

Experience in a New Key

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Retrieving Experience: On the Phenomenology of Experience in Hegel and Kierkegaard, Arendt and Gadamer

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Abstract: The purpose of the present contribution is to develop an understanding of experience that accounts for its need to be continuously uncovered and recovered in order to consolidate itself. Through critical dialogue with modern phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions I posit that this consolidation process proves porous and discontinuous as experience contains caesuras and limits, which break open and even fracture what is already known by individual consciousness so as to make room for something new to appear over the horizon. Thinking about how to engage with the phenomena given in experience draws us into a dynamic movement at the limits of singular subjectivity and the world which transcends it to all sides. After following and exploring this movement, it remains a question, which will be discussed in the end, whether all experience can be retrieved.

Keywords: Experience, theory, limit, truth, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Arendt, Gadamer

1 Introduction

In a series of courses on political experience in the twentieth century, held in the 1960s, Hannah Arendt spoke of retrieving experience as the main objective of historical thinking: “No theories”, she wrote, “we want to be confronted with direct experience.”¹ From around the same time, she is quoted for a similar remark in a conversation: “if we lose the ground of experience, then we get into all kinds of theories.”²

Arendt’s purpose with her courses was not to dismiss theory as such, as she was herself a theorist, but in a similar vein as her teacher Martin Heidegger, who investigated into the field of “the pre-theoretical” in the 1920s,³ Arendt searched for a new way of tapping into the underlying ground of theory and conceptual understanding by rescuing experience from oblivion, especially within the political field, and so root thinking in a deeper dimension of reality. In her *Denktagebuch* she sketches out a sensitive form of thinking, rooted in a non-objectifying experience of reality, in search of meaning and understanding.⁴

In the same context, she also called this deeper dimension “truth”,⁵ which brings her into proximity with another German thinker, Hans-Georg Gadamer, who like her developed his experiential thinking around

1 Arendt, *Political Experience in the Twentieth Century*, quoted from Heuer, *Citizen*, 9.

2 Arendt, *The Recovery of the Public World*, 308.

3 Heidegger, *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie*, 59: “The dominance of the theoretical must be broken [...] the theoretical in itself and as such refers back to something pre-theoretical (*ein Vortheoretisches*).”

4 Arendt, *Denktagebuch I*, Dec. 1952, [19], 284: “Thinking is sensitive (reason), namely ‘sensing meaning’” (*Ein vernehmendes (Vernunft), nämlich ‘Sinn vernehmendes’*).

5 Arendt, *Denktagebuch I*, Sept. 1953, [3], 451; Aug. 1954, [25], 489. Arendt coins the expression “the root of truth” (*aus der Quelle der Wahrheit*), which constitutes part of the ground of experiential thinking, and she asserts that it is through the roots that we can sense depth.

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the middle of the 20th century and took the cue from Heidegger's early phenomenological teachings, which broke new ground for the development of a historical form of thinking rooted in the experience of truth. In opposition to scientific methodology and objectivity, Gadamer maintains that "the experience of historical tradition reaches far beyond those aspects of it that can be objectively investigated", and he associates this 'far-reaching' experience with truth.⁶

Yet, as Heidegger had already underscored, the ground of experience or the truth of being is continuously receding in time and so does experience itself as an event, which calls for a phenomenological approach that sets as its goal to uncover, not merely specific personal, historical or political experiences, although they may serve as examples, but the significance of experience and its impact on human existence as such.

In a critical dialogue with Arendt and Gadamer, the present study offers an investigation into the phenomenology of experience, understood as an event in need of being continuously retrieved. Both Arendt and Gadamer saw themselves as working within the tradition of modern phenomenology with special emphasis on understanding phenomena in their historical context⁷, but whereas Gadamer tends to conceptualize experience as generating enough resources to keep consolidating itself as experience, Arendt considers certain shocking experiences, such as totalitarian terror and genocide, to break so profoundly with any past experience that it remains an open question whether all experience can be retrieved.

Elaborating on the understanding of experience as in need of being repeatedly uncovered and recovered, the paper returns to G. W. F. Hegel's interpretation of the inner dialectics of experience as a movement from some singular "thing" perceived, originally given in sense perception or in cognition, to its "estrangement", when it proves not to be a thing, but containing more than objectivity. In so far as consciousness realises what it has gone through, facing its own limit, it is led into a fully-fledged experience.⁸ Experience is thus not something ready at hand, but it is, as we say, something a person suffers or endures, which highlights its temporal character as event and duration.

Yet, as will be shown, the concept of experience entails a limit, which may or may not be crossed. In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, experience is the way, understood as the dynamic medium, through which spirit moves itself, *via negativa*, and becomes enlightened about its own content. In its continuous progress, spirit is, in principle, unstoppable and does not suffer any definite defeat but overcomes each and every barrier on its way towards self-realisation. As the focus in this paper is not on experience as a mere medium which is to be sublated, but more on its fundamental, enduring significance, we shall, instead of positing spirit as a metaphysical principle, center on the limits inherent in human experience, first by highlighting the "empirical proposition" (*Erfarings-Sætning*) of Victor Eremita, the fictitious editor of Søren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, as an example of liminal experience.

Along the same lines as Kierkegaard and against Hegel, Arendt stresses that she is interested in the sort of experience which "rained down" on a person, who endured it in flesh and blood, but who also reacted.⁹ Although critical of Hegel's all-encompassing conceptual philosophy, Gadamer draws more explicitly on his dialectical thinking than Arendt. Still, we shall see that, like Arendt, Gadamer's conception of experience is grounded in human finitude and suffering, which sets a limit to how much can be conceptually known.¹⁰

Arendt and Gadamer appear to agree with Hegel that it takes time for experience to sediment but from a human perspective, they raise doubts about the existence of a spiritual form of self-consciousness, which moves through history behind the backs of the living, recollecting and enlightening them about the real

⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxiii. The original, German text, which will be used in the remainder of this contribution, is listed in the references.

⁷ In one particular context, Arendt called herself "a sort of phenomenologist" (Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, 405), and Margaret Conovan has said about Arendt that "her intention was often the phenomenological one of trying to be true to experience (Conovan, Hannah Arendt, 3)." In several interviews and texts, she insisted on understanding phenomena in their specific historicity, see for instance the textbook *Ich will verstehen* (Piper 2005). Gadamer's whole hermeneutical body of work on effective history, especially his opus magnum *Truth and Method*, relies on modern phenomenology. See also the third volume on Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger and the tenth volume of his collected works (Mohr Siebeck 1990-1999).

⁸ Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 38-39.

⁹ Arendt, *Political Experience in the Twentieth Century*, quoted from Hyvönen, "The Janus Face of Political Experience", 14.

¹⁰ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 362-363.

content of their experiences, so as to reach a fully scientific outlook on reality. It is precisely against science, be it in the form of Hegel's speculative system, Leopold von Ranke's attempt to recover historical events "as they really happened", or the objectivist ideal of modern sciences, that Arendt and Gadamer hold forth the concept of experience as an alternative basis for an original historical thinking in search of truth and meaning. To experience something means to be exposed to a limit, which is to be endured and at some point dealt with, if one wishes to get a glimpse of the sort of depth or transcendence, which full-fledged experience holds in store for us human beings. The thesis is that in experience humans do not transcend their own finitude, but only temporarily the limits and the peril, which they are exposed to.

2 Passing through danger: On the semantics of experience

The word 'experience' can be used about a wide field of perceptions and sensations which seem to be limited to a subjective approach to reality: I can speak of 'my experience' and thereby refer to a perception or a feeling which I have had of a certain situation. Yet, as Hegel argued in his phenomenological exploration of consciousness and spirit, isolated perceptions and sensations are limited forms of engaging with reality and do not amount to full-fledged experiences, as they uphold a narrow and undifferentiated picture of the present and of things, which do not allow for any significant change. Hegel reserved the concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) for the kind of significant turn of consciousness, through which the one enduring an experience changes his or her outlook on things. In three decisive passages from the first three chapters on consciousness in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel highlights the kind of dynamic experience, which an individual consciousness undergoes, as it realises that what it held to be true about itself and reality was only apparently so.¹¹

We do not have to follow Hegel through all the steps of his phenomenological analysis to observe that experience operates as a sort of hinge at the juncture of individual consciousness and the realm that transcends it: Experience exposes the perceiver to an outside, of which she had not been aware until now. This is conveyed in the prefix 'ex-', which denotes an opening towards an outside or a movement out of something. In whatever way the prefix is interpreted, it excludes that experiences can be made solipsistically and statically in idle isolation. Even the one, who experiences something fleetingly, as if it were a phantom, is turned towards something which appears outside herself. Still, as experience traverses the ambiguous realm between individual consciousness and its outside, it is not always clear what is inside or outside consciousness. Hegel is fully aware of this dialectical flip side-effect, and he describes in detail how the individual consciousness cannot in itself secure its own content, but it needs to undergo another "turn" towards an intersubjective sphere, where each consciousness puts its own identity to the test and fights for recognition.¹²

We shall move a bit slower than Hegel and return once more to the semantics of the word 'experience': Etymologically, it comes from latin and is related to testing and trying something out as in 'experiment'. In this context, it has only rarely been pointed out that the root 'per' or 'peri', which follows upon the prefix 'ex-', is of Greek origin and has different meanings associated with penetrating or passing from an advanced position into surroundings lying next to or beyond the current position. The related substantives, *peras* and *peirar*, refer to the limit and the endpoint, at which something is accomplished or finally over, and the verbal forms *peiraō* and *peraō* mean to attempt, test and travel through something, often in a powerful and penetrating way, filled with peril.¹³ In his etymological explanations of the root 'per', Julius Pokorny also relates its meaning to the German roots 'ver' and 'fahr' as in *Erfahrung*, which conveys a temporally concluded movement, sedimented as experience.

In Hegel's use of the term, *Erfahrung* is a dynamic event which happens to a subject, who is confronted with a limit to its own knowledge, which can only be transcended through a heightened consciousness of

¹¹ Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 87, 97, 117.

¹² *Ibid.*, 145-155.

¹³ Pokorny, *Indogermanisches Wörterbuch*, 810-818. See also *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* under *per-*, related to 'peril' as 'fahr' to 'Gefahr' (danger) in German, and Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 10-11.

the inherent contradictions of a given conception of reality. At this point, one can center more on the limits inherent in experience or on the experiential movement beyond the given limits. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard was one of the first to notice that Hegelians tend to move on and go further ahead, while he preferred, under a pseudonym, to make a pause at the limits experienced by a suffering subject. We shall follow Kierkegaard in exploring the limits inherent in experience by interpreting a certain *caesura* in his early work, which will serve as a stepping stone for the subsequent investigation of narrative and dialogue as media for full-fledged experience. It remains a question though, whether all experiences can be retrieved, and also whether it is desirable; a question, which marks the limits of the present contribution and is to be discussed in the final section.

3 Exposed at the limit: Victor Eremita's "experiential thesis" (*Erfarings-Sætning*)

In the introduction to his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, Kierkegaard compares philosophy to a father confessor, who listens to history confessing its "secrets". History itself is unable to shed an explaining light on its own events and needs philosophy to convey its truth, according to Kierkegaard, who is partly inspired by Hegel in his conception of philosophy as "the eternal *prius*" which helps history to reveal itself. Yet, at the same time, the Danish thinker is critical of the forceful way in which the mighty philosopher grabs the female phenomenon instead of treating it with sensitive, erotic care, as Socrates would have done, by focusing more on the limits of human knowledge in the search for truth.¹⁴

This double phenomenological approach in his dissertation creates a dichotomy between sensitivity towards unique phenomena and the conceptual knowledge of spirit. In his following work, *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard removes the dichotomy by dethroning the father confessor as an authority and correspondingly splits up his own authorship into multiple storylines with different protagonists, who speak their mind from different points of view, yet without getting any closer to the truth of their own reality. Their experience is rather, in opposition to Hegelian dialectics, that what they contain in their interior cannot be exteriorized, or as the fictitious editor of the work, Victor Eremita, rephrases his own skepticism after having stumbled upon the papers which he is about to publish: "my thought found its suspicion strengthened – that the outer is certainly not the inner – and my experiential thesis (*Erfarings-Sætning*) was confirmed: it takes a stroke of luck to make such discoveries."¹⁵

Based on his own experience, Eremita had already on the first page of his preface opposed the tension between the outward and the inward to a father-confessor, who "is separated by a grillwork from the person making confession". He only listens without seeing: "As he listens, he gradually forms a picture of the other's outward appearance corresponding to what he hears; thus he finds no contradiction."¹⁶ Kierkegaard employed a similar 'paternal' approach in his dissertation, namely to make history confess its "secrets" and to let philosophy hold up a truthful "copy" or counterpart (*Gjenpart*), in which history could recognize itself.¹⁷ Yet, in *Either/Or* there is no longer any authority or any single author, who attempts to keep a distance to history in order to express its atemporal truth. The fundamental, existential situation between the one, who confesses, and the one, who listens, has changed: "It is different, however, when one sees and hears simultaneously but sees a grillwork between oneself and the speaker."¹⁸ If there still exists an exterior and true counterpart to unique historical phenomena and events, it cannot mirror and transparently convey their inner truth, as a barrier has become visible, which obstructs movements from one side to the other and reflects sounds as well as images back to where they came from.

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 9-10.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 10.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 3.

This complicates the experiential apprehension of, not only the spoken word, but also of the written word. In Danish, the verbal form of confessing, “skrifte”, is related to and almost the same word as writing, “skrift”, and although confessions are traditionally oral statements, Kierkegaard draws attention to the peculiarity of his own confessional writings, which are both to be heard and seen. The gist of the first part of *Either/Or* consists in confronting its protagonists and its readers with the apparently unresolvable tension and contradiction between the audible and the visible. The ghostly father, who represents spirit and the capacity to explain historical experience, does not see the barrier, which separates himself from the confessor, i.e. he remains unaware of the medium, in Kierkegaard’s case writing, understood as a secret form of confessing, which is incommensurable with what it intends to convey. At the very moment, when we are about to envisage the full meaning of either the written fragments of ‘A’ or of the musical pieces which he reproduces, it all ends up falling back into an abyss of darkness.

On the first pages of the first chapter, the so-called *Diapsalmata*, we hear of a poet, a child and the writer A himself each of whom seeks to express what they feel and think, yet it comes out in ways so different from what A had imagined that he despises. He would have liked to speak with “the tongue ligament of my spirit” and to enter through “fortune’s door”, but it remains undoable for him, and so he withdraws to “his castle of sorrow”.¹⁹ What A experiences, together with the characters he describes, is to be irrevocably exposed to a limit, which he cannot move beyond. The grillwork and the door represent the threshold, which breaks the communication between the two opposite sides and throws the one, who is in search of understanding and meaning, back on himself accompanied by the “Echo” of his own suffering.²⁰ The door, which A tries to push open, leads, only apparently, to happiness. In the end, it becomes the door of unhappiness for the writer, who is left, as he says, with nothing to do.

Hegel describes the same effect of being thrown back on oneself in his dialectical unfolding of the inner contradictions of each form of consciousness, especially the divided form of consciousness, which he designates “unhappy”, is invested with almost all the properties depicted by Kierkegaard in the first part of *Either/Or*: It moves, according to Hegel, back and forth between its opposite sides, apparently remaining the same and having truth outside itself. Yet, it suffers from its own contradictions without realising its own nature in its restless movement. For Hegel, a possibility remains for those who accompany consciousness through its progress to become aware and enlighten it of its own drawbacks so as to keep moving coherently forward.²¹

However, in *Either/Or* Kierkegaard suspends the continuous communication between the we and the I and displays how the latter is not receptive to reason or to be enlightened by the progressing spirit. In fact, writer A is much more keen on submerging himself in scattered sensations or reflecting on sudden impressions without finding any fulfilling meaning, only passing joy and no lasting satisfaction. Keeping in mind how often A returns to and focuses on bodily sensations and that it is the lips of the poet, which are formed in such a way that the disharmony of the soul comes out harmoniously²², the grillwork obfuscating the communication between the inward and the outward could, apart from writing, also be interpreted as the body, the not always transparent medium through which human beings express themselves.

Rather than arriving at a middle point, as Hegel claims about the unhappy consciousness, the restless form of consciousness in Kierkegaard’s aesthetic writings is blocked by the medium, be it writing or the body itself, which is supposed to express the truth about its own reality. Yet, if it is writing or the body which blocks consciousness from experiencing reality in its fullness, then this opens up other ways of situating experience within a broader worldly and social context: Kierkegaard’s picture of the door of happiness, which opens outwardly and cannot be forced open from the inside, points to a reality beyond individual consciousness that could help opening the door.

Like Hegel, Kierkegaard identifies one form of such assistance with ethics, which is meant to lend a helping hand to stranded existences like writer A. But characteristically enough for the whole set up of

¹⁹ Ibid., 21-24.

²⁰ Ibid., 24-26, 29-33.

²¹ Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 163-174.

²² Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 18.

Either/Or, the ethicist B, who addresses A in a series of letters in the second part of the book, does not succeed in bridging the distance between the two opposing characters. Furthermore, B seems to presuppose that A has the necessary resources to overcome his own estrangement and ground his own life in a familiar setting with wife and children, but this is precisely the resources which A is not in possession of or may not want to make use of, and so he needs an alternative approach to his own reality in order to be fully present in it and experience it.

4 Narrative and dialogue

What writer A offers his readers is a set of experiences, which could be read as traumatic, if it were not for the theatrical narrative and often humoristic tone with which he conveys his dramatic messages. Although the *Diapsalmata* consists of fragments, which break with a traditional narrative in accordance with the disruptive poetics underlying them, the reader can piece together a sort of life story thanks to the rhetorical means employed by writer A, who possibly clings on to his own writing as an escape route from a completely meaningless existence. A is only occasionally sceptical about his own writing, and he seems to be able to go on forever, narrating experiences and observations, which he has made in ever new ways.

Without narrative, experience is in danger of being forgotten or fragmented in thousand of pieces which nobody, not even the one enduring them, could recognize and make any sense of. As she set out to retrieve vital experiences from the political history of the 20th century, Hannah Arendt stressed the importance of recapitulating them within a narrative. She considered William Faulkner's condensed narration of one week during the last year of World War I in *A Fable* to be one of the clearest and most perceptive of all the literature on the war, also extensively known as "the original catastrophe" (*die Urkatastrophe*) of the twentieth century. She could, of course, be wrong, but what she means by employing Faulkner's fable as a paradigmatic example, which the author himself thought to be "the best work" of his life, is that it discloses and makes humans appear more vividly in their interactions with each other, i.e. as doers and sufferers, than any neutral or objectively minded report could ever convey. Like drama, literary narratives can reenact events as they were experienced from a plurality of perspectives by interacting persons, who appear on the world scene, in their uniqueness as finite beings, exposed to the contingency of their times.²³

Events are experienced from different points of view, and although there are views which are more relevant or salient than others, no human perspective has the privilege of overlooking the whole chain of events. Seen from Arendt's perspective, experience is formed by the temporally and plurally constituted web of human interaction from which it springs. Like action, experience is not anything like an object or an instrument to be controlled, but it is by nature an uncontrollable movement which irrupts unexpectedly, and whose novel consequences cannot be undone. As one of the few interpreters of Arendt's concept of experience observes: "experience in Arendt's case can be understood as a process of enduring and re-experiencing events which we cannot control [...] experience comes to us belatedly and poetically, not directly and transparently."²⁴

When Arendt speaks of being confronted with "direct experience" in her course from 1965, she does not refer to the possibility of re-experiencing, in an unmediated way, exactly the same things which others have experienced. Not even they could have an identical experience twice, as the dynamic phenomenology of experience consists in a continuous renewal and recreation of the original content experienced and remembered. Without memory experience would lose its foundation and could not be retrieved, but, at the same time, narrative assists in remembering and recreating memorable actions and events.

As experience is not consolidated once and for all, a faculty, akin to narrative, is needed in order to recapture both the novelty and the meaning of the original impact of experience. Retrieving "direct experience" through narrative means for Arendt to return to the intricately complex moments and situations,

²³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 179-187. See Heuer, "Verstehen als Sichtbarmachen von Erfahrungen", for the long list of narratives of twentieth century literature, which Arendt drew on in order to get closer to and understand what she called "direct experience".

²⁴ Hyvönen, "The Janus face of political experience", 6.

not yet distorted by conceptually closed theories narrowing down the field of action, and in which people are thunderstruck and overwhelmed by immense events that surpass their immediate understanding.²⁵

Arendt finds the faculty searched for in the sensitive and imaginative form of enlarged thinking, already hinted at in her *Denktagebuch*, which can “go visiting” by envisioning what it would have been like, seen from one’s own embodied perspective, to experience what others have experienced. Thus Arendt tells her listeners that the course might as well have been titled “exercises in imagination”, which is not meant as a call for artistic creation of something completely new. Authors like Faulkner, Brecht or Blixen would be better at that. Put in narratological terms, to go visiting is about finding out how persons, who have endured vital experiences, “would have told their story, if they had to”.²⁶ For the thinker, this corresponds to moving “in a space which is public, open to all sides”, i.e. inhabited by others, who either speak their own mind or are confronted with others speaking their mind.²⁷

Speech is needed to consolidate experience as a worldly reality, “an experience makes its appearance only when it is being said”²⁸, which for Arendt entails the presence of others. Even so, her conception of an enlarged mentality has been criticized for being predicated on a monological model, which does not explain how I am supposed to put myself in other people’s place and in what sense my own judgment can be changed as a consequence of going visiting.²⁹ It is true that Arendt does not tell us exactly how judgment in the form of an enlarged mentality works. Still, following Kant, she interprets it as a thoughtful way of confronting one’s own judgment with other people’s point of view, so that one’s own standpoint is challenged and, using Gadamer’s terminology, questioned.³⁰ An enlarged form of mentality is surely best exercised through oral dialogue with other people and cannot fully substitute it, but is enriched by it.

Seen in the light of these reflections, what writer A seemingly lacks in *Either/Or* is to retrieve experience in a medium which resonates with others in a worldly setting. Writing is a solitary activity, which cannot do full justice to deep experiences of passion and music, or, as Gadamer has argued, artistic works and words are required to be performed and enacted, not merely written and composed, to be fully experienced as worldly realities.³¹ In this sense, writer A appears to be trapped within his own echo chamber of private experiences, which are thrown back on himself without being shared by others, except his readers, who are also separated from him and each other by the grillwork of the text. The father confessor, on the other hand, does not see the grillwork, i.e. language or the body, as the medium of expression and interpretation, and so he remains under the illusion that the truth of historical experience is revealed in a direct, unmediated manner.

In many ways, although without engaging directly with Arendt’s thinking, Gadamer elaborates further on the linguality of experience by analysing the way, in which the one undergoing an experience is confronted with her own finite limits in the form of a question. In this context, Hegel delivers an important contribution to Gadamer’s hermeneutics, whose goal is to pin-down understanding as an experiential event that poses a question to the persons involved. What they thought or expected to know, a new experience interrupts and may even falsify, which becomes, according to Gadamer, an experience in itself, namely of the limits of one’s own knowledge. Yet, in exposing someone to negativity and suffering, experience opens that same person up to a larger horizon extending beyond what she presently knows or was aware of. Enduring and responding to this sort of hermeneutical experience marks for Gadamer the beginning of

²⁵ Already in her preface to the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* from 1950, Arendt wants to avoid “denying the outrageous” and “explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt.”

²⁶ Arendt, *Political Experience in the Twentieth Century*, quoted from Wolfgang Heuer, *Citizen*, 9.

²⁷ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind II*, “Appendix: Judging”, 257. The quotation ends: “in other words, it adopts the position of Kant’s world citizen. To think with the enlarged mentality – that means you train your imagination to go visiting ...”.

²⁸ Arendt and McCarthey, *Between Friends*, 294.

²⁹ Fraser, “Communication, Transformation and Consciousness-Raising”, 171-172.

³⁰ In relation to the enlarged mentality, Arendt has the following quotation by Kant in mind: to afford objections “the opportunity of overturning all my most cherished beliefs” and so by “viewing my judgments impartially from the standpoint of others some third view that will improve upon my previous insight may be obtainable”, quoted from Wellmer, “Hannah Arendt on Judgment”, 40-41.

³¹ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 114-118, 127-139.

dialogue and understanding³², which is a never-ending search for words to make one's own 'journey', the transient and perilous movement at the limits of one's own existence and what transcends it, intelligible.

Gadamer returns several times to an analogy used by Aristotle to illustrate the porous formation of experience from multiple perceptions and observations: A fleeing army comes to a stand little by little, as some of its members slow down and stop. Soon more will follow, and through repeated movements of this kind, an organized pattern will appear, which holds the different members with their diverse tendencies together within a unit. Now, before presenting his own hermeneutical interpretation of the analogy, Gadamer remarks that it is inadequate in two ways: Aristotle presupposes that the many members of the army, i.e. the original perceptive wilderness, had already come to a stop and so formed a unit before the flight. Secondly, Aristotle intends the analogy to represent the formation of conceptual knowledge and science.³³

In relation to the beginning, which in Greek also means ground and rule (*archē*), Gadamer objects that there is no already formed principle or command, which controls and organizes the elements of experience so as to form one conceptual unit. In fact, Gadamer adds, experience as such does not come to a complete stop, although the many elements going into an experience can be forced to take certain directions and shapes, but then we move into the field of conceptual and scientific knowledge, which systematically transforms experience into repeatable experiments and replicable results by abstracting from its historicity. Gadamer reminds us that every scientist still relies on experience as a temporally open-ended and principally uncontrollable event on her way towards knowledge.³⁴

Returning to Aristotle's analogy, we shall focus on two other important aspects, not mentioned by Gadamer: Although the army may not form one coherent unit, its members is still on the run and fleeing, which can only mean, if we want to make any coherence of the picture, that danger is near or not very far away. As already observed, the presence of danger, while being on the move, characterizes every experience, in which one is caught up without having a safe foothold or a clear direction. The danger may not be life-threatening, but to experience means to be exposed to limits, which reflect human finitude, not having already arrived there. The limits can only be endured without crossing them, as a transcending movement of that kind would mean the end of experience and thus also of finitude.

Enduring involves duration, which means that there is time to move and stop in the face of danger, which involves gaining a certain distance and open view to the events suffered and to what one has passed through. Peril functions like a wake-up call or perhaps even a shock, which shakes the foundations of the given. No experience is made, when peril is still immanent. Only afterwards, when having passed through it or moved out of the danger zone, can experience crystallise as a response to what one has been exposed to. Both Gadamer and Arendt insist that experience is the event of being ultimately opened up to all sides of a reality, which escapes human grasp. Their own thinking constitutes two comparable attempts to retrieve this event without ever getting to the end of the whole story or dialogue.

Even Kierkegaard's aesthetic writers testify to the openness in experience described by Arendt and Gadamer, and Kierkegaard could be said to go visiting in his aesthetic writings according to the form of enlarged and non-objectifying mentality, which Arendt contrasts with theory and conceptual knowledge. Yet, Kierkegaard's writers seem to be so submerged in their own reflections that the distance and openness inherent in experience, which reveals a transcending reality, collapses too soon to become more than a fleeting sensation and not a full-blown response to the question raised in experience. Arendt was interested in the people, who was exposed to a sheer skyfall of experience, but who also reacted, and Gadamer is likewise in search of the specific dynamics in experience, through which the exposure to questions is transformed into one's own questions and thus into one's own answers. The transition from suffering to reacting and from being questioned to coming up with a liberating response is what Kierkegaard's aesthetic writers are barred from carrying through. They are indeed exposed to dramatic experiences raining down on

³² Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 362-364.

³³ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 357. See also *Gesammelte Werke* 2, 229; 7, 259; 8, 354, for Gadamer's interpretation of the analogy.

³⁴ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 356-359.

them, yet, they do not seem to become more grounded in reality or more experienced for that reason. Their experiences are not merely limited. They are examples of genuine, liminal experiences.

Experience may not always hold in store resources to deal with and respond to the limits experienced. At times, Gadamer seems convinced that experience in itself holds resources in store for people to face the experienced limits, or he insists that each person must remain open and let something make its presence felt in order to keep experiencing anew.³⁵ Arendt appears to be more aware of the unsurpassable limits of certain traumatic experiences than Gadamer, especially when she speaks of the “shock of reality” during and in the aftermath of World War II. She suggests that one of the only ways to cope with and understand such experiences, which even the people enduring them did not know to be real or not, is “to dwell on horrors” from a distance of “fearful imagination”.³⁶ However, neither temporal distance, narrative nor dialogue may always offer enough resources to recover and still less to recover from liminal experiences of unimaginable horror, such as totalitarian terror and violence, although each of these “media” may in their own way help to come to terms with them.

5 Faced with questions without immediate answers

The question of whether the resources to endure experience comes from experience itself or from a place outside it could be considered as external to the study of experience itself. And it may, or at least the answer to it, be just that: originating from somewhere outside experience itself. At the end of our reading of *Either/Or*, we saw that Kierkegaard considers ethics to be one field, which may provide resources in order not merely to recover certain experiences, but also to recover from them, in case they have completely taken away the breath of the persons involved. In certain passages, writer A describes himself or other characters in this way, as not merely losing their breath, but losing their spirit, unable to express their deepest desires and experiences. In formulating his religiously inspired ethics, French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas refers to the experience of the other’s infinity as both a trauma and a source of extra resources for a spirit, out of breath, to face and open up to transcendence.³⁷

In her dissertation on *Love and Augustine*, Arendt describes the liminal experience which Augustine suffered, when he lost his best friend and became a question to himself; a question which he could not find an answer to. The only way to deal with this existential impasse was for him to seek rescue in the Christian God, which is where Arendt leaves him behind.³⁸ Not surprisingly, Kierkegaard considers a similar way out of the sort of human self-enclosurement, which withdraws from making new experiences: The resources to open oneself up to new horizons do not come from within, as Gadamer and also Arendt often seem to claim, they come from beyond each individual consciousness, namely in the form of Christian love that “wrenches open the lock of self-love”³⁹. “Fortune’s door” is indeed only opened from the outside, yet, for Kierkegaard this event no longer depends on pure luck, but on love and having faith in God.

Consequently, the Danish philosopher also considers the leap of faith as an option to cross the barrier or the abyss, which separates every human being from entering into contact with truth. Within the Biblical context, which Kierkegaard reinterprets to make sense of love and faith, experiencing truth is linked to the presence of God and Jesus Christ. The latter becomes the door and the way for believers to transcend their ordinary reality.⁴⁰ Yet, when trying to put into words, where Abraham gets his resources from to keep believing in God, or how it is possible that Jesus Christ, the son of God, walks the earth, Kierkegaard concedes that language breaks down: Abraham’s secret lies hidden in a book sealed by God, and Christ’s earthly existence remains an unsolvable paradox.⁴¹

³⁵ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 367.

³⁶ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 441.

³⁷ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 196-199, 222-224; *Autrement qu’être*, 16, 86.

³⁸ Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 13.

³⁹ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 17.

⁴⁰ *The New Testament, The Gospel according to John*, 10:9; 14:6.

⁴¹ For a full interpretation of these passages in the light of Kierkegaard’s “grillwork”, see Holst, “Gitre, døre og andre forhindringer på vejen”, 48-53.

Do we reach the limits of experience when faced with these paradigms of religious existence? If it is not possible to convey in words how these events came about, and if neither Abraham nor Christ suffered any significant change in their “views” or “beliefs”, then it seems out of place to use the word “experience” about their engagement in the world or their relation to God. When love, faith and truth become associated with a kind of immovable certainty and reality, then they become worldless, Arendt claims, and Gadamer would add that there is no room for experience, if nobody undergoes negativity and scepticism, moving from believing to know to not knowing and back again. For experiencing to begin a limit between hither and thither needs to be felt by a conscious perceiver, who is exposed to something, which appears against a horizon of transcendence. Yet, full-fledged experience does not entail a complete movement beyond to a transcendent reality. As Dorthe Jørgensen has expressed it, genuine experience involves the experience of immanent transcendence, in which transcendence is not tied to another world apart from this one, but it interrupts in this world or at its limits, making aesthetic, ethical and religious experiences possible.⁴²

Hegel’s account of the experiential movement of spirit through its moments of clarity and confusion is based, as he himself underlines, on the appearance of the world to consciousness, which is why it can rightly be called a phenomenology after the ancient Greek term for appearance, *phainesthai*. Yet, for something to appear in a certain light, light itself needs to be broken in a medium, which for Hegel is consciousness.⁴³ In Kierkegaard’s narrative, human consciousness is embodied and becomes fractured into multiple personalities through a confessional form of writing, which creates imaginative openings to a realm appearing vaguely on the other side, be it music, the beloved, faith or the self. Kierkegaard places himself together with his pseudonymical writers at an angle, as he says, where he may get a glimpse of the fractured light from the other side, which he pictures as a sort of salvation and happy existence.⁴⁴ Once on the other side, a movement never to be completed in Kierkegaard’s writings, as humans cannot transcend language, their body or their own time, everything appears to become clear, illuminated by unfractured light. At least so it seems for those of us, who still find ourselves on the side of embodied and temporal consciousness, exposed to limits, which we may only experience and deal with through language and our body.

This returns us to the phenomenological insight developed, namely that experience is to be studied as it appears in its movement at the limits of what can be conceptually known: ““Experience”, we might say, is at the nodal point of the intersection between public language and private subjectivity, between expressible commonalities and the ineffability of the individual interior.”⁴⁵ It challenges already shaped concepts and theories and affect and open humans up to what lies beyond their own horizon. Experience is the dynamic way, in which humans gather a finite understanding of the “infinite”, which is never revealed as such, as this would mean the end of the finite and also of the infinite. Some experiences of finitude, be it bodily or linguistically, confront humans with an unsurpassable limit and may thus not be fully retrieved, as they defy being expressed. Still, being moved by and responding to the unknown, which appears on the horizon, is in any case experienced as perilous, but insofar as experience marks and even constitutes who we are as human beings, rescuing and retrieving what is one’s own may be located in the direction where peril lies.

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⁴² Jørgensen, “Experience, Metaphysics and Immanent Transcendence”, 23-25.

⁴³ Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 40, 69.

⁴⁴ Holst, “Gitre, døre og andre forhindringer på vejen”, 45, 53.

⁴⁵ Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 6.

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