

Point IV. We are historic

It is productive to know as much History as possible. But we cannot turn the clock back and change History. We can also see that if History had been different, for better or worse, the future would have also been different. Likewise, through the course of the years there would have been other encounters, other links; other people would have been born, not us. None of those who have the gift of life today, would exist. This does not imply in any way that the evils caused by our forefathers were not really evil. We censure and reject them, and we do not want to repeat them. The surprise of existing will help those living today strive happily to right the wrongs caused by previous generations.

We Could Not Have Existed

The great frontier of History lies between what has occurred and what is yet to happen. First, what already happened is unchangeable and can not happen in another way. We are aware that we can't turn History back. Second, whatever has yet to occur is undetermined and could happen in more than one way.

We stem from the sometimes surprising fact: Our existence is a result of the exact events, good and bad, that took place up to our conception. If something had occurred differently, we would not exist; it would have been enough for our parents to have never met. This is the vital bond that ties us to history and enables us to view history as it occurred; without ignoring or hiding any episode.

Each and every one of us could have never existed; in philosophy this is known as contingency. In other words, we are not necessary beings or gods.

Contingent: That which could or could not exist.
It is opposed to the necessary.

It is truly surprising to find ourselves alive when we are aware that we did not exist before we were born and so we couldn't have done anything to provoke our existence. Feeling this awe of

our existence should drive us to appreciate it and value it as a treasure. A treasure defined as “the original lottery” by biologist Andre Guirdan¹, in the following words:

“To be born or not to born, that is the question! This statement is not as trivial as it seems. Whether I am happy or not, whether I am convinced that I will end up as dust that will be swept from the circle of the living, or that heaven awaits me, the truth is in this cliché: ‘Hic et nunc’, I exist. Provisionally, I’ll agree, but I exist.

So, why am I here and now precisely? Why me? What provoked my existence? In summary, what probabilities did I have of having been born? Very few; less than guessing the winning numbers of a lottery, which is not chickenfeed.

(...) It would have taken just one grandparent to not want to (make love) at the precise moment that it took place, and a different forefather would have been born and lived his life on his terms and robbed me of the hope of being born to the world.

To complete this picture we must ponder on the probability of the appearance of the first humans, the first apes from which man is believed to have evolved, the first fish...the universe and the Big Bang. Innumerable events!

In summary, I am completely improbable, yet I exist.”

We could say that this is a lottery where there are only winners – those who exist- for those that could have existed had History happened differently do not exist now or ever existed in the past.

Numerous Unexpected Consequences

From the latter many consequences are deducted. For example: If in a given country History had taken a different route with a greater or lower level of peace and prosperity, the lives of its citizens and their families would have been different. Their ties would have been different and presently other inhabitants would populate that land. Likewise many situations and circumstances would have been played out differently.

¹ A. Guirdan, *Mi cuerpo, la mayor maravilla del mundo*. Barcelona, 2000. p. 13-21

Alfredo Rubio² expresses it in this concrete example:

“In the beginning of the XIX century, Napoleon invaded Spain. It was a tragedy of copious deaths. Napoleon’s troops stripped the country of innumerable treasures wherever they trekked. They left Spain divided. During that century civil wars destroyed the country. And even today its consequences are being felt.

All this is true. While it was a time filled with faults, cruelty and the huge moral errors of the perpetrators of these events, for us it was an existential benefit. The way history unfolded then, made way for all present Spaniards and French to be born.

If history had turned out differently, maybe even better, less bloody and with much less injustices there would be other Spaniards and Frenchmen, but not any of the ones that exist now.”

It is quite clear that had History been different, the present would be different and we would not exist. The past is irrevocable. In spite of the negative burdens that History may hold (such as injustice, lack of solidarity, slaughter, domination, and genocide), we are the direct fruit of a concrete historical situation. It is an irrefutable fact that we owe our existence to it. However although we are a direct effect of history, this does not make us responsible for such situations.

Unfortunately, it is very difficult for many to accept the fact that we would not exist had History unfolded differently. They insist on believing than they would exist today regardless of things being different in the past, even if their parents’ paths hadn’t crossed. The evidence becomes blurred by” the arrogance of being”.

Given that one exists, it’s inconceivable to consider not having existed. They don’t understand and much less accept the contingency of being. The contingency of being is misunderstood

²A. Rubio, “ *La actitud Realista Existencial. Contribución a Europa*”. En M.T. Aubach, *Europa familia de naciones fundamento de paz*. Barcelona, 1987. p. 94-95.

and not accepted. These folks believe we would exist regardless of the circumstances of our conception. It is this attitude that hinders our capacity to improve society and assumes that all efforts are futile.

No one believes that time can turn back History and change our paths. However, some claim that they would have preferred for History to have been different without stopping to think about the fact that they would not exist as a result of that change. And when presented with this argument, they go as far as to claim heroically that they would prefer to have never existed if that would have made History better. But they forget that to achieve such a heroic act one would have had to exist in the first place and History would have had to unfold as it did. Such heroism is very easy because it is impossible.

Sensing the joy of existing along with the startling possibility that we might have never existed, provokes a feeling of happiness to be alive³.

Those events, good or bad, have been a global good for us. From a philosophical perspective they have provided us with our real and concrete existence. Besides, those of us here today couldn't have done anything to avoid the events of the past from occurring because we simply did not exist then. We are not guilty of those events of the past; therefore we shouldn't harbor any resentment.

This startling surprise and happiness is extremely demanding, if we are happy about existing, because, even if we must endure the consequences of history we should not reject or complain about all that happened in the past which led to our very conception. On the contrary, that happiness and surprise should inspire us to work hard at mending our present. Only our work will measure our happiness and our discontent.

Neither Tyrants nor Slaves of History

This chapter titled "We Are Historic", explains that we are beings whose births have been dependant on History. " Had History been different..., others would have been born, not us." Which is to say, each and every one of us is the way we are or simply we wouldn't be who we

³ The "joy of existing" is merely a philosophical concept which refers to the permanent reality of things. It does not engage in ethical evaluations or moral judgments.

are. We exist with our ego, our self; with our aptitudes and faults, our height, hair color, sex, physique, psychological traits, genetic code, etc.; born in a country during a given epoch or we wouldn't exist at all. Given other characteristics and circumstances we would be someone else, not who we are.

If we aren't History's critics, then neither are we its slaves. The first three points of the Letter of Peace point out that every person exists free of personal blame for the historical events prior to its birth. Therefore this person is born new and free; not a mere consequence of its ancestors or of the past. Every person is original, unique and unrepeatable.

Surprisingly, the philosophical acceptance of History is what liberates us from the weight of ill events of the past that could fall upon us. This acceptance is what allows us to dedicate our energies to improving our present and living it gleefully.

Know History

Many believe that for them History begins at birth. They are uninterested in anything regarding before that time. They delight in the thought that they have appeared just like that, analogous to an apparition of a god from nowhere. These folks will be the ones to toss and turn once they perceive that they too will experience death. To them death is some sort of absolute and eternal insult. They are the ones most likely to befall to the tempting belief in the extreme rationalization: What I don't think about does not exist. They engage in a learned despotism. These persons are egocentrics who seek for all to revolve around them according to their will, interests, and caprices. It is very difficult for an arrogant person to come to terms with the notion that they could have not been born.

We can not disregard or forget our History. It is of our utmost interest to know all that has taken place. At the beginning of this paragraph the Letter of Peace states that: For the sake of peace it is fruitful for us to know as much as possible about History. We must be acquainted with History so that we may know where we come from as well as where our present structures stem from, without letting that oppress us. From our birth we are new and free beings.

And yet, it is quite different to joyfully acknowledge history including its good and bad than to approach it negatively and reject it. History is life's teacher; one that will help us avoid repeating the disastrous events that occurred in the past and we so criticize. So the saying goes: "He

who ignores history is condemned to repeat it.” We need to know how to extract the positive and enrich this legacy with our united actions of today.

When a person philosophically and joyfully accepts the history prior to his birth, he yearns to be exposed to and taught his family and national history in a more objective manner. Be what it may, this history with its pros and cons, made existence possible. Hiding or distorting family or national history presents a serious obstacle in the building of peace, it converts it into a perilous weapon that can be used against other nations where motives and rancor propel us to solve conflicts violently.

Ethical Acceptance of History

Once History has been joyfully accepted from a philosophical point of view we turn our attention to looking at it from an ethical point of view. Accepting history on an ethical level is quite a different matter as it could lead to us deeming negative events as morally correct. Hence it has the potential to make us accomplices of such events even if it takes place after the fact.

Ontic:

Is a philosophical adjective derived from Philosopher Martin Heidegger. It refers to the permanent reality of things. It does not engage in ethical evaluations or moral judgments.

Historian Carlos Martínez Shaw, in his commentary⁴ to the Letter of Peace explains it like this:

“We can and must judge past events. To know the past and to value the events that took place within it, serve as a fundamental instrument; one that saves us from obstacles in the present. It is a way of contributing to the construction of a peaceful future.

⁴C. Martínez Shaw, “*Conocer el pasado. Construir el futuro*”. En J. Rigol y Otros, *Convivencia en el siglo XXI: la Carta de la Paz*. Barcelona, 1995. p. 107-108

(...) Recent History wishes to recapture Cicero's sense of "Magistra Vitae", or life as teacher, given that societies who choose to ignore the mistakes of the past are condemned to repeat them. (...) Furthermore, knowledge of the past not only allows for present knowledge, it also makes it possible by preventing lies and manipulation.

(...) We must recognize the past and judge it too. We can not accept ethical relativism. We believe there are conditions for human conduct but we also believe in the liberty of man. We can not toss a blanket of moral indifference over the past just as we cannot do this in the present..

If we are happy to be alive, while we were unable to partake in the events of the past, because we didn't exist then, it is fair to say that we are happy such events took place the way they did since they made our being here today possible. (Which is not to say we justify them, ethically speaking).

The past has taken place, and as rational beings we know that we are not personally responsible for the events of that time. On the other hand, we are accountable for the present and the future. That is why we must be responsible for our actions which must always be ethical. The last paragraph of Point IV concludes with the following: "the ills unleashed by our ancestors... we censure, we repudiate, and we do not wish to repeat them."

Improve the Present

Point IV ends with this paragraph: "The surprise of existing, facilitates our joyful efforts to amend the consequences of ill events of a past prior to us."

The ill events of past History reverberate in the present with consequences that are both joyful and sad. Among the joyful ones are our existence and all that helps us live with dignity. The painful consequences are diverse. They include wars, hostility, ecological devastation, lack of culture, poverty, etc.

From a sociological point of view it is much more comfortable and easy to divert people toward criticism and rumors of ill events of the past, than to guide them to the present ills to analyze,

correct and ultimately foresee and prevent these events from occurring again. Criticizing the past keeps us from seeing our contemporary monstrosities. Prehistoric times and up until the end of Modern history are studied in great detail in schools. However, these schools rarely address the last century which holds the key to understand the present. The mass media tends to experience the present as something indigenous, without ties to History. That is why they are unable to perceive the relationship between the causes of the damages of the past and of the damages of today, regardless of how immersed they are in the present. Due to the fact that these causes were not analyzed nothing is done to prevent further harm. There seems to be a lack of perspective; damages are not evaluated or judged therefore they are not prevented. We men are not mere logs pushed along by the rivers current. Many rulers are interested in keeping their followers in that blind present.

It would be incoherent to accept the positive outcomes of the past and to reject the ones that complicate our lives, since all resulted from the same historical events, good or bad. What would be coherent is for all to work fervently to improve the painful consequences of the past we presently endure.