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Vulnerability and Testimony within the Nihilistic Experience and Existential Attestation

1. At first glance, it seems as if the connection between the vulnerability of human existence and the expressive possibility of testimony is so obvious that it does not need to be especially corroborated. This connection is most directly relayed to us by contemporary testimonial literature, which to a great degree has to do with experiences of traumatic memory¹. In such cases, the traumatic memory can be individual or communal, and it can pertain to different developmental phases of the human personality as well as to different periods of history and to different geographical regions. A traumatic experience can lie so deep that the affected person finds it difficult to bear witness to it or is even hindered from testifying to this memory; it could also be said that the *formative bond between the memory and the testimony is broken*². This aspect of the impossibility of testifying to trauma is a

¹ A. Gautier, A.A. Scalmati (eds.), *Bearing Witness. Psychoanalytic Work with People Traumatized by Torture and State Violence*, Karnac Books - Instituti Donneriani Aboensis, London-Turku/Åbo 2010; C. Santos, A. Spahr, T. Crowe Morey (eds.), *Testimony and Trauma: Engaging Common Ground*, Brill Rodopi, Leiden-Boston 2010.

² Cf. C. Welz, *Trauma, Memory, Testimony. Phenomenological, psychological, and ethical perspectives*, in «Jewish Studies in the Nordic Countries Today», 27 (2006), pp. 104-133. Paul Ricœur, who is one of the key authors on the hermeneutics of testimony, meticulously lays out the link between memory, historiography and testimony in his work *Memory, History, Forgetting* (orig.: *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Le Seuil, Paris 2000): "History can expand, complete, correct, even refute the testimony of memory regarding the past; it cannot abolish it. Why? Because, it seemed to us, memory remains the guardian of the ultimate dialectic constitutive of the pastness of the past, namely, the relation between the 'no longer,' which marks its character of being elapsed, abolished, superseded, and the 'having-been,' which designates its original and, in this sense, indestructible character. That something did actually happen, this is the pre-predicative – and even pre-narrative – belief upon which rest the recognition of the images of the past and oral testimony. In this regard, events like the Holocaust and the great crimes of the twentieth century,

particular subject within psychological, psychoanalytical and social studies discussions³, but at the same time it also appears as a topic within historiographical, legal, philosophical, literary and media accounts of testimony⁴.

In addition to mentioning the inability to testify to a traumatic life experience, it is also necessary to mention its *violent hindering*, which further exacerbates the actual act of violence against human existence because one is unable to confess one's own trauma to someone else. This has the consequence that, as an individual, I am unable to express the meaning of humanity in general. This circumstance is indelibly linked to the moral, legal and social aspects of *recognizing human dignity* and the institution of *human rights*.

In considering the systematic hindering of bearing witness to violence against human existence, we are often dealing with authoritarian and totalitarian political systems, which is not to say that such hindering is by any means an exception in democratic social environments⁵. I myself have spent years researching the personal, social and political aspects of bearing witness to traumatic memory as it pertains to the Yugoslav concentration camp on Goli Otok (1949-1989); this research into such testimony was based also on conversations with former prisoners, most of whom did not even know why and on what grounds they had been sentenced. As a result, as prisoners, they were triply traumatized: first through the punishment they had been allotted, then through the violence they had to suffer in the camp (some of them over a period of many years), and finally, when they were released from the hellish circumstances, they had to commit themselves to silence about what they had

situated at the limits of representation, stand in the name of all the events that have left their traumatic imprint on hearts and bodies: they protest that they were and as such they demand being said, recounted, understood. This protestation, which nourishes attestation, is part of belief: it can be contested but not refuted" (P. Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. by K. Blamey and D. Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2004, p. 498; orig.: *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, cit., pp. 647-648).

³ See D. Amir, *Bearing Witness to the Witness: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Four Modes of Traumatic Testimony*, Routledge, New York-London 2019.

⁴ See R. Aron, *The Dawn of Universal History: Selected Essays from a Witness of the Twentieth Century*, Basic Books, New York 2003; K. Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004; S. Weine, *Testimony after Catastrophe. Narrating the Traumas of Political Violence*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2006; S. Denham, M. McCulloh (eds.), *W.G. Sebald. History, Memory, Trauma*, Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co, Berlin-New York 2006; P. Frosh, A. Pinchevski (eds.), *Media Witnessing. Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2009.

⁵ In this regard, the current migrant, refugee and asylum crisis is particularly problematic, including last year in direct connection with the war in Ukraine.

endured⁶. In the case of Holocaust survivors, muting and silencing of testimony stemmed from *survivor's guilt*, in connection to which we can ascertain the *traumatization not only of the individual but also of historical existence*⁷.

From a completely different viewpoint, it is worth mentioning that a disinterested public can hinder testimony. Their intentional or unintentional indifference blocks the possibility of testifying, such that *the truth the testifier wants to bear witness to becomes irrelevant*. When the expression of truth is blocked and manipulated – something for which concrete social factors cannot always be blamed – historical co-existence itself is of course robbed of meaning; trust in humanism vanishes, and we thus slip into an *attitude of nihilism*.

The nihilistic loss of meaning in itself directly affects how we perceive and accept the vulnerability of human existence, since this is felt and evaluated not solely in an affective state; rather, it appears, so to speak, beyond that state in the insensibility, insensitivity and nothingness that we call *nihilism*. How can human existence, both individual and historical, be or become so *susceptible and vulnerable to nihilistic senselessness that it cannot regain meaning*? If establishing human values has itself become a problem, which are the “means” that remain to help us overcome this state of falling into nihilism? The disposition of nihilism is a *liminal* one in that we cannot interpret it in either a psychological or a social perspective as an effect of a negative “subjective experience”, since as such it expresses *the crisis of the dominant self-perception of the humanness of the human be-*

⁶ “However, the intimidation apparatus managed to transfer the psychological violence against the inmate from ‘inside’ to ‘within,’ so that on release the inmates suffered their own dehumanization to the extent that they themselves succumbed to a kind of aphasia, which entailed not only the impossibility of spoken communication but the existential determination of being-witness. The goal of intimidation was not only to instill the fear of further punishment, but to erase the witness as a witness. However, erasing the witness as a witness does not erase the existential dictate of being-witness. For that reason, [...] the testimony situation not only encompasses the factual situation into which the witness was thrust or into which he ‘pushed’ himself; it bears an existential mark. The curtailing of the right to speak and testify dictated indifference to the world for the camp inmates, which was limited not solely to the camp space; rather, it generally took over their existence. The indifference dictated in this way confronted the individual such that it was no longer possible for them to understand their own position in the world and the associated element of communication with others, and the individual was subjected to the dictatorship of silence” (M. Erzetič (ed.), *Goli otok po sedemdesetih letih*, Institut Nova revija, Ljubljana 2021, foreword, p. 39).

⁷ See P. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. by R. Rosenthal, Michael Joseph, London 1988 (orig.: *I sommersi e i salvati*, Einaudi, Torino 1986); J. Matthäus, *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor. Holocaust Testimony and Its Transformations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009; T. Trezise, *Witnessing Witnessing. On the Reception of Holocaust Survivor Testimony*, Fordham University Press, New York 2013.

ing as *subjectivity*⁸. It manifests itself primarily in the fact that, despite our being “chained” to all possible information means – which are omnipresent and available to everyone – we fundamentally do not know *what we are witnessing in the world* and *what is being witnessed as our own human sense*. In this respect, we can talk about the special contemporary *vulnerability of testimony*, insofar as it arises not only from the traumatic experiences of witnesses who were victims of various violent acts, but also because it concerns the very existential and co-existential possibility of *being-witness* – it adopts both a verbal and historical character in terms of divulging⁹.

2. In terms of understanding human values, the fall and slide from humanism into nihilism¹⁰ fundamentally characterizes the historical situation

⁸ From the hermeneutical viewpoint, Gianni Vattimo provides a broad analysis of the relation between nihilism and the (post)modern crisis of the subject in *Beyond the Subject. Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Hermeneutics*, trans. by P. Carravetta, SUNY Press, New York 2019; original: *Al di là del soggetto*, Feltrinelli, Milan 1981; *The Decline of the Subject and the Problem of Testimony*, in *The Adventure of Difference. Philosophy after Nietzsche and Heidegger*, The John’s Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1993, pp. 40-60; or. *Tramonto del soggetto e problema della testimonianza*, in «Archivio di filosofia», 1-2 (1972), pp. 125-139, reprinted in *Le avventure della differenza*, Garzanti, Milano 1980.

⁹ From the particular point of view of the possible hermeneutic conceptualization of “Witness” and “Testimony”, under the understanding of “bare existence”, Gert-Jan van der Heiden discusses the vulnerabilities of testimony in *The Voice of Misery. A Continental Philosophy of Testimony* (SUNY Press, New York 2020): “What if – thus are the stakes of this study – we begin to understand testimony proceeding from the task to bear witness to the bare existence at the heart of human life? What if this dimension of existence were set apart from our common human experience and from our common human discourse or *logos* because the latter is somehow denied access to the realm of bare existence? Would this not assign to testimony a distinctive, exceptional sense on the threshold of *logos* and bare existence? Yet perhaps testimony has always already been marked by such an exceptional sense throughout the history of its philosophical and theological usage, and perhaps the contemporary ‘normalization’ of testimony in the epistemological approaches to this theme is the mark of the forgetfulness of this particular exceptional provenance of testimony” (*ivi*, p. 14).

¹⁰ Gianni Vattimo cogently deals with the slide of humanism into nihilism in his *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*. (Part I Nihilism as Destiny: 1. “An Apology for Nihilism”, 2. “The Crisis of Humanism”, pp. 19-59, trans.: J.R. Snyder, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1988; orig. *Fine della modernità*, Garzanti, Milan 1985, pp. 25-6). Clearly shown in this regard is the dilemma of whether, say, Levi’s testimony about the horror of Auschwitz should (still) be defined as “humanism”: “Primo Levi, the author, who may have insisted that his world remained intact, and his texts, where largely unintended counternarratives reveal the nervous tension between his pre-Holocaust humanism and the legacy of Auschwitz – that single word that calls the entire Enlightenment project into question. As we shall see, a number of post-Holocaust thinkers suggest that Auschwitz produced a caesura or an abyss – what Gordon names here ‘the post-Holocaust ontological or moral void.’ This rupture exposed the practical inefficacy of so many humanist assumptions, such as the inherent dignity and rights

of humanity in the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, when a posthumanist and transhumanist orientation is gaining ground within the humanities and social sciences¹¹. We are, at the same time, throughout the world faced with various forms of dehumanization¹². As Nietzsche points out in the introductory fragments to *The Will to Power*, nihilism is not only a social phenomenon within a certain historical course and what follows that course; it is the very source that determines the entire further course of his-

of the individual and the positive utility of reason, and it even challenged the ability of language to describe experience” (J. Druker, *Primo Levi and Humanism after Auschwitz: Posthumanist Reflections*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2009, p. 6).

¹¹ The conceptual demarcation between humanism, posthumanism, and transhumanism is in itself complex, and above all, of course, it remains undefined whether these concepts cover one problem area or different areas: “In contemporary academic debate, ‘posthuman’ has become a key term to cope with an urgency for the integral redefinition of the notion of the human, following the onto-epistemological as well as scientific and bio-technological developments of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries ... ‘Posthuman’ has become an umbrella term to include (philosophical, cultural, and critical) posthumanism, transhumanism (in its variants as extropianism, liberal and democratic transhumanism, among other currents), new materialisms (a specific feminist development within the posthumanist frame), and the heterogeneous landscapes of anti-humanism, posthumanities, and metahumanities. The most confused areas of signification are the ones shared by posthumanism and transhumanism” (F. Ferrando, *Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations*, in «Existenz», 8, 2 (2013), pp. 26-32. As part of this discussion, I can emphasize that these transformations and deformations of “humanism” do not eliminate the contemporary crisis of humanism, at least not in the context that Vattimo highlights in connection with the experience of nihilism; rather, it continues to expand and deepen.

¹² “Dehumanization” can be understood as the devaluation and annihilation of “humanization” that forms the basic effort of humanism, that it is engaged in “meditating and caring, that human beings be human and not inhumane, ‘inhuman,’ that is, outside their essence” (M. Heidegger, *Letter on ‘humanism’ (1946)*, in Id., *Pathways*, ed. by William McNeill, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 244; orig.: *Brief über den Humanismus (1946)*, in Id., *Wegmarken*, GA 9, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 2004, p. 319). Dehumanization is definitely characterized by nihilism, precisely in relation to the vulnerability of the human being and the possibility of witnessing humanity. David Livingstone Smith has devoted several of his works to understanding dehumanization and the social relevance of dealing with it; in this regard, he emphasizes the following: “Most of all, I think that a good theory of dehumanization should be consistent with those episodes in human history that are uncontested examples of dehumanization. The Holocaust is one such. It would be strange, to say the least, to adopt a view of what dehumanization is that doesn’t apply to the horrors of Auschwitz and Treblinka. Such a conception wouldn’t merit being taken seriously. The same can be said of a theory of dehumanization that’s irrelevant to slavery, or to the anti-Black terrorism of Jim Crow, or the horrors of colonialism, or many other examples. To resist dehumanization effectively, you’ve got to know what it is. You’ve got to be able to distinguish it from racism, misogyny, xenophobia, or other forms of prejudice and oppression. To dehumanize others is to think of them not merely as inferior human beings, but as subhuman creatures” (D. Livingstone Smith, *On Inhumanity. Dehumanization and How to Resist It*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2020, pp. 21-22).

tory, together with all individual and social efforts to make the world more human, so that a person would be properly human:

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*. This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for this music of the future all ears are cocked even now. For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect¹³.

It would be superfluous to consider whether and to what extent Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism remains relevant after almost one hundred and fifty years. The reception of Nietzsche has already been well served with arguments we could cite both for and against. Nietzsche himself directly denies the possibility of looking for the reasons for falling into nihilism:

Nihilism stands at the door: whence comes this uncanniest of all guests? Point of departure: it is an error to consider 'social distress' or 'physiological degeneration' or, worse, corruption, as the cause of nihilism. Ours is the most decent and compassionate age. Distress, whether of the soul, body, or intellect, cannot of itself give birth to nihilism (i.e., the radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability). Such distress always permits a variety of interpretations. Rather: it is in one particular interpretation, the Christian-moral one, that nihilism is rooted¹⁴.

Nietzsche's "recipe" for escaping nihilism is, as is well known, a *re-evaluation of all values*, especially those values formed by Christianity. As can be seen from the above quotation, in Nietzsche's view we are *not immunized simply by recognizing the vulnerability of the human being*, from which could follow an *ethics of vulnerability or an ethics of compassion* that could contribute to an improved world¹⁵. Nietzsche considers compassion for the

¹³ F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, preface (Nov. 1887 - March 1888), trans. by W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. by W. Kaufmann, Vintage Books, New York 1968, p. 3; orig.: F. Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885-1887*, KSA 12, ed. by G. Colli and M. Montinari de Gruyter, Berlin-New York, DTV, Munich 1988, p. 189.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 7; orig.: F. Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1887-1889*, KSA 13, ed. by G. Colli and M. Montinari, de Gruyter, Berlin-New York, DTV, Munich 1988, p. 125.

¹⁵ In connection with this, I quote Judith Butler's thoughts on vulnerability and the ethics of vulnerability, from *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*: "A vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter, and there is no guarantee that this will happen. Not only is there always the possibility that a vulnerability will not be recognized and that it will be constituted as the 'unrecognizable,' but when a vulnerability is recog-

weak to be one of the origins of nihilism and turns against Christianity in this respect. However, it must be noted at the same time that Nietzsche is not indifferent to the *vulnerability of the human being* or to the *vulnerability of God*, and neither is he indifferent to the *metaphysical pain* that occurs in connection with both. In Nietzsche's understanding, the Dionysian deity affirms the pain of existence, in contrast to Christianity, which negates it and thereby promotes nihilism. It is certainly debatable whether Nietzsche here means Christianity in itself or the historical unveiling of Christianity as "Platonism for the people". This distinction lies in the foreground of the thinking of another great "diagnostician" of nihilism, namely, Dostoyevsky, especially in *The Brothers Karamazov*¹⁶; the same line of thinking is evident in Kierkegaard¹⁷.

This sort of consideration would undoubtedly call for a more extensive discussion – one which, however, has already taken place in modern philosophy and cannot be summarised here. Let an apparently small observation that Martin Heidegger made in the context of this discussion suffice, namely, in his response to Ernst Jünger's essay on crossing the line into nihilism (which Jünger dedicated to the philosopher in 1950 on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday)¹⁸. In his response to Jünger's essay, in a piece entitled "On the Question of Being"¹⁹, Heidegger emphasized, while also relying on Jünger's 1934 essay *On Pain*, that the *overcoming of nihilism* is not possible without the *recovering of metaphysics*; Heidegger exploited the proximity between the German verbs *überwinden* (to overcome) and *verwinden* (recover)²⁰. This "tiny difference" is given at the existentially historical

nized, that recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of the vulnerability itself. In this sense, if vulnerability is one precondition for humanization, and humanization takes place differently through variable norms of recognition, then it follows that vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject" (J. Butler, *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, London-New York 2004, p. 43).

¹⁶ See F. Volpi, *Il nichilismo*, Laterza, Bari 1996, pp. 39-40.

¹⁷ We can undoubtedly count Kierkegaard among the seminal authors dealing with human vulnerability and existential witnessing. Cf. D.S.J. Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness. Kierkegaard's Poetics of Faith, Hope, and Love*, T & T Clark International, New York 2005.

¹⁸ E. Jünger, *Across the Line*, in M. Heidegger, E. Jünger, *Correspondence*, trans. by T.S. Quinn, Rowman & Littlefield International, Lanham 2008, pp. 69-102. Orig.: E. Jünger, "Über di Linie", in *Anteile: Martin Heidegger zum 60. Geburtstag*, Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 1950, pp. 245-284.

¹⁹ F. Volpi, *Il nichilismo*, in the chapter "Oltre la linea del nichilismo: Jünger 'versus' Heidegger", pp. 19-40.

²⁰ "Wherein does the overcoming of nihilism then consist? In the recovery [Überwindung] of metaphysics" (M. Heidegger, *On the Question of Being*, in *Pathmarks*, trans. by W. McNeil, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 313; orig.: *Zur Seinsfrage*, in *Wegmarken*,

level from the experience of metaphysical oblivion of ontological difference and follows Heidegger's discussion of the place Nietzsche's philosophy has in an epoch that is (uncannily) vulnerable in that "there is nothing to being itself". As a result, in the text, Heidegger dwells specifically on Nietzsche's definition of nihilism as the "uncanniest of all guests" (Ger. "*der unheimlichste aller Gäste*"), adding "It is called the 'most uncanny' [*unheimlichste*] because, as the unconditional will to will, it wills homelessness [*Heimatlosigkeit*] as such. This is why it is of no avail to show it the door, because it has long since been roaming around invisibly inside the house. The task is to catch sight of and see through this guest"²¹.

Heidegger's connecting of the *Unheimliche* (the uncanny) to *heimisch*, *Heim*, and *Heimat* can be found already in *Being and Time*, specifically in regard to the fundamental disposition or "attunement" of anxiety²². The link between the words is relevant not only in etymological terms. In his 1935 lectures *Introduction to Metaphysics*²³ and in his 1942 interpreta-

Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 1978, p. 408). The English translator William McNeil added this comment: "The phrase *Verwindung der Metaphysik* is difficult to render into English. Heidegger uses the word *Verwindung* to suggest something other than a straight forward 'overcoming' (*Überwindung*) that would be accomplished by human beings (or by human thinking as subjectivity), and that would simply leave behind it whatever is 'overcome.' *Verwindung* implies recovery in the sense that metaphysics itself, in its 'essence,' recovers from the oblivion of its own essence. As Heidegger goes on to clarify, it is not therefore to be taken as implying that human beings recover from metaphysics; nor is it human beings in the first instance who 'recover' metaphysics in the sense of 'retrieving' its essence. In the phrase 'recovery of metaphysics,' metaphysics is itself the 'subject' of the genitive. Elsewhere, Heidegger explains that the *Verwindung* of the 'essence of technology' in the direction of its as yet concealed truth 'is similar to what happens when, in the human realm, one recovers from grief or pain'. See *Die Kehre* (1949), *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 79, p. 69 (trans. by William Lovitt as *The Turning*, in *The Question Concerning Technology*, p. 39). *Verwindung* does, therefore, imply an 'overcoming', but what is overcome is not left behind or escaped" (*ivi*, p. 376). As is well known, Heidegger's concept of "*Verwindung der Metaphysik*" influenced the forming of the Italian philosophical movement *Il pensiero debole*, *Wicked Thought*, (G. Vattimo, P.A. Rovatti, eds., *Il pensiero debole*, Feltrinelli, Milan 1983).

²¹ M. Heidegger, *On the Question of Being*, in W. McNeill (trans. and ed. by), *Pathmarks*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 292; orig.: *Zur Seinsfrage*, in *Wegmarken*, Frankfurt a.M. 1978, p. 408.

²² "In anxiety one feels 'uncanny.' Here the peculiar indefiniteness of that which Dasein finds itself alongside in anxiety, comes proximally to expression: the 'nothing and nowhere.' But here 'uncanniness' also means 'not-being-at-home' [*das Nicht-zuhause-sein*]". The translator's note reads: "The reference is presumably to H. 134 above. While 'unheimlich' is here translated as 'uncanny,' it means more literally 'unhomelike,' as the author proceeds to point out" (M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., Oxford (UK) - Cambridge (USA) 2001, p. 233; orig.: *Sein und Zeit*, elfte, unveränderte Auflage, Niemeyer, Tübingen 1967, p. 188).

²³ M. Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by G. Fried and R. Polt, Yale Univer-

tion of Hölderlin's poem "Der Ister"²⁴, Heidegger connects the "Unheimliche" to the *deinon* from the opening lines of the chorus in Sophocles's *Antigone* (332-375): πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κούδὲν ἀνθρώπου δεινότερον πέλει. Heidegger's rendering reads as follows: "Manifold is the uncanny, yet nothing uncanner than man"²⁵.

According to Heidegger, *Unheimlichkeit* as not-being-at-home is a consequence of the fact that the unconditional subjectivity of the will to power wills it thus²⁶. On the other hand, the "Unheimliche", according to

city Press, New Haven-London 2000, pp. 156-177; orig.: *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, GA 40, ed. by P. Jaeger, Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 1983, pp. 153-182. In the same year, Heidegger also sent his own verse rendering of the chorus to Jaspers. *The Heidegger-Jaspers Correspondence (1920-1963)*, ed. by W. Biemel and H. Saner, trans. by G.E. Aylesworth, Humanity Books, Amherst (NY) 2003, pp. 240-242; orig.: M. Heidegger, K. Jaspers, *Briefwechsel 1920-1963*, ed. by W. Biemel and H. Saner, Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M., Piper, Munich 1992, pp. 157-159.

²⁴ M. Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"*, trans. by W. McNeill and J. Davis, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1996, pp. 51-122; orig. *Hölderlins Hymne „Der Ister"*, GA 53, ed. by W. Biemel, Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 1984, pp. 63-170.

²⁵ *The Heidegger-Jaspers Correspondence*, cit., p. 240; orig. *Briefwechsel 1920-1963*, cit., p. 157.

²⁶ Heidegger's definition of nihilism as "Heimatlosiket" reminds us of Nietzsche's proclamation "Wir Heimatlosen": "We who are homeless. – Among Europeans today there is no lack of those who have a right to call themselves homeless in a distinctive and honourable sense: it is to them in particular that I commend my secret wisdom and *gaya scienza*. For their lot is hard; their hope uncertain; it is a feat to invent a form of comfort for them – but to what avail! We children of the future – how could we be at home in this today!" (F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by J. Nauckhoff, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 241; orig.: *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, KSA 3, ed. by G. Colli and M. Montinari, de Gruyter, Berlin-New York, DTV, Munich 1988, p. 628.)

May we, following Heidegger, understand it as an expression of empowered subjectivity? Here, Heidegger's stance is related to his perception of Nietzsche's active overpassing of nihilism, which he himself considers to be emphatically metaphysical: "Extreme but active nihilism evicts prior values together with their 'space' (the suprasensuous) and offers prime possibilities to the new valuation. With regard to this character of extreme nihilism, which makes space and steps into the open, Nietzsche also speaks of 'ecstatic nihilism' (WM, 1055). While giving the impression of remaining a simple negation, such nihilism affirms neither something at hand nor an ideal, but the 'principle of value-estimation,' to wit, the will to power. As soon as this is expressly conceived as the ground and measure of all valuation, nihilism has accommodated itself to its affirmative essence, has overcome and incorporated its imperfection, and so has completed itself. Ecstatic nihilism becomes 'classical nihilism.' That is how Nietzsche conceives of his own metaphysics. Where will to power is the professed principle of valuation, nihilism comes to be the 'ideal of the supreme degree of powerfulness of spirit' (WM, 14). Inasmuch as every being that would exist in itself is denied, and will to power as the origin and measure of creating is affirmed, 'nihilism could ... be a divine way of thinking' (WM, 15). Here Nietzsche is thinking the divinity of the god Dionysus. The affirmative essence of nihilism simply cannot be stated more affirmatively. According to its full metaphysical concept, then, nihilism is the history of the annihilation of the highest values hitherto on the basis of the anticipatory revaluation that knowingly acknowledges will to power as the principle of valuation. Revaluation therefore does

Heidegger's references to the disposition or attunement of anxiety in *Being and Time* and the interpretation of *deinon* from the chorus, is germane to the very essence of the human being and not just to his nihilistic abolition as a result of the *burgeoning of modern subjectivity in the modern world*. Although the chorus from *Antigone* relates how man's action ultimately lead him to nothingness²⁷, any interpretation claiming that this entails nihilism would be difficult to sustain. Human existence is, both individually and historically, exposed (Gr. *ek-sistere*) to the *Unheimliche*, whereas, on the other hand, the *Unheimliche* arises from what the human is exposed to and must endure because of some violent will that dispenses it. In both cases, it is a kind of passing that emphatically testifies to the vulnerability of man, the difference being that in one case it is in the aspect of *existence* and in the other case it is in the aspect of *subsistence*.

In *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, which takes Primo Levi's testimonial oeuvre as a point of departure, Giorgio Agamben underlines this moment of enduring suffering as being key in terms of the Latin word for witness *superstes*:

In Latin there are two words for "witness". The first word, *testis*, from which our word "testimony" derives, etymologically signifies the person who, in a trial or lawsuit between two rival parties, is in the position of a third party (**terstis*). The second word, *superstes*, designates a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it. It is obvious that Levi is not a third party; he is a survivor [*superstite*] in every sense²⁸.

not mean merely that new values are posited in the old familiar place of the prior values, but first and foremost that the place itself is newly determined" (M. Heidegger, *Nietzsche. Volume III: The Will to Power as Knowledge and as Metaphysics Volume IV: Nihilism*, ed. by David Farrell Krell, Harper & Row, San Francisco 1991, pp. 207-208. Cf. D. Barbarić, 'Wir Heimatlosen.' *Nietzsches Gedanken zum Europäertum*, in R. Reschke, V. Gerhardt (eds.), *Nietzsche und Europa - Nietzsche in Europa*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2007, pp. 53-66. Gianni Vattimo, making direct reference to Heidegger's *Verwindung*, at the same time takes an affirmative position on Nietzsche's distinction between active and positive nihilism: "Vattimo's revalorization of nihilism is achieved principally, then, through a return to Nietzsche's distinction between active and reactive nihilism. Active nihilism is to be thought as hermeneutics, postmodernity, post-foundationalism, the post-metaphysical, weak ontology, or what – taking the term from Heidegger – Vattimo describes as *Verwindung*" (S. Weller, *Literature, Philosophy, Nihilism. the Uncanniest of Guests*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2008, p. 176). Especially if we take into account Agamben's preoccupation with the Auschwitz archive, this definitely raises the question of whether *Verwindung* loses its existential-historical validity.

²⁷ "Everywhere underway and yet with no way out, he comes to nothing" (*Heidegger-Jaspers Correspondence*, cit., p. 242; orig. *Briefwechsel 1920-1963*, cit., p. 159).

²⁸ G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive*, trans. by D. Heller-Roazen, Zone Books, New York 1999, p. 17; orig.: G. Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*.

In the case of Primo Levi, there is an additional aggravating circumstance, namely, of his being a survivor, that is, one who endured the inhumane conditions of the concentration camp and who had and suffered from survivor's guilt. One could say that this heralds the nihilism of the times and of the history that follows the horror of Auschwitz. Levi, as a witness who must also testify for other witnesses and especially for those who can (no longer) be witnesses, narrows his essential view of the world-historical situation – which remains terrifying and threatening also after Auschwitz – to the question raised in *If This Is a Man?*²⁹ The question bears witness to the special *vulnerability of testimony of a time* in which it is no longer possible to disavow indications that humanity has nihilistically slid into inhumanity. As such, it *calls for an understanding* of the contemporary world-historical situation, such as that Hannah Arendt³⁰ convincingly undertook, for example, as her own existential concern; she defined the nihilism of totalitarianism as “Mindlessness” and the “Banality of Evil”³¹. At the same time, her own life experience evinced her *Heimatlosigkeit*, which probably included a different understanding than that of Heidegger, one which was perhaps even incomprehensible in his terms³².

In factual-existential terms, “understanding” means nothing other than *being-at-home with myself* or with somebody else. Understanding testifies to the attitude towards one's own being, to the being of others and to being

L'archivio e il testimone, Homo sacer III, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1998, p. 15. The moment of “living through something” is linked also to the Greek word for witness *martyr*, which was taken up also by other languages: “one who bears testimony to faith,” especially ‘one who willingly suffers death rather than surrender his or her religious faith,’ specifically ‘one of the Christians who in former times were put to death because they would not renounce their beliefs’” (www.etymonline.com/word/martyr).

²⁹ P. Levi, *If This Is a Man*, trans. by S. Woolf, The Orion Press, New York 1959; orig.: *Se questo è un uomo*, De Silva, Torino 1947.

³⁰ H. Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954. Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, Schocken Books, New York 1995.

³¹ H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on The Banality of Evil*, The Viking Press, New York (1963), enlarged edition 1964. See A. Fabris, *Arendt in Jerusalem*, in «Phainomena», 27, 106/107 (2018), pp. 23-33.

³² In her conversation with Günther Gaus, which was broadcast on German television on 16 September 1964 (published as an introduction to *Essays in Understanding* as “What Remains? The Language Remains”), Hannah Arendt decisively states, “What is important for me is to understand. For me, writing is a matter of seeking this understanding, part of the process of understanding”. At the same time she links understanding with the experience of being-at-home and feeling at home. “I want to understand. And if others understand – in the same sense that I have understood – that gives me a sense of satisfaction, like feeling at home” (*Essays in Understanding*, cit., p. 3).

in general. At the same time, it necessarily includes incomprehensibility and misunderstanding as being away from oneself or others, being away from home and without a home, which stokes the desire to return home. A particular problem is coerced misunderstanding in the form of being driven from home through someone else's will, being a victim of violence of an individual or social origin, or even without any origin³³.

To have understanding for something or someone, further, means *not being indifferent*; it means inviting someone into your home or going to their home. Alternatively, we can simply be nowhere at home and indifferent to everything, apathetic and without understanding towards anything in the world, first of all towards ourselves. Heidegger recognizes nihilism as the not-being-at-home to which the subjectivity of the will to power leads, as *indifference in being itself*, which arbitrarily wants, as the will to will, to direct not only historical events, but also natural processes. Nihilism as historical indifference and metaphysical uniformity does not mean that nothing more happens in history since the appearance of nihilism or that history is over; on the contrary, in this indifferent history, events can continue without end, without our having even the slightest understanding of what is at work here and what it is about, i.e., what we are actually witnessing.

The demand that “the horror of Auschwitz must not be repeated” rings hollow if we do not recognize that, first of all, nihilism repeats itself over and over and is beyond understanding and without end. Nihilism as the *Unheimliche*, *homelessness*, *nothingness and indifference* is, in its boundless reproducibility, terribly violent for today's humanity; at the same time, it goes undetected and unrecognized. However, nihilism does not merely represent violence against existence and co-existence as annihilation and destruction; the repeated loss of meaning triggers alarm, which reveals lack of meaning as an existential situation that forces one to understand and confess it, that is, to reveal it to oneself and to others. The blocking of such testimony is also revealing, and this even more directly triggers alarm. But what we are

³³ In his editor's introduction to the collection *Phenomenologies of Violence* (Brill, Leiden-Boston 2014, p. 1), Michael Staudigl writes in connection with confronting the phenomenon of violence: “There is no violenceted – and thus irreducibly contingent – orders, within which the ‘meaning violence’ is ascribed to a given social event. This is not meant to imply that violence should be thought as something independent of its agents, recipients, and observers. It also does not imply that we cannot carve out some essential traits of violence and its overall significance for the socio-political and cultural order. It implies simply that violence is to be thought as a social phenomenon within the horizon of its ordering, within which we negotiate, define, and debate what counts and is recognized as violence and what does not”.

witnessing historically is horrifying, insofar as we are, in our own essence, assigned to be in the world.

3. Confronted with the question of whether, after the horror of Auschwitz, God still exists, Levi denied the possibility of continuing to look for an answer in faith in God, which is revealing because the question goes beyond the religious, theological, social and humanistic philosophical contexts; it is not a historical question that we ask ourselves. Rather, we are existentially and co-existentially *pushed before it*. It is posed by history itself as the possibility of some existence and co-existence from which one can understand or surrender to nihilism and renounce understanding.

In this regard, it is necessary to establish that, in addition to individual human vulnerability, the *historical vulnerability* of human (co)existence is also possible, and that this in itself essentially conditions the possibility or impossibility of witnessing humanity in the effort to be human. If human beings were individually vulnerable – but humanity in its entire world-historical situation was not – it would not be possible to testify to human meaning, as advocated by, for example, Viktor E. Frankl³⁴, and neither would it be possible to testify to inhumanity and senselessness.

At the same time, it should be emphasized that in dealing with the vulnerability of human existence and co-existence and the possibility of testifying to it, researchers into the vulnerability of human existence most often refer to arbitrary psychological or biological dispositions of human beings, who can be subject to what can affect them *from the world shared with others*³⁵.

³⁴ V.E. Frankel, *Man's Search for Meaning. An Introduction to Logotherapy*, trans. by I. Lasch and H. Pisano, Beacon Press, Boston 1959. Originally published in 1946 as *Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager - A Psychologist Experiences the Concentration Camp*, Verlag für Jugend und Volk, Vienna.

³⁵ “The notion of vulnerability comes from the Late Latin *vulnerabilis*, derived from *vulnerare* ‘to wound,’ which comes from *vulner-*, *vulnus* ‘wound.’ As the Merriam-Webster dictionary suggests, it is probably akin to Latin *vellere*, ‘to pluck,’ and Greek *oulē*, ‘wound.’ The Latin noun *vulnus* refers primarily to bodily wounds and moral hurts or emotional damages, but it also signifies a blow, a cut, or a bite, as well as an arrow or a projectile. Standard definitions of ‘vulnerable’ list two main meanings: 1: capable of being physically or emotionally wounded; 2: open to attack or damage: assailable (*vulnerable* to criticism). Even this cursory look at the etymology of the term makes clear that the thinking of vulnerability pivots on the understanding of how that which is vulnerable comes to be constituted: in its existence, identity, or self and thus also in its proper boundaries. Before one can speak of vulnerability, there needs to be a ‘something,’ an ‘it’ – a being or an entity – that is or can become vulnerable, with its boundaries compromised, violated, even destroyed” (K. Ziarek, *A Vulnerable World. Heidegger on Humans and Finitude*, in «SubStance», 42, 3, 2013, p. 169).

This factually bypasses the pre-subjective worldly predisposition of the human. Human existence is actually vulnerable “*already*” *from its own being thrown into the world*, on the basis of which it is given to understand in advance what it means *to be in the world*.

This world position of human existence, namely, that it is already predisposed to how it is to be in the world, was very cogently expressed by Hans-Georg Gadamer in “Hermeneutics and the Ontological Difference”, where, among other things, he explains Heidegger’s concept of the *hermeneutics of facticity* from his 1923 Freiburg lectures *Ontology - The Hermeneutics of Facticity*³⁶ onwards:

So facticity becomes a formulation that is challenging for our will to understand, something like when in *Being and Time* Heidegger speaks of the ‘thrownness’ of Dasein. For Heidegger, thrownness belongs to human existence in a world that man comes into without being asked, and one is called away from this world also without being asked. In all of life’s ‘thrownness’ one also lives toward one’s future, a future toward which one is projected. In this situation hermeneutics [as a hermeneutics of facticity] is focused on something that is not understandable [life]. Indeed, this is somehow always the case for hermeneutics. Challenged by something not understood or not understandable, hermeneutics is brought onto the path of questioning and is required to understand. In this process one never has some advance lordship over all meaningfulness. Instead, one is answering an always self-renewing challenge to take something not understood, something surprisingly other, strange, dark – and perhaps deep – that we need to understand. Nevertheless, this tends to render harmless the paradox that lies in the hermeneutics of facticity³⁷.

According to Gadamer, “man” in his own humanity witnesses the fact that the world in which he is exceeds him to the same extent that he himself approaches this world. A person’s ability to witness something in the world and the world itself is already defined in advance by the incomprehensibility of their own existential situation, which forces him/her to try to understand what he/she encounters both in the world and as the world. This incomprehensibility regarding one’s own existential situation – as far as it is defined by the facticity of the being thrown, into which we cast ourselves – can be

³⁶ M. Heidegger, *Ontology - The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, trans. by J. van Buren, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1999; orig.: M. Heidegger, *Ontologie. Hermeneutik der Faktizität*, ed. by Käte Bröcker-Oltmanns, GA 63, Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 1988.

³⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *Hermeneutics and the Ontological Difference*, in R.E. Palmer (ed.), *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston (Illinois) 2007, p. 363; orig. *Hermeneutik und ontologische Differenz*, in *Hermeneutik im Rückblick*, Gesammelte Werke, Bd. 10, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1995, p. 63).

defined as the *originless origin of the vulnerability* of the human being, and it is necessary to add: *therefore, it is not only a human being who is vulnerable, but is always vulnerable as well the world in which he exists.*

Of course, this immediately raises a question: how can the world be vulnerable? It is vulnerable, of course, for the human being, in direct connection with the fact that that human being is a creature that, unlike other creatures, ‘has the world.’ Martin Heidegger defined this ‘possession of the world’ on the basis of the existential structure of *being-in-the-world*, which determines the being which is ourselves and which in its being is capable of understanding not only its own being but also being in general. In his existential analysis in *Being and Time*, Heidegger thus introduces the concept of *Dasein* as an ontological label for “beings that are ourselves”. *Dasein* always encompasses my existential situation as the historical horizon of the world to which I am open in the openness of here-to-be and *in this openness I am vulnerable*. I can truly “have” the world, only to the extent that the world “has” me; I can lose myself in it or lose it, which indicates the *finitude of being-in-the-world*, or the entire existential structure of *Dasein* (*Being-there*). Heidegger encapsulates the entire existential structure of *Dasein* with the notion of *care*, the meaning of which is formed by temporality³⁸.

In view of the previously introduced notions of “man’s humanity”, “human meaning”, “human position”, “human dignity” and finally “human vulnerability” and the testimony of the meaning of humanity, there is undoubtedly a certain embarrassment residing in the fact that Heidegger in *Being and Time* systematically avoids using the label “man”, with the explanation that this would lead to a subjectivist concept of man, as established in the modern age³⁹. In this regard it should be noted that later, perhaps most di-

³⁸ “Dasein’s totality of Being as care means: ahead-of-itself-already-being-in (a world) as Being-alongside (entities encountered within-the-world)” (*Being and time*, cit., p. 375; orig. p. 249).

³⁹ Something similar holds true for the concept of “living”, which Heidegger replaces with *Dasein* in his 1923 Freiburg lectures *Ontology – The Hermeneutics of Facticity*: “‘Facticity’ is the designation we will use for the character of the being of ‘our’ ‘own’ *Dasein*. More precisely, this expression means: *in each case this*’ *Dasein* in its being-there *for a while at the particular time* (the phenomenon of the ‘awhileness’ of temporal particularity, cf. ‘whiling,’ tarrying for a while, not running away, being-there-at-home-in ..., being-there-involved-in ..., the being-there of *Dasein*) insofar as it is, in the character of its being, *‘there’ in the manner of be-ing*. *Being-there in the manner of be-ing* means: not, and never, to be there primarily as an *object* of intuition and definition on the basis of intuition, as an object of which we merely take cognizance and have knowledge. Rather, *Dasein* is there for itself in the ‘how’ of its own most being. The how of its being opens up and circumscribes the respective “there” which is possible for a while at the particular time. Being- transitive: to be factual life! Being is itself never the possible object of a having, since what is at issue in it, what it comes to, is itself: *being*” (M. Heidegger, *Ontology -*

rectly in his “Letter on Humanism”, Heidegger completely rehabilitated the designation “man”, but by no means in the semantic context of “subject”. Rather, he established humanism as ex-istence, that is, as exposed to the clarity of being, or in the world, being-witness. A passage from Heidegger’s interpretation from his 1936 Rome lecture “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry” (which was reprinted in the book *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*) stands out in relation to the topic discussed here:

Who is man? He is the one who must bear witness to what he is. To bear witness can signify to testify, but it also means to be answerable for what one has testified in one’s testimony. Man is he who he is precisely in the attestation of his own existence. This attestation does not mean a subsequent and additional expression of man’s being; rather, it forms a part of man’s existence. But what should man testify to? To his belonging to the earth. This belonging consists in the fact that man is the inheritor, and the learner of all things. But things, of course, stand in opposition. What keeps things apart in opposition and at the same time joins them together, Hölderlin calls intimacy. The attestation of belonging to this intimacy occurs through the creation of a world and through its rise, as well as through its destruction and decline. The attestation of man’s being, and thus his authentic fulfillment, comes from freedom of decision. Decision takes hold of what is necessary, and places itself in the bond of a highest claim. Man’s being a witness to his belonging among beings as a whole occurs as history. But so that history may be possible, language has been given to man. It is one of man’s goods⁴⁰.

The belief that Heidegger’s thinking is lacking in ethics due to his pronounced ontological orientation was furthered especially through the work of Emanuel Levinas, a philosopher for whom the consideration of vulnerability is central. This is certainly not the place to go into this not only broad but also deep-reaching question of the relationship between ethics and ontology, working on the presupposition that Heidegger goes beyond it in his basic line of thought. A key role in this lies precisely in the laying-out of the existential structure of *Dasein*, which also has key consequences for the understanding of the vulnerability of human existence and the possibility

The Hermeneutics of Facticity, trans. by J. van Buren, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1999, p. 5; orig.: *Ontologie. Hermeneutik der Faktizität*, ed. by K. Bröcker-Oltmanns, GA 63, Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 1988, p. 7).

⁴⁰ M. Heidegger, *Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry*, in K. Hoeller (trans. and introd. by), *Elucidations of Holderlin’s Poetry*, Humanity Books, New York 2000, p. 54; orig.: *Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung*, in *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, GA 4, ed. by W.-F. von Herrmann Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 1981, p. 36.

of witnessing it, especially if we take into account that even authors who generally retain an anti-subjectivist point of view (such as Sartre, Levinas, Ricœur, as well as Derrida and Agamben) still retain subjectivist assumptions⁴¹. We can ask ourselves a crucial question, namely, whether humanity as such could be vulnerable, given that it could not be a witness according to its essential capacity. *Dasein* fulfils man's existential sense of *being-witness* in its mode of *articulation* and *historicity*.

Within the framework of an existential analytics of *Being and Time*, the division of the existential structure of *Dasein*, as a thrown projection (*geworfener Entwurf*) on *state-of-mind*, *understanding*, *discourse*, and *falling*, is key. Above all, through the exposure of the *Dasein*'s state-of-mind, together with falling into the world, a reliable basis for understanding existential vulnerability is given, together with the possibility of its attestation; this is a special topic and is discussed in the second section of the second part of *Being and Time*, *Dasein's Attestation of an Authentic Potentiality for Being, and Resoluteness*⁴².

As Jacques Derrida observed, Heidegger's introduction of *Dasein*'s *attestation* in systematic connection with the *call of conscience*, *guilt*, *anxiety*, *silence*, *being-toward-death* and *authentic resoluteness*⁴³ in the interpretative appropriations of *Being and Time* was insufficiently emphasized and discussed⁴⁴. Paul Ricœur offered a critical analysis of it within his central deliberation of *attestation* in *Oneself as Another* (original: *Soi-même*

⁴¹ See C. Sautereau, *Subjectivité et vulnérabilité chez Ricœur et Levinas*, in «Études ricœuriennes / Ricoeur Studies», 4, 2 (2013), pp. 8-24.

⁴² *Being and Time*, cit., pp. 312-348, orig.: *Die daseinsmäßige Bezeugung eines eigentlichen Seinkönnens und die Entschlossenheit*, pp. 267-300.

⁴³ "Though the call gives no information, it is not merely critical; it is positive, in that it discloses *Dasein*'s most primordial potentiality-for-Being as Being- guilty. Thus conscience manifests itself as an *attestation* which belongs to *Dasein*'s Being – an attestation in which conscience calls *Dasein* itself face to face with its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. Is there an existentially more concrete way of determining the character of the authentic potentiality-for-Being which has thus been attested?" (pp. 334-335; orig., pp. 282-283).

⁴⁴ "Perhaps we will try to show elsewhere (it would require more time and space) that it accords with everything which, beginning with the existential analytics of the thought of being and of the truth of being, reaffirms continuously what we call (in Latin, alas, and in a manner too Roman for Heidegger) a certain *testimonial sacredness* or, we would even go so far as to say, a sworn word [*foi jurée*]. This reaffirmation continues throughout Heidegger's entire work. It resides in the decisive and largely underestimated motif of attestation (*Bezeugung*) in *Sein und Zeit* as well as in all the other motifs that are inseparable from and dependent upon it, which is to say, all the existentials and, specifically, that of conscience (*Gewissen*), originary responsibility or guilt (*Schuldigsein*) and *Entschlossenheit* (resolute determination)" (J. Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. and with an introd. by Gil Anidjar, Routledge, New York-London 2002, pp. 95-96).

comme un autre)⁴⁵. Gert-Jan van der Heiden has recently pointed out the relevance of Heidegger's existential clarification of attestation, also with regard to Ricœur, in his broad attempt at a hermeneutic conceptualization of testimony⁴⁶. What is conspicuously absent in interpretive appropriations of Heidegger's introduction of *attestation* within the hermeneutic situation of *Da-sein* in *Being and Time*⁴⁷ is the insight that it is precisely on the basis of the *attestation* of "the call of conscience" that the hermeneutical *transition to the consideration of the historicity of human existence and co-existence is ensured*⁴⁸. This insight significantly contributes to the fact that we consider the world-historical relevance of the testimony to lie beyond the prevailing subjectivist approach. It is only at the level of this transition – a transition which would prove decisive also for Gadamer's conception of *Wirkungsgeschichte* in *Truth and Method* – that both *recognition of the vulnerability of human existence and responsibility for human co-existence*

⁴⁵ P. Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. by K. Blamey, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1999; orig.: *Soi-même comme un autre*, Le Seuil, Paris 1990. See especially the final chapter, "What Ontology in view", pp. 297-356; orig. "Vers quelle ontologie", pp. 345-410. Ricœur's critique goes in the 'standard direction' – that is, due to the exaggerated ontological emphasis in the concept of "attestation of Self", he sees a lack of ethics in Heidegger. At the same time he also criticizes Levinas's pronounced subordination of the understanding of the other to the ethical or religious moment: "On the one hand, if the injunction coming from the other is not part and parcel of self-attestation, it loses its character of injunction, for lack of the existence of a being-enjoined standing before it as its respondent. If one eliminates this dimension of auto-affection, one ultimately renders the metacategory of conscience superfluous; the category of the other suffices. To Heidegger, I objected that attestation is primordially injunction, or attestation risks losing all ethical or moral significance. To Levinas, I shall object that the injunction is primordially attestation, or the injunction risks not being heard and the self not being affected in the mode of being-enjoined. The profound unity of self-attestation and of the injunction coming from the other justifies the acknowledgment, in its irreducible specificity, of the modality of otherness corresponding, on the plane of the 'great kinds,' to the passivity of conscience on the phenomenological plane" (p. 355; orig. p. 409).

⁴⁶ G.-J. van der Heiden, *The Voice of Misery. A Continental Philosophy of Testimony*, SUNY Press, New York 2020, especially the chapter "An Exceptional Attestation", pp. 151-176. On the hermeneutic conceptualization of testimony see also the author's chapter "Testimony and Engagement. On the Four Elements of Witnessing", in P. Marinescu, C. Ciocan (eds.), *From Witnessing to Testimony*, in «Studia Phaenomenologica», 21 (2021), pp. 21-39.

⁴⁷ In connection with this, see especially Ricœur's referring to the concept of historicity in Heidegger that appears in his *Time and Narrative* (trans. by K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1984; orig.: *Temps et récit. Tome I*, Le Seuil, Paris 1983) and in *Memory, History, and Forgetting* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2004; orig.: P. Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Le Seuil, Paris 2003). See also F. Dastur: *La critique ricœurienne de la conception de la temporalité dans Être et temps de Heidegger*, in «Archives de Philosophie», 47, 4 (2011), pp. 565-580.

⁴⁸ *Being and Time*, cit., pp. 424-455.

can attain true validity. Each depends mainly on how and whether one *testifies*, and this means: how one speaks *silently or aloud* to himself, to others and with others*.

Abstract

The traumatic experience of the past occupies a central place in testimonial literature. The trauma can be so strong for the affected person – for example, in the case of Holocaust victims – that it can significantly hinder or even nullify the possibility of testifying. On the other hand, it is obvious that bearing witness to a negative event from one’s own past presupposes that this event touched, hurt and wounded the witness. In the first, introductory, part of the article I show how the relationship between the existential vulnerability of the witness, the traumatic memory and the possibility of testimony appears to be a special problem, one that goes beyond the individual and collective subject’s psychology. Thus, in the second part of the article, I pay attention to how the crisis of the subjectivist conception of humanity is defined by the experience of nihilism, as it came to light mainly in Nietzsche’s thought and how, in the twentieth century, it became a key topic within humanistic discussions. Contributing to this were violent social upheavals, which triggered a special “historical vulnerability”, which also became one of the key themes in testimonial literature. In this context, in the third part of the article, I outline the relevance of Heidegger’s introduction of existential attestation in going beyond the subjectivist approach in dealing with the phenomena of vulnerability and testimony and their mutual connections, taking into account Levinas’s and Ricoeur’s critical comments. This is introduced from the standpoint of ethics, which are by no means immune from falling into the trap of subjectivism.

Keywords: vulnerability; nihilism; existence; attestation; testimony.

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