An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts

Existenz

Volume 14, No 1, Spring 2019 ISSN 1932-1066

Creativity and Historical Non-Being in Nikulin's *The Concept of History*

John V. Garner
University of West Georgia
jgarner@westga.edu

Abstract: Dmitri Nikulin's *The Concept of History* raises important questions about the ways historical beings like humans can be said to face non-being (for example, the non-being of death; or of past events or persons; or of future novelties). Here, I discuss three main topics relevant to the book's framework. First, I ask whether the content of and motivation for historical writing must be of exclusively mortal origin. Beyond Nikulin's theory of ahistorical invariant structures, I consider the possibility of ahistorical sources of content or motivation. Second, I engage with the book's concept of beneficial forgetting and express caution regarding the terminology of "mechanisms" or "arts" of forgetting. Third, I engage with the book's conception of productive imagination and suggest that a radical conception of historical novelty may be integrated into Nikulin's theory. Following Nikulin's lead, I emphasize throughout the essay the way that thinking about history demands attentiveness to the ahistorical.

Keywords: Nikulin, Dmitri; ahistorical; correlationism; creation; forgetting; imagination, historical novelty; theodicy.

Introduction

Dmitri Nikulin's *The Concept of History* offers a compelling, complex, and philosophically rich account of the writing of history and of what it means for humans to be historical beings.[1] Professor Nikulin's work has for a long time nourished me with many concepts and lessons that were new to me; hence, rather than providing a critique, I will articulate some questions about those lessons and engage with some responses that are, I believe, possible from within the book's framework geared to understanding history. I pose three main questions, first, one regarding the relationship between historical and ahistorical being; second, one about the notion of beneficial forgetting explored in chapter six; and, third, one about the book's relationship to the possibility of historical novelty. In all these areas, I suggest that thinking about history proves inseparable from thinking about the ahistorical, in several sense of the term.

The Content of History

With regard to the book's account of the basic prerequisites for history, the "Preface" clarifies that history stems from a human being's "attempt at self-preservation" in the face of "possible non-existence."[2] Nikulin clarifies that while we make other attempts

[1] For the opportunity to take part in this dialogue, I would like to thank the organizers of the Karl Jaspers Society of North America, the entire panel, the audience who joined this event at the 2019 meeting at the Central APA, and above all Professor Nikulin.

[2] Dmitri Nikulin, *The Concept of History*, London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. [Henceforth cited as *CH*]

at self-preservation—for example via progeny or soteriologial hopes—these fail to satisfy the deep need that history satisfies, namely the need to overcome loss and to persist for others (*CH* 1, 2, 5, 13). Hence, even if there is no grand Reason in History, good reasons certainly exist to explain histories. Certain invariant structures show up in all histories, and ontological factors such as the human survival-need drive its production. Nikulin describes these invariants both in the "Preface" and in "Chapter 1" (*CH* 15-8). Above all, histories must have both narratives (fabulae) and a list of names of real persons, things, and events (the historical).[3]

My first of the three above-mentioned questions concerns this apparent need that appears to motivate humans to write histories. I understand that if we were not subject to non-being, aware of this fate, and motivated to overcome it, then we would not write history. However, even if the survival-drive is a necessary condition for history, this does not necessarily establish it as the core of what motivates humans to write a history. I am unsure as to whether the book implies this claim, and hence I ask: Might the motive for writing history come to us not only from the self-preservation need, but also from the awareness we have of some other content that is in itself non-historical, specifically a content not dependent on being preserved in a historical account or in memory?

I will return momentarily to this question of the source of history's motive and content. Yet, to frame the question better, it is helpful to remember that for Nikulin the past's very existence as past depends on memory. The past exists as past only insofar as it is remembered-as-not-present (*CH* 128). While history is truly "about the past," this is a past retained in and "for the sake of the present" (*CH* 174). The book's account does not appear to be committed to constructivism, that is, to the view that humans only ever consciously construct the past and the past does not exist separately from that construction. Nevertheless, it does seem committed, if I understand it correctly, to a specific analogue of correlationism. Quentin Meillassoux describes the concept as follows: "By 'correlation' we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.[4] Nikulin thus seems to claim that the existence of X as past, and the existence of remembering beings who recall X as past, are correlated. Separately from this correlation, there is no being-as-past of X.

To clarify Nikulin's commitment to a kind of correlationism, one might want to consider, for example, a historian who is building a rich archive of items and stories about a real acquaintance named Callicles. Nobody else leaves any record of Callicles. When Callicles dies, the archivist buries the archive, tells nobody about it, and then dies. A thousand years later the archive is found, analyzed, and incorporated into various extant historical narratives. Now, during the period while the archive is undiscovered and unremembered, what is its status? Clearly, *qua* archive, it would indeed seem to exist as unremembered in each of the moments during which it is unremembered. I do not think Nikulin's account would dispute this point. However, a more central question regards the status of Callicles. During the period in which the archive remains undiscovered and Callicles is unremembered, does he exist as past? It would seem that, on the book's account, this assertion could not be affirmed. It would seem that until and unless Callicles' archive is discovered and remembered, he does not exist as past. This is equivalent to saying that Callicles' existence-as-past depends in some way on him being remembered. It is not entirely clear whether the book's view of history really implies the strongest version of such a view, as there are several possible ways to read Nikulin's claim. On one view, it can be seen as implying that Callicles does not exist at all during the lost period. That seems unlikely, however, since he will exist later on when being discovered. On a second view, Callicles merely does not exist historically (or as-past) during the lost period, but he does exist as a material remnant in the archive. In either of these readings, however, the discovery of the archive still somehow "creates Callicles into being": in the first option it creates him into being tout court from non-being; in the second option it creates him into historical being, from historical non-being, and from material being. If neither of those readings is accurate, then perhaps, third, one would prefer to say that, in the lost archive, Callicles does exist as historical (or as-past) precisely

[3] Regarding the need for survival, it would perhaps help to put this concept into conversation with Benedict de Spinoza's *conatus*.

[4] Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, transl. Ray Brassier, London, GB: Bloomsbury 2008, p. 5.

because he is still remembered by the archive itself. This reading would posit that an archive, even while it is not remembered by anything else, somehow still remembers Callicles and constitutes a memory.[5] In short, it is unclear which one of these interpretations of Nikulin's thesis would be preferable.

Now, regardless of how one clarifies this general question of the "being of the past," what is clear is that, for Nikulin, the content that enters into histories is specifically a content that is mortal and dependent on mortal beings remembering it. Hence, I will now return to the earlier question, namely the relationship between the historical and the ahistorical. In an effort to elucidate Nikulin's assertions, it is prudent to consider several related possibilities: first, the possibility that a historian could be motivated by an ahistorical source; second, the possibility that there is content in a history that is not dependent on being preserved historically by memory; and, third, the possibility that Nikulin's invariant structures of history themselves have such a status. To this end I pose a thought experiment about a writer of a history by the name of, say, Eve. For the sake of this experiment I posit that there are some ahistorical truths, such as Plato's Form of the three, the moral law of Kant, or Nikulin's invariant structures of history. As Eve starts to inquire into and achieve awareness of some such ahistorical truths she might, in being aware of them, become motivated to share these truths. Of course, while sharing them, she inevitably also finds herself to be in the human condition of being subject to the fate of death.[6] Thus, she does indeed set out to construct in a historical way her expression of this ahistorical content; she writes with an inherited narrative constrained by a list of mortal persons, places, and things that have really existed, and by doing so she meets Nikulin's basic definition of history. But, always and throughout, her focus is on expressing the ahistorical content too. Of course, I mean to express no dogma here, but rather only to pose Eve as a hypothetical example. In her case, the human desire to survive seems merely concomitant. Furthermore, the content she introduces into history is not memory-dependent but rather enters into memory and history only subsequently. Finally, if such ahistorical sources seem possible, then Nikulin's structural invariants may be conceived not merely as empty structural determinants but also as ahistorical determinants of history's content itself. If so, then they may point to the possibility of additional ahistorical sources worthy of consideration.

Historical Losses

My next point brings me to the question whether it would be advantageous to humans to let go of the writing of history. In other words, does history have an intrinsic value, to the extent that if there were beings who lack the fate of temporal destruction, it would be desirable to impose this fate upon them in order to allow them to bring forth history? Nikulin does speak about the Greek concept of *nous* as being ahistorical: "Reason cannot have any memory or recollection, because it does not need it: memory is superfluous for the thinking that at any moment thinks only itself and always in the same way" (*CH* 127). Thus, unless history has an intrinsic value, the writing of history becomes superfluous for purely intellectual beings. Yet if, by contrast, history does have an intrinsic value, on one interpretation, it follows that even non-historical beings (if there are any) ought, normatively speaking, to become historical beings like humans. However, this viewpoint appears to propagate unnecessary destructibility. Obviously it appears to be odd to assume that even if one were not subjected to death, it might be best to make oneself subject to death, so as to be historical. If this sort of interpretation is correct, then it could be argued that the book's thesis supports a classic *felix culpa* argument: since history is good, it is good for an ahistorical being to fall into the fate of being destructible.

I became motivated to ask this question because of an extremely interesting section in chapter six (*CH* 142-9). There, Nikulin addresses a consideration that threatens to challenge what he calls the historical imperative. He writes, "that a name must be preserved in and for history is itself a *historical imperative*" (*CH* 109). This is the imperative to preserve names for the historical archive, so as to be able to retain them in a memory and as a history. What potentially threatens this imperative is the possibility that some forgetting could be a good thing. If I understand it correctly, chapter six's section on

[5] On a similar debate, Jan Assmann argues that his concept of a "cultural memory" that is embodied in things is not merely a metaphor. Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press 2007, p. 22.

[6] In addition to being subject to death, Eve is also subject to a radical newness that Hannah Arendt calls "birth" and Cornelius Castoriadis calls "imaginary creation." See note 11 below.

oblivion defends a view that is attributed to Hans Jonas and posits the necessity and goodness of certain kinds of forgetting or of historical losses (*CH* 142). Specifically, it seems to claim that memory's very function—and its very goodness—requires "a *sui generis* trauma"; that forgetting helps prepare humans "for a new start in a new life"; that forgetting makes room for the higher capacity of recollection; and that forgetting is needed to help mitigate against cases of remembering too many confusing details (*CH* 143-5). Furthermore, Nikulin even raises the value of setting up "arts of forgetting." While I find this section to be the most difficult in the book, I read it to mean that involuntary forgetting is our fate, and also that voluntary forgetting should sometimes be pursued as a planned practice (*CH* 145).

These details pose an interpretative challenge. On the one hand, there is the historical imperative to preserve things. Yet, on the other hand, "developing and sustaining individual and cultural mechanisms of oblivion" seems to be construed as being valuable (*CH* 145). Depending on how one reads this passage, therefore, perhaps one might worry that it seems to retain the justificatory side of the theodical views of history. Clearly, Nikulin criticizes the use of historical narratives to defend past atrocities as being justified (for example, their being justified as part of an overall greater whole or project).[7] However, one area where a sacrificial—and perhaps this term is more suited than theodical—conception of the ritual of writing history appears to be endorsed, is where Nikulin says, "Drinking from the river of Lethe allows one to forget the past and in this way to get ready for a new start in a renewed life" (*CH* 143). This passage recalls, I think, the organic metaphor used by Friedrich Nietzsche: "sometimes the partial destruction of organs, the reduction in their number (for example, by the destruction of intermediary parts) can be a sign of increasing vigour and perfection."[8] Hence, I wonder if there is, by analogy, an organic-sacrificial element built into Nikulin's concept of an art of forgetting. Of course, I do not mean to suggest that his book proposes a teleological history. It clearly does not. However, these passages suggest that humans should harness or even propagate some historical non-being as part of an institution of a historical way of life, a so-called renewed life. If so, this argument can be taken to justify setting up institutions of intentional destruction ("mechanisms of oblivion"), thereby exposing itself to the critique that humans are already subject to enough losses. After all, historical details (and also possibly narratives or narrative-kinds) do seem to fall incessantly and inevitably into the realm of "historical non-being." Since these cases of non-preservation or loss are so inevitably pervasive, frequent, and inexhaustible it is difficult to accept any argument that would justify making more of them. Hence, my larger question concerns how the conditional value of forgetting is compatible with the imperative of preservation. I pose this point strictly as a question, for Nikulin clearly states later that "memory, recollection, and remembering, and not forgetting the past, is the task of history" (*CH* 145).

Here is an alternative reading of this section in chapter six. Rather than justifying intentional destruction, the section can be read as simply positing that in moving on from traumas, one must attend to and preserve other things besides the traumatic memory. This art of moving on thus aims to sustain other goods; and the resultant forgetting is accidental. At times, the book suggests this line of argument:

> The way out is the cultivation of an "art of forgetting"…This does not mean, however, that one has to get rid of a past that might appear uncomfortable or traumatic, but rather that one has to remember and incorporate the past into a history as meaningful and perhaps painful but not actually hurting. A voluntary act of forgetting means, then, a remembering that heals the pain of the memory of the past. [*CH* 145]

If the claim here is that the bad of forgetting is a

[7] Perhaps the best term for this kind of justification is not theodicy but rather "sacrificial history." Adapting René Girard's theory, a sacrificial ritual of remembering might demand of humans to sacrifice (in this context: to not preserve, or to forget) some historical events or persons or memories so as to make it possible to institute, or to reinstitute, a collective ritual, memory, or historical way of life. In short, the danger here seems to me that, just as one might make persons or events non-existent as part of the preservation of them (as being dead) in sacrificial ritual, so too might one intentionally set up a mechanism to help us to not attend to, or to forget, the historical being of someone, and we might do this as a way of instituting a grander life-renewing ritual, such as the ritual of history (*CH* 110-1). See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, transl. Patrick Gregory, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press 1977, p. 277.

[8] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, transl. Carol Diethe, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 2007, Part 2, Section 12, pp. 51-2.

by-product of the good of attentive remembering, forgetting might be construed as mere collateral damage (justified by double-effect, or the like). This reading would accord with Nikulin's concern about *hypermnesia* as clouding precision, since the idea there seems to be that one needs to avoid retaining all details in order to remember effectively (*CH* 144). However, my question here concerns the issue of whether the book posits that it is good that certain historical details get lost (because their loss is part of a greater good). Of course, loss of historical detail might be inevitable. Yet, if forgetting is seen as being bad and merely as a collateral damage, then—like collateral damage in just war theory's *post bellum* category—would not the proper task of the art *qua* art be the avoidance of, or reparation for, the forgetting? If affirmative, then it seems odd to refer to this situation as an art of forgetting. It is rather the bringing about of the opposite outcome that needs to be recognized as an art, namely the avoidance, as much as possible, of all forgetting. This means that for any losses that occur as by-products, new arts to repair or mitigate those losses are to be the desired objective. In other words, it is not desirable to institute mechanisms of destruction.

Novelty in History

Another concern that is more loosely connected to the concept of non-being relates to novelty in history. To what extent does newness emerge in human future existence; or in other words, is there *ex nihilo* novelty? Nikulin claims that while historical narratives are transmitted by involuntary memory, even this involuntary transmission is accomplished by "productive imagination" (*CH* 141). This power creatively preserves extant narratives (always with slight differences), thus making their transmission non-mechanistic. Moreover, one can also use "reproductive imagination" to critically improve inherited history, either through re-narration or through instituting technical practices or media (mnemotechnics, archives, and so on) that preserve or uncover more details (*CH* 140). This account suggests, happily I think, that humans are not buried in an unfree manner within inherited thinking. While the critical-rational power is limited to reshaping and archiving, humans nevertheless do have some autonomy in determining the flow of narratives, the organization of the archive, and the particular themes that are granted attentiveness, namely the memoranda. Nikulin describes these memoranda as the contents that the fabulae deem worth remembering, thereby contrasting them with memorabilia (*CH* 132). In general, it thus seems that some control over our human attention occurs, according to Nikulin, both through how archives are being ordered and how (and which) fabulae are being made dominant. Thus, for Nikulin, freedom in history occurs as "the freedom to create a new history" and indeed to create a new history that retells an extant narrative (*CH* 109).

Nevertheless, by restricting rational control and freedom to the human use of the re-productive imagination, Nikulin arguably inscribes any social autonomy or freedom within a grander social heteronomy. Apparently, he excludes the possibility of an original autonomy of the instituting social power, as is defended, for example, by Cornelius Castoriadis.[9] Indeed, Nikulin treats "productive imagination" primarily as preservative and interpretive; for example he writes that it "produces a new interpretation of and within a fabula" (*CH* 141). In other words, as I understand Nikulin's position, human aspirations with respect to the writing of history must always be bound to re-writing an extant narrative. No new narratives seem possible, for one must instead simply actualize the possibilities that an extant narrative, as already extant, can offer. Hence, on this view, extant history seems to contain or dictate all possibilities for history, and thus there seem to be no other possibilities whatsoever for history, other than the extant ones. However, the question remains whether there could be a pure creation—or other purely novel emergence of possibilities—that might originally enter into a context or extant narrative. Such an original novelty, admittedly, could never really enter into a history unless it impacts that history's fabula or narrative. Yet, this entry, or new impact on a narrative, does not have to be described as an interpretation of that narrative. Certainly, anything new that enters into a history will be a newness that, in effect, marks out continuities and differences with and in that extant narrative. But this is not to say that it originates wholly from that extant narrative. In short, it seems here that Nikulin restricts productive imagination; he appears to make production a force subordinate to reproduction, one differing from it only by degree. For productive imagination appears here to

[9] Cornelius Castoriadis, "Power, Politics, Autonomy," in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. and transl. David A. Curtis, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 1991, pp. 143-74.

always and only ever re-tell. Nikulin writes: "A fabula is always told and retold (at least, slightly) differently: it is the same by being always other, because fabula always allows and presupposes an interpretation" (*CH* 141). This view seems to rule out the classic Kantian (and arguably Platonist) notion of pure, *a priori* syntheses,[10] as well as strong senses of novelty in history, arguably found in Arendt and Castoriadis.[11]

In other words, I suggest that one can enter into a stream and impact its flow without that act being simply an interpretation of the stream. While extant narratives, and innumerable other situational factors, are always going to be the conditions in and with which novelty emerges, nevertheless those extant factors need not, for that reason, be the sole or core source of this novelty's content (*CCI* 64-5). Even if an emergent novelty will always yield continuities with extant narratives, to concede this point does not seem to me to be the same as admitting that a novelty is merely an interpretation (with differences) of the same. Perhaps unprecedented, novel content generates, due to its effects within the extant, a variety of differences and samenesses within the extant. I believe that we may conceive of, or at least attend to and welcome, such a pure newness.

In conclusion, the motivator for and content of a history can very well be an ahistorical reality or event that, in the effects of its emergence is given a proper historical place. Radically new possibilities emerging in and for history can be conceived as having either an ahistorical source that exists-as-ahistorical, or as an instance of pure novelty *ex nihilo*. If this is so, then in either case the thinking of history—of its form and content—cannot be separated from careful attentiveness to ahistorical being, or to historical non-being.

[10] Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics: With Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and transl. Gary Hatfield, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2004, pp. 5-31.

[11] Hannah Arendt, "What is Freedom?," in *Between Past and Future, Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, NY: Viking Press 1968, pp. 165-71. Cornelius Castoriadis, "Individual, Society, Rationality, History," in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. and transl. David A. Curtis, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 1991, pp. 47-80, here pp. 64-5 and passim. [Henceforth cited as *CCI*]