeneutics can be referred back to history. Analogous forms of reversal and re-evaluation present themselves there. It is not only about man not being the master of history, subjected to (or even victim of) history as he is, rather

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, „Brief über den ‚Humanismus‘“, in: *Wegmarken*, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann 2004 (Gesamtausgabe, Bd. 9) p. 313-364, hier p. 313, 319, 330, 361.

²⁵ Roland Barthes, *L’obvie et l’obtus. Essais critiques 3*, Seuil, Paris 1982. [German edition replaced by French version.]

²⁶ Jean-Luc Marion, *Étant donné. Essai d’une phénoménologie de la donation*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France ²1998;

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Niemeyer ¹⁰1963, p. 34.

than the subject of what is happening. The human being is at the same time participant in the history that carries him and which enables him to act and interpret. Following Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur underlines this belonging to a meaningful process (*Sinngeschehen*) as the foundation of historical being and understanding – it is, as it were, the positive counterpart to human non-sovereignty in history. The limitation does not itself turn into its opposite; but that, which is the foundation of limitation – the dominance and precedence of history – is simultaneously exposed as the fundament and resource of subjective receiving and production. It should be further clarified, to what extent a similar change of perspective can be distinguished in the whole of human existence, with special attention paid to the most immediate limit of making, which appears in the instrumental action and technical planning. It remains to be studied how such a positive reversal could shed light on conceptions both of cancelled self-authorization and of nature somehow coming towards us.

But, of course, even without building on the metaphysical fundamentals of sense that reveals itself or of the concealing and contributing nature, the existential experience of limitation, irreversibly interwoven with our finitude, remains torn between two opposite poles: between the negative limitation, which sets boundaries to our will and desire with quest for infinity and the positive overlapping through receptivity and the revelation of the other which comes towards us. And, last but not least, liberating positivity resides in becoming aware of the limit itself. If the painful experience of being limited consists in the subject's claim to absoluteness getting undermined, this means at the same time a liberation from a false self-image. The finite human being has to come to terms with limitation as an essential mark of human existence and to get over the presumed 'insult', which is, in the end, only caused by a misconception of the subject. Confrontating limits of making is not alienation, but rather a return to what it means to be human.

Translation from German: Lassi Jakola