Known Unknowns: How Philosophy Has Responded to Fear of the Post–9/11 World

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The whole game of history and power has been turned upside down, as have the conditions of analysis. One must take time to reflect. As long as events were standing still, one had to anticipate and outrun them. But when events accelerate so much, one has to slow down—without becoming engulfed in a jumble of words and in the clouds of war, and without losing sight of the unforgettable flash of images.¹

Can a field as unhistorical as philosophy say anything worthwhile about 9/11, which has been described as not merely historic but world-historical? Giovanna Borradori raises this question in the introduction to her book of interviews, conducted only weeks after the event, with philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida. As she notes, even Aristotle suggests that philosophizing is out of place in such times.² He calls poetry more philosophical than history, because it makes universal claims about “what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do,” while history makes particular ones about “what, say, Alcibiades did or had done to him.”³ The sense that 9/11 was in some way unprecedented—the sense that “everything changed” on that date—certainly makes this view attractive; but, historians being quite as capable as poets or philosophers of making generalizations, it cannot be entirely correct. Borradori turns to G. W. F. Hegel, who coined the notion of a world-historical event, to prove that “nothing is more philosophical than history.”⁴ Even did this not strike

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me as an overstatement, I would venture that one can explain the differences and the similarities between the philosophical and the historical approaches without recourse to Hegel’s enigmatic and controversial theories. When one considers the ends of the disciplines of philosophy and history, the relevance of philosophical reflection to events—world-historical or otherwise—comes into focus.

Insofar as both are meant to make our experience of reality better intelligible, philosophy and history travel alongside each other. Their courses diverge because they aim to illuminate different aspects of experience. Historical claims must always refer at least indirectly to some actual event, and hence historians are prone to make many particular claims. Yet the distinction between history and philosophy runs deeper than that. Historians must seek to document their claims about what has happened, which is to appeal to a kind of perception. This is to say that history is a form of investigation, which in turn is to say that it is a way of providing proof by, as E. R. Emmett aptly puts it, “going and seeing.” Investigation is thus distinct from speculation, or “sitting and thinking.” Isaiah Berlin draws the same distinction, but describes two kinds of investigation.

The history of systematic human thought is largely a sustained effort to formulate all the questions that occur to mankind in such a way that the answers to them will fall into one or other of two great baskets: the empirical, i.e. questions whose answers depend, in the end, on the data of observation; and the formal, i.e. questions whose answers depend on pure calculation, untrammeled by factual knowledge. There is, however, an “intermediate basket, in which all those questions live which cannot easily be fitted into the other two,” and “such questions tend to be called philosophical.” Because philosophy is essentially speculative, its claims need refer only to the structure of concepts that allows one to make sense of events (or of anything of which one can conceive as existing). But, while this fundamental distinction between philosophy and investigative disciplines such as history makes it comprehensible why philosophers will be prone to make universal claims, every investigative question raises questions that belong in Berlin’s third basket. So, as my epigraph from Baudrillard suggests, even the least philosophical historians must at some point sit and think in order to gauge the significance of what they have gone and seen.

This, then, is my answer to the question about what philosophy can say about the ghastly particularities of 9/11: every attempt to understand them historically assumes some philosophical standpoint. But, having (pace Emmett and Berlin) sat and seen documents of 9/11—“the unforgettable flash of images”—over and over again, one must go and think about them. We sit and see because these times, by way of the media, drench us almost unavoidably with historical particulars to which, until 9/11, most of us were indifferent and behind which loom the iconic ruins of the World Trade Center. One common reaction is inchoate fear, giving rise to the question: will it happen