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The Uses and Misuses of Historical Reflexivity in Philosophy: From "Historical Critique" to "Deconstruction"

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*The Uses and
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Reflexivity
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“Historical Critique”
to “Deconstruction”*

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According to Voltaire, one of the main functions of the philosophy of history was to be critical. It seeks to attest the truth of facts against prejudices, to demystify the established dogma by revealing its genesis, and to show on a worldwide scale the emancipation of the human spirit. On this last point, the critical tradition of the *Aufklärung* undoubtedly provided new ground for reflection within which the philosophy, now emancipated from the ancient metaphysics of history and its theological presuppositions, managed to develop. And yet, if philosophy provided an ontological dignity to history, which was hitherto excluded from its own field and timeless perspective, it was always with the idea to submit it to a transcendent view. In Voltaire's time, the philosopher still read history in order to obtain, behind the tangible reality of the facts, confirmations of his own postulates. Later with Kant, history was mostly reduced to the apparent manifestation of a "hidden plan of nature", while Hegel referred to it as a "ruse of reason" which expresses itself through human passions. In this respect, historicism constitutes a decisive stage in the critical use of history by philosophy. First, it tends to distance itself from the ancient metaphysical conceptions, and secondly, it offers a radical refoundation of the thought by considering its own historical assumptions. But if the philosophy of history has claimed, from its beginning, to be critical, its reflexivity has remained, however, speculative. History is just confirming what it presupposes in advance. On the contrary, historicism intends to submit the philosophical gesture to its own reflexivity. And unlike the Hegelian

philosophy of history, it opts for a reflexivity which does not try to relate the historical facts to a pregiven totality, but to confront its own assumptions on history. It seeks to shed light on what conditions and precedes its own critical gesture.

I would like, in this article, to explore some of the philosophical historicist paradigms put forward in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by German scholars. I will mainly focus on the Diltheyan project of a “critique of historical reason”, Ernst Troeltsch’s “reflexive historicism”, and the “destructive” approach suggested by Martin Heidegger. The object will be to underline the specificity of the relationship between philosophy and history and the critical use it generates, while questioning its limits, its diversions and what still binds it to the former metaphysical conceptions of history. If the recourse to history unmistakably implies a critical perspective within philosophical investigations, an aspect by which the philosopher aims to demystify and to exceed appearances, what can be said of an approach which claims to be “metahistorical” and to exceed the empirical status that serves as a scientific guarantee for historians? And what can be said of the motto “to overcome history with history”? Does it imply the same hubris, originally present in the discipline, which pushes its reflexivity to the limits of sacrificing its own criticism, or does it imply an extreme form of reflexivity which would be capable of enhancing the historian’s work?

From the philosophy of history to historicism

It was against the theological conception of history (*Geschichtstheologie*) that philosophy began to flirt with history. The objective was less the rejection of its vision “from on high”, as Bossuet formerly tried, than to think of it in the immanence of the same continuous and unified process. The gesture of the philosophy of history aims to integrate into the philosophical system that which seemed, from the very beginning, to have been excluded from it: the continuous change in time and history. The thought had initially excluded these aspects as being contingent and secondary in comparison to the domain of essences it seeks to reach. At the same time, what we call “history” began to form a reflexive unity and a space of autonomous meaning when it started to free itself from the external influences that ruled its existence, the most powerful being the one of God. If it remains a prisoner of its surface effects, it is the duty of mankind to think of its deployment, and in doing so, to let the finite consciousness rethink itself in the light of what exceeds it. By bringing to light the historicity of thought through the genealogy that he provided of consciousness and its progress towards the full universality of absolute knowledge, Hegel was one of the first scholars to integrate such a reflexivity into his system. Time is no longer thought as an *a priori* and unconditional frame, but as an integral part of the knowledge process and one of the conditions of its effectiveness. And the very way the consciousness thinks its own historicity allows it to reflect on itself and to be assured, through this reflexivity, of its concrete contents and effectiveness. A privileged moment of the system, history can nevertheless only

be integrated if it can be maintained within certain boundaries. And if philosophy turns to history, it must treat it as a material that it reconstructs at will and *a priori*.¹

It is precisely in opposition to the speculative presuppositions underlying the “Hegelian shape” of the philosophy of history that historicism appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century. This appearance represents a formal gesture of emancipation, as we find it in particular in the jurisprudence of Friedrich Carl von Savigny which seeks to enhance the local, the individual and the historical singularities over the universalist and jurnaturalist conceptions which were hitherto prevalent. It is the same gesture that appears in the literature of Gustav Schmoller and David Friedrich Strauss. The former tried to break with the purely *a priori* economic perspective, traditionally that of classic political economy, while the latter contributed by criticising and questioning the established dogma of the Bible with his historically based biography of Christ. From a speculative philosophy of history to historicism, it is possible to observe a radicalisation of the critical standards. It is not only a matter of thinking the whole of history from the perspective of a finite consciousness, but to assume the finitude of this consciousness, and, by assuming it, to accept the abandonment of any transcendent point of view. According to Ranke, if the historian has to raise himself above the consideration of the individual towards a universal view, which allows the historian to seize the objective coherence which transmits history, he will only be able to deal with histories and not *the* history.² Droysen radicalised this gesture by showing that the historical fact has nothing objective but depends on a whole process of interpretation. Dilthey’s perception, for his part, is even more radical. By reflecting on itself, historical consciousness informs us that universality exists only according to the sense we gave to it, and truths only within the limits of the point of view from which they were built.³ The “*Aufklärung* of the *Aufklärung*”,⁴ as it could have been called, historicism adds to the reflexivity of the Enlightenment, which emerged in reaction to ancient theological dogma and tried to build a philosophy of history with a universal claim. Historicism is a philosophy of history which broke with the Hegelian attempt to seize the global sense of history and accept itself as resolutely finite. In other words, it is a philosophy of history neither metaphysical nor speculative, but eminently critical and reflexive: a reflexivity “of the second degree”⁵ which not only aims to think the finitude in the light of a totality which exceeds it, but also to draw its conditions of possibility, in the lineage of Kantian criticism, which are themselves totally historical. It is what Odo Marquard described as a historical philosophy which abandoned the former philosophy of history (*Philosophie der Geschichte nach der Geschichtsphilosophie*),⁶ distinguishing the philosophy of history as a historical formation and the discursive way we think in general about history and its own conditions of possibility.

The Diltheyan project of a “critique of historical reason”

It has been in reaction to this speculative and metaphysical problematic that many philosophers, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, positioned themselves by claiming a specific relationship with history which, if not reduced to the empirical or factual investigation undertaken by historians, refuses the transcendent position which is traditionally attributed to the philosophy of history. Wilhelm Dilthey was, in this respect, one of the first to bring, in the lineage of Hegel,

philosophy to reflect on its own development. He was also one of the first to introduce a real “self reflection” (*Selbstbesinnung*) within philosophy’s own relationship to history. It is the aim of what he calls, in his *Introduction to the Sciences of the Spirit* (1883), a “Critique of Historical Reason”, which he defined as a critique of the way that mankind can know himself, society and history.⁷ Based on history and on historical analysis, such a project sought to radicalise the Kantian paradigm, by reflecting on the critical thought itself by bringing it back to a dynamic historical process which allows for the deepening of the consciousness of the limits of our knowledge such as it appears from a historical standpoint. For the philosopher who becomes a historian, this notion involves using all the means available from existing historical knowledge and work, going back to the real conditions of the consciousness and its presuppositions such as we can find them in a dynamic historical process. The critique should not only help the philosopher to acquire the pure forms of knowledge, as it is the case with Kant, but should also enable the bringing to light of all the historical presuppositions which underlie any process of knowledge.

Thinking the transcendental within its empirical genesis, with the idea of seizing a “historical *a priori*”, deepens and indeed goes beyond the Kantian perspective. This also means, in a sense, to radicalise the critique towards an absolute archaeology or genealogy of knowledge. The perspective is at once diachronic and fundamental. The unitary principle that Hegel presupposed *a priori* can thus be put to the test of the facts. In an attempt to look for the ultimate foundation to rebuild the human sciences, Dilthey reached for the historicity of the lived experience that underlies pure reason, what he called the “historical experience of life” (*historische Lebenserfahrung*). This experience constitutes the first ground from which the thought precisely arises and which it cannot exceed.⁸ Kantian reflexivity – which gave reason a sense of its own limits – is thus incited to reflect on itself fully, but this time in the direction of what historically determines it in an approach that is no less *transcendental* than *hermeneutical*. This approach consists of starting with the life expressions, no matter how discursive or theoretical they are, in order to come back to the lived experience which underlies them. As far as it can help us with our self reflection and the possibility of grasping this first lived experience, the psychology lying at the core of Dilthey’s approach plays a prominent role in understanding the genesis of symbolic and cultural processes as well as comparing various world visions. By thinking about its own situation, by drawing the structures which are carried out in it, and by putting into perspective what comes to it in an immediate way, the consciousness manages to reach a higher and eminently more critical reflexivity than the speculative one proposed by the Hegelian philosophy of history. Although referring to history, the reflexivity implemented by Dilthey serves an eminently *fundamental* perspective: it is now through history that Dilthey wants to seize the lived ground thought by psychology, and in a sense “to overcome history with history” in the way it would later be proposed by scholars such as Friedrich Meinecke, Ernst Troeltsch or Martin Heidegger.

“To overcome history with history”: a historicism of the second degree

Troeltsch’s conceptual framework is interesting in many aspects. It marks a brand new stage in the attempt made by philosophy, in the early nineteenth century, to look further into its own critical reflexivity. Praising the value of the “immanent critique” implemented by historians,

which allowed him to comprehend any period from its own temporality and history, Troeltsch suggested pushing this reflexivity to its limits in the direction of what he called a reflexive and “renewed” historicism.⁹

If we no longer understand the temporal frame or historical object from some transcendent principle, this comprehension is intrinsically bound to the context in which the historian lives. As Troeltsch underlines, the action of choosing and elaborating criteria from which an epoch is understood draws its essence from a certain “context of existence”, an extrinsic frame of reference. So, shedding light on the assumptions of the historian’s own gesture does not only imply an awareness of the historicity of his own approach or to reinsert this object into a specific context: bringing to light the historicity of the historic approach is indeed one thing, but to extend and deepen the reflexive process which makes this historicisation possible is another. Indeed, the latter action provides the tools to integrate a “second-degree reflexivity”, within which the approach aims not only to relativise its object, in the light of a given situation, but to reflect on the situation itself. As Troeltsch specifies, it is necessary that every period that undertakes reflective actions towards history interprets the unity of sense of the whole from its own context, as this context itself represents an important part of the whole. In other words, it needs to consider what determines it and, at the same time, what exceeds it, two aspects on which the psychological approach unfortunately does not have a grip.

Thus, in order to avoid the arbitrariness of an unclarified position, Troeltsch intends to develop a more reflective position than the one reached by Dilthey. Where Dilthey omits the historical presuppositions that underlie his own psychological approach and typology of worldviews, Troeltsch seeks to assume fully the finitude and the partiality of his own conceptual framework. The situation in which the historian’s work is linked must indeed be enlightened, not only at the level of a generation or an epoch, as proposed by Dilthey, but in the light of a wider historical context seen at the scale of the “united sense of the totality” of humanity – basically, at the level at which the philosopher should work. As Troeltsch recognises, what is at stake here is a philosophy of history in the full sense of the term, one which seeks to extend historical science by radicalising its own reflexive gesture. The goal is to clarify the main criteria – mostly implicit and unquestioned – on which the historical research bases itself, and to enlighten the present’s imperatives in light of past history. In this form, the philosophy of history constitutes, according to Troeltsch, a necessary counterpart to the historian’s gesture. By revealing a continuity and a unity from which a comparison may be implemented between the present situation and the past, or moreover, between a distant and foreign culture, the philosophy of history provides a greater reflexivity to the discipline.

This new philosophy of history proposed here by Troeltsch has thus nothing to do with a purely contemplative and panoramic philosophy. It aspires to be committed, firmly “activist”, and half-way between the empirical history from which it originates and the political project of “cultural synthesis” which comprises its destination. Its last criterion is thus neither transcendent nor external to its own context. It is based on “the inner experience and the personal commitment” and promotes a philosophical reflection carried by a critical self-reflexivity, which is supposed to protect it from any arbitrariness.

This project involving a new “synthesis”, a “construction” (*Aufbau*), should thus make it possible, while “overcoming history with history”, to find within history a sure and stable principle as well as the tools that would allow us to think more deeply about our culture. It should provide the key to generate new impulses drawn from the values and “the most precious trends of the past”.¹⁰ Here, Troeltsch takes on the reflexive requirement, which allows the historian to avoid dogmatism and to relativise his own position. But according to him, the philosopher should go beyond this point. The philosophy of history should not contend itself with clarifying the presuppositions which underlie historical work. Indeed, if its task is initially to consider the values and the criteria on which the historian bases his own work, the philosophy of history is thus not purely descriptive. It participates in reaching the conclusion of an eminently creative mission, which is “to acquire a criterion, an ideal, and an idea of the new cultural unity which should be created *for every present situation*, and understood, at the same time, as a whole and as the result of processes occurring over several millennia”.¹¹ Thus, his project of synthesis focuses less on the transmission of a content that needs to be reactivated than on the “continuous structuring” (of criteria, ideals, ideas) from which our worldview is edified and developed. Working with the values that are already in place within the different totalities of western history, it aims to structure the various strata of our culture in order to offer a new impulsion to the present. In being conducted according to the way each age understands itself, the appeal to history serves a reflexivity which is not only critical, but eminently constructive. However, it is only if we seek a mutual conditioning and complementary relation with our past – which lets us integrate the efficiency of our own reflexivity into the creative power of knowledge – that we can be, as Troeltsch explains, free again to operate a selection of what appears to us to be especially significant in the effective course of history. Or, in other words, we shall be able to rewrite history freely from our own present and contribute to the self-conscious appropriation of our era.

Critique as a “systematic deconstruction of tradition”

Heidegger, for his part, considers Troeltsch’s reflexivity concept as insufficient. Through his deconstructivist paradigm, he suggests bringing the critique to a further level, not only by implementing a reflection on the self, the knowledge of the situation and of the conditions imposed by history, as Troeltsch had already proposed, but also by developing a “systematic deconstruction of the tradition”. Thought as destruction, the critique is here more radical. It does not seek, as with Troeltsch, to elucidate what is conditioning us – which is more incumbent on historiography or sociology – but to expose the historical way through which we appropriate that history. The critique which results from the concrete implementation of this destruction does not target the fact that we generally locate it in a tradition but, rather, the way in which we are doing it. This movement, as Heidegger would later explain, consists in a positive return to the past in the sense of a productive reappropriation: a movement that allows philosophy to become more aware of its own limits, the theoretical and conceptual for example, and the limits of what conditions its relation to history. Heidegger’s deconstructivist paradigm should allow, through the deconstruction of different layers of meanings, to fluidise sense, to unblock access to it and to liberate it in order to make possible a dynamic and actual reappropriation of tradition. Deconstruction has hence the task to elucidate the concrete pregiven categories, to condemn the dominant and accepted meaning as well as to

reveal the hidden motifs, implicit tendencies and ways of interpretation, in favour of a deconstruction that would help penetrate the original sources that served as motifs for the elucidation. It is in that sense, he adds, that philosophy can become “‘historical’ knowledge in a radical sense”.¹²

The destructive paradigm put forward by Heidegger is therefore eminently critical. The recourse to history does not only occur within the optic of a return to the past, but offers also the possibility to hold a critical debate towards traditions that would avoid the transplanting of a fatal prejudice to the understanding of the present. As Heidegger writes, destruction does not refer to a denial of the past: its critique concerns the present and the dominant way of treating history. Against this “dominant vision” which consists, according to Heidegger, in objectivising what is at first a lived experience (*Erlebnis*), the philosophical destruction allows us to question the authenticity of our relation with history and aims therefore to put aside the mediations which are blocking our access to it.

However, it does not suffice to renounce or to ignore tradition. First, because the original experience was not given to us as a whole and must be reappropriated in light of our present, and then, because our way of thinking, conceptualising and defining is rooted in a complex heritage, inherited from the Greeks, which has circulated through a chain of heterogeneous interpretations. This critical movement should thus occur in two steps. The first one concerns our own situation and the different ways to broaden its horizon of interpretation. Here Heidegger refers to “a hermeneutical critique of the situation”, which provides the advantage of rendering clear the prepossessions and preconceptions of the research, namely its theoretical and conceptual assumptions. Every philosophical elucidation, no matter how radical it may be, starts from the beginning and remains penetrated by inherited concepts and, consequently, by unquestioned horizons and perspectives.¹³ All these concepts, Heidegger says, lost their original expressive function, the ground of the experiences in which they rooted, and gradually gained their autonomy from the original context. Every transfer entails thus attrition. It is only by retracing its filiations that we can access the primordial sense which emerged in that history. Therefore, the critique, initially deployed to clarify the concepts and the horizon within which it operates, ultimately ends in the “historical destruction of the history of philosophy”.¹⁴

Thus, it is only once our theoretical and conceptual assumptions are made intelligible that an authentic reappropriation of the past can take place. It is what makes possible the second step of the critique, known as “repetition” (*Wiederholung*). In fact, there is no question here of “repeating” or reiterating what Plato and Aristotle had thought, nor to pretend to access the ultimate psychical structure which underlies real life, as Dilthey suggested. Destruction is not just an instrument aiming to provide an access to preestablished meanings. Going back to the tradition concerning the “original meaning” does not necessary mean to locate a “start”. But through an authentic comprehension, it should seek to liberate the possibility of an authentically lived sense and to reappropriate a tradition reflexively. Repetition is thus neither a restitution of the “past”, nor a posterior connection of the present with what is “done” and “accomplished”. It is a lively and creative reappropriation of tradition which, in that sense, constitutes the only way to reach an authentic historicity for Heidegger, as he argued in *Being and Time*.¹⁵

The destruction under critique

Even though it is erected on the noble principle of clarifying the presuppositions that underlie our relation with history and tradition, the “destructivist paradigm” proposed by Heidegger is not without its critique. To what extent does his approach lead us to the same false routes identified in the approaches of other philosophies of history? And no matter how radical the critique associated with it is, does it not rely on assumptions which themselves are never exposed to the critique? To what degree can the critical movement elucidate its own assumptions? What is the legitimate limit of what we could call a “metahistorical” use of history?

Here, the recourse to history is not only critical but also subjected to an authentic ambition to refound philosophy. But to succeed, it has to return to the authentic relationship it once had with its own object allegedly falsified or lost during its history. In Heidegger’s thought, what justifies destruction is the fact that tradition, instead of making accessible what is transmitted, conceals it and, more often, blocks access to the original “sources” from where the categories and the traditional concepts were drawn in an authentic way. Against the oblivion to which he says history contributes directly, Heidegger favours the lived historicity, the only notion which can make possible a veritable repetition or an authentic reappropriation of tradition. A decade later, Heidegger would contrast the authentic history with what he calls literally “nonhistory” (*Ungeschichte*),¹⁶ that he assimilates into the factual and local history judged nonauthentic enough in comparison to what takes place at a deeper level, from the vaster point of view of “the history of Being”.

The Frankfurt school has accurately stressed this metahistorical use of history by demonstrating how it substituted real history, made with “sweat and tears”, through a quasi-mythological reconstruction of an authentic historicity. Certainly, evenemential history is no longer thought of as being related to a transcendence that is embodied within it, and thus has gained in effectiveness. In the form of a reversed Hegelianism, history is always understood from the successive imprints left by the being, the various modalities of the opening up of the world, appearing within which Heidegger sees the founding event (*Ereignis*) of any history, but which never shows itself as such. It seems in this case that philosophy allows itself many extrapolations from which the historian, even the one working with *longue durée* phenomena, denies, referring to tangible sources. So then, what are the means to avoid and safeguard against such an use of history, especially when this history is in competition not only with the history constructed by historiography but with the lived history, considered as superficial, as opposed to a deeper, more authentic or secret one?

First of all – even if this remark may seem obvious to historians – there is a need to abandon every ontological postulate. Itself historical, philosophical reflexivity cannot pretend to access what is history as a whole or as a totality (i.e., as a history of progress, decline, etc.). It can only focus on our relation with history, the way that we live it, write it and think it. In other words, it focuses on the various modalities of historical reflexivity itself, and on its discursive forms and concepts. The critical movement appears legitimate in so far as it allows for a radicalisation of the work of the historian concerning the conditions and the possibilities of historical discourse, and for a shedding of light on the historical assumptions of the reflexivity that he implicitly uses.

Furthermore, it seems necessary to critique the criterion of the historical critique itself in order to avoid any hypostasis and panoptical positioning. By interrogating his own postulates, the philosopher meets the historian, who equally deploys his reflection based on the results produced by empirical history. Historical reflexivity should thus accept its own exposition to critique.

Finally, if philosophy renounces the thinking of history in terms of progress or decline and rejects the univocal and teleological reading of history, then philosophers should recognise some kind of polytheism and the simultaneity and coexistence of a plurality of historical horizons or regimes of historicity. In that case, the philosophical gesture confines itself, with more humility, to the implementation of a critical reflexivity, which shall return not only to its antecedent history, but also its own history, the historical assumptions of its own discourse, and the postulates which condition its own critical gesture. Once those prerequisites are fulfilled – deontologisation, deabsolutisation, plurivocity – the philosophy of history can therefore possibly assume a historical reflexivity which might be interesting for historians. Within projects like conceptual history (Joachim Ritter), philosophy of historicities (Reinhart Koselleck) or constructive critical reflexivity (Jean-Marc Ferry), the major problems that need to be put forward are numerous: first, to reveal the assumptions which dominate each use of the concepts by retracing their history; then, to shed light on the conditions of possibility of historical discourse; to articulate different regimes of historicity highlighted by historians; and finally, to think them inside an horizon of common meaning. In such a philosophical gesture, more reconstructive than destructive, what is at stake is to overcome the discontinuity of cultural horizons and the demarcation of national and antagonistic histories in order to envisage them in the light of a common history. In this regard, critical reflexivity works more within the horizon of a common memory and relies more on a history of conciliation than on a history of redemption or of revenge. And it is only within the optic of a common truth, with its open-ended horizons, that histories and historical reconstructions can be antagonistic. History and philosophy can both participate, I assume, in the writing of the past, and continue to have a critical function, beyond commitment and reflexivity.

NOTES

- 1 G.W.F. Hegel, *Geschichte der Philosophie*, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1832, xv.
- 2 Leopold von Ranke, *Geschichten der romanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 33, Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1874, vi.
- 3 Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, Leipzig: Teubner, 1958, 80.
- 4 Cf. Herbert Schnädelbach, "Über historistische Aufklärung", *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 4:1 (1979): 17–36.
- 5 Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1960, 500.
- 6 Cf. Odo Marquard, *Schwierigkeiten mit der Geschichtsphilosophie*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1973.
- 7 Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, Leipzig: Teubner, 1959, 116.
- 8 Ibid., 191.
- 9 Ernst Troeltsch, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, Aalen: Scientia, 1961 (1922).
- 10 Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, 77.
- 11 Ibid., 112.
- 12 Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles (Anzeige der hermeneutischen Situation)*, Mauvezin: Trans-Europ-Repress, 1992, 31.
- 13 Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 24, Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1997, 31.
- 14 Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993, 392.
- 15 Ibid., 384–85.
- 16 Martin Heidegger, *Logik als die Frage nach dem Wesen der Sprache*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 38, Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1998, 99.