

“Some kind of empathy”: Introduction to What makes history personal?

“Alguma forma de empatia”: Introdução O que faz da história algo pessoal?

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The articles made available to the reader in this theme section of *História da Historiografia* constitute the second moment of our attempt to answer a question presented as a thematic symposium proposed and organized by Kalle Pihlainen at the IV Congreso Internacional de Filosofía de la Historia in Buenos Aires in November 2017: “What makes history personal?” While ensuing discussions have continued on several fronts, the authors who now publish here — with the exception of the organizers of this section — are not the same who presented in Buenos Aires two years ago. In the intervening time, and through our evolving discussion, we have seen that the question is amenable to a wide range of responses and attracts attention on diverse fronts.

Given the range and variety of potential, relevant opinions and proposals, we have not attempted to definitively systematize or answer the question here — as if that were conceivable in any such endeavor — but to leave it, instead, to be rehearsed, tested, and experimented on by each contributor in the ways they see best. With this, we intend our theme section to shed

light on possible approaches to the question of the personal from theoretical viewpoints and concrete situations with distinct provenances.

One cannot seek an answer to the question of the personal nature of history without elaborating on the role emotions play on an elementary factor of intellectual life, namely, the research. Thus, by addressing the specific case of A.T., a young Finnish PhD candidate at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Marja Jalava's article paves the way for broader identification too: reports of problems in carrying out research are common, yet details of any difficulties tend to be absent from the final work and hence easily remain unseen. However, with the lack of academic and institutional space to elaborate on the emotions involved, more sensitive researchers may reveal their distress in private and informal settings. Jalava does not miss the opportunity to point out how extremely manly that attitude is: to hide the suffering, to withstand the pain. After all, "boys don't cry."

Jalava studies the case of young A.T. because it shows not only how emotions occupy the realm of academic work but also how they contribute to it and, importantly, how the process of historical research in its elaboration is not merely a case of the historian expressing his or her feelings but, rather, their development in relation to others (in A.T.'s case, this is evident from his correspondence with an established Finnish historian of the time, Gunnar Suolahti). In this sense, there is no "self" prior to the work, but a "self" constructed (and also destroyed) throughout the process, always in a context — real or fictitious — filled by the expectations of others as well as by broader social and political meanings and significance.

To ignore the complexity of this setting would reiterate a radically dichotomic conception of knowledge, whereas recourse to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology offers Jalava a rich alternative to think on the young A.T, in whose trajectory one senses the presence of something each of us has witnessed in academia, whether personally, with colleagues or with young

students: the urgent need to give meaning to what one does (in A.T.'s case, this materializes in the national sentiment, strongly related to a feeling of manly brotherhood, a "band of brothers"), but to also be able to channel this in a specialized, "controllable" and scientifically rigorous way. Transference is not always easy and, when it does not occur, or when one does not know how to handle its failure, the psychological burden is strong (and we would do well to question whether we currently possess more sophisticated tools than those available to young A.T.). The complexity of the case is undeniable: empathy exists between two men, as exists the initial empathy between a young 22-year-old and his research subject, in which, instead, he sees the reflection of the empathy for his national community. In such a vertiginous game of mirrors, A.T.'s self-image shatters. This was definitely not the first time and, sadly, it will not be the last.

Kalle Pihlainen's article also aims to escape dichotomies, although, here, the key dichotomy is one that appears to have deep roots in debates within theory of history, namely that between experience and linguistic construction, presence and meaning, theory of history and its surroundings—all contrapositions that point to the need to overcome the mind-body opposition. For Pihlainen, this attempt involves three questions: "How does language 'embody' reality?", "How do referential texts encode reality?", and, "How do we read referential texts with respect to reality?" Naturally, the reader will be able to follow how these unfold while reading the argument, but we can already highlight its most important nodes: body, codification, and identification. It is positively surprising to see how—both in Jalava's and Pihlainen's articles—the same considerations appear and disappear, as if variations on a theme in which the body as a place (much more than as an object) of production of knowledge is central.

By proposing these three questions and seeking a way beyond easy polarizations, Pihlainen also invites the reader to think about several other concerns, two of which we wish

to highlight here. Firstly, the challenge to avoid intellectual voluntarism. Accordingly, the resources culturally present and used in the production of meaningful historical knowledge should not be understood as simple pliant instruments, but, instead, as a legacy one possesses, and one that can be better or less well known. Secondly, relatedly, the phenomenological basis underlying this thought process needs emphasis: after all, *how* should we ask “What makes history personal?” if we accept Merleau-Ponty’s assumption that we are “condemned to meaning”? This is a subtle question: to be condemned *to* meaning does not mean to be condemned *by* meaning. This phenomenological sensibility should also be seen as central to the reading process, as existing within the complex shuttling between reader and (referential) text, in which the identification between oneself and another is complex, gifted with meaning, and to be described in terms of “some kind of empathy” — that is, it cannot be a mere absorption of information that questions the identity of readers and their reading methods, and nor can it constitute complete immersion. In this sense, the complex dynamics of what in Jalava’s text focus on the elaboration of a relational self are discussed by Pihlainen in ways that blur the often clearly drawn lines between body and mind (verbally articulated language), experience and language, and the reader’s present and the past represented in a historiographical piece.

Pedro Caldas’ reflection similarly demonstrates a concern for thinking the self beyond personalism, voluntarism and a self-centered subject-perspective. Using the subject pronoun “I” in most of his text, that is, assuming his own voice, which slowly looks for conceptual references — and articulates, therefore, both experience and meaning — Caldas begins with current experiences relating to a phenomenon yet to be classified in Brazil (and, unfortunately, not only in Brazil): the rise of far-right politics. It is as if his piece is traversed by the problem “How to personalize history without it being self-centered?” Pihlainen’s expression could be usefully repeated in this context: “some kind of empathy”; and here we talk

about a delicate and difficult empathy between professionalism and an agitated, yet not always conventional everyday life, between professors and students, between the past and the present, told and endured by an author as relevant as Primo Levi, irreplaceable interlocutor, yet formulator of an experience contiguous to suffering that requires caution as to avoid immediate “immersion” (to use a term from Pihlainen’s piece again). Anguish can, therefore, be a putative *pathos* from which we see ourselves forced to lend meaning to history, so much so that another possible answer — one yet to be developed and one which remains inconclusive in Caldas’ text — would be to consider the personal nature of history when it is *unheimlich* (uncanny). Here, we are faced with an undoubtedly ironic situation since “-heim” carries within it the intimate, the welcoming, and the personal.

This engaging theme, laterally considered in Caldas’ text, is discussed by Jonas Ahlskog in a more conceptual manner. In his article, Ahlskog, too, aims to surpass key dichotomies: between the practical past and the historical past, between the experienced and the elaborated, between the will to engage in the present while already engaged with the past. His goal is clear: “In opposition, this essay argues that the personal resides *within* and not only beyond historical relations to the past.” The very choice of authors discussed by Ahlskog suggests the need to overcome this particular dichotomy: the combination of W. G. Sebald’s contemporary classic *Austerlitz* with the theoretical work of R. G. Collingwood highlights how important it is to articulate texts of distinct kinds.

With his reading of *Austerlitz*, Ahlskog shows how the investigative method is not just a tool but, also, something without which the personality of those who investigate would remain indistinct and unaffected. Obviously, Ahlskog knows that *Austerlitz* discusses a 20<sup>th</sup>-century traumatic event, yet he recognizes that it questions the radical dichotomy between those who suffer and those who study: “the best way of thinking about this contingency is probably to view it as scale without either of

the extremes — there is neither complete lack nor necessary connections with a personal dimension from the perspective of the individual.” Thus, a theme traced by Pihlainen, namely the reader’s importance in the process of personal construction of meaning, also potentially personal, follows, at Ahlskog’s hands, other contours. For him, the matter becomes one of how reflection on a book such as *Austerlitz* causes readers to see themselves as having a share of responsibility. One could ask: condemned in what way? — to generate “some kind of empathy”?

Clearly, Collingwood is an essential point of reference for thinking about this question. As demonstrated so well by Ahlskog, the attempt to separate self-identity from everything else that one is always already immersed in offers shaky grounds to construct historical knowledge. One would be vehemently attacked for even positing such a dichotomy; and, more importantly, when undertaking to re-enact, it is clear that one not only gains the existential consciousness of seeing oneself obliged to attribute meaning but also needs the ethics of distinguishing oneself from — and, if that is the case, also of identifying with — the past ways of thinking that are being re-enacted. Collingwood’s approach offers, as Ahlskog proposes, another possibility to consider the personal dimension of history in terms of a relational structure.

As noted, various points of entry and perspectives relating to all of these themes appear and reappear with distinct intensities throughout the articles that follow. Although this offering can only hint at the range of possible ways to articulate a response to “What makes history personal?”, some central questions have already been exposed: How to overcome the dichotomy between experience and language, between body and mind, between past and present, between engaging and disengaging, that is, between practice and theory? And, for example, in what measure do documents, such as letters and witness literature, provide routes to elaborate these questions? Or, in this pursuit, how

could turning to phenomenology help? Perhaps beginning with a phenomenology capable of critically implicating the reader, of creating "some kind of empathy", first, hopefully, with the readers of this theme section.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND INFORMATION

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