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Experience as an Issue of the Humanities.

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Experience as an Issue of the Humanities

The polyphony of the debate on experience

The question of “modernity as experience” undertaken by the cultural scholar can take on a number of forms. It triggers both reflection on the form of the presence of the concept of experience in contemporary discussion on modern culture and consideration of the role attributed to culture in the articulation of the experience of modernity. This seems appropriate if we remember that the very idea of culture ultimately crystallizes as a modern idea. The question also arises of whether today’s advocates of “experience,” comparing it with the “prison of language,” would also talk about culture in such penitentiary terms. This is probable in reference to its transcendentalist, neo-Kantian conceptions as well as those which reduce culture to the sphere of discourse; but can this metaphor be applied equally well to other ways of conceiving it? But if we think of experience not as “against” or “outside of” culture, then the key question is whether it occurs in the form of a kind of *locus* of experience, or rather constitutes its *organon* (experiences as an expression of experiencing culture, of the qualitatively anthropomorphised world), or whether it is thought of as its *modus* (e.g. modern modality). The answer of course depends on the decision of how both culture and experience are understood.

In his 2005 book *Songs of Experience*, a kind of compendium of modern conceptions of experience, the American historian and scholar of social issues Martin Jay admits that even if in the contemporary debate on culture it is hard to find a more controversial category, “experience” is becoming a genuine issue of cultural theory. The context of his statement seems to suggest that this in fact means a genuine

issue of the humanities and social sciences.¹ The historian and philosopher of history Frank Ankersmit deemed “experience” to be a kind of antidote to the “crisis of representationism” affecting the entire humanities and clearly evident in confrontation with the issues of the Holocaust.² Meanwhile, the authors of *The Anthropology of Experience*, a mid-1980s book edited by Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner, attribute the role of the original metaphor reorganising the arena of explorations in the humanities to “experience.”³ Bruner writes that studies in anthropology of experience grow out of opposition to the functionalist-structuralist orthodoxy, and are linked to the demise of the influences of neo-Kantian tradition. Turner, the initiator of this current of anthropological studies, refers both to the hermeneutic, Diltheyan, and the pragmatist, Deweyan conception of experience. In his afterword to *Anthropology of Experience*, Clifford Geertz notes that for each of the authors “experience,” this category that is elusive and yet key to the whole collection of essays, represents a kind of theoretical touchstone of self-identification, without which none of them can get by and yet which visibly resists all of them. Significantly, practically everybody who writes about experience today begins their discussion with the caveat that they are well aware that they are treading onto extremely thin ice. The title of Jay’s work *Songs of Experience*, borrowed from Blake, demonstrates the elusiveness of the subject of the debate on experience, as well as its remarkable polyphony. I suspect that the fact that the discussion on experience takes place amid the hubbub of languages of various disciplines and on numerous cognitive levels is the root of the tendency for the identity of the subject to be deceptive and any attempts to systematize it to be somewhat difficult.

The ambiguity and elusiveness of “experience,” as well as the perception of studies on experience as a sign of naivety in cognitive theory or illusory hope of conceptualization of immediacy, are often among the reasons for which the question of experience is ignored. Of course, Richard Rorty removed it from his lexicon, although it is a key category of pragmatism with particular importance for his master, Dewey.⁴ Rorty went so far as to suggest that Dewey should desist from the term “experience,” since it embroils us in the myth of what is given, together with its “fundamentalist” and “metaphysical” consequences. Although Dewey consid-

¹ M. Jay *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2005. Cf. also M. Jay “The Limits of Limit-Experience: Bataille and Foucault,” in: *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, MA 1998.

² E. Domańska “Od postmodernistycznej narracji do postmodernistycznego doświadczenia. Rozmowa z F. Ankersmitem,” *Teksty Drugie*. 1996 no. 2/3; F. Ankersmit *Narracja, reprezentacja, doświadczenie. Studia z teorii historiografii*, Universitas, Kraków 2004.

³ *The Anthropology of Experience*, eds V.W. Turner, E.M. Bruner, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1986.

⁴ Cf. R. Rorty *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1982, here: “Dewey’s Metaphysics”; idem *Objectivism, Relativity, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991.

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ered a change to the title of his book *Experience and Nature* to *Culture and Nature*, he came down firmly behind “experience,” as Richard Shusterman, defending the fundamental character of the issue of experience in Dewey, wrote in his polemic with Rorty.⁵ His project of somaesthetics invokes and looks for the foundations of Dewey’s conception of aesthetic experience and non-discursive experience.⁶

In today’s reflections in the humanities and philosophy, the trail of confrontation of experience with language and discursiveness is a very important one. It seems that the problem of non-discursive, critical experience dominated the other voices of “songs of experience” of later modernity. Inaccessible, absent, impossible experience is its form, in a certain sense critical, which was revealed together with the issues of the Holocaust, and is looking for room to express itself, making a clear transformation within the arena of enquiry in the humanities.⁷

The protagonists of the last chapter of the aforementioned work by Jay are Foucault, Barthes, and Bataille; it is titled “The Poststructuralist Reconstruction of Experience,” and is an obvious polemic with the Anglo-American reception of poststructuralist ideas, a reception which according to the author is unjustified in incorporating the elimination of the question of experience to poststructuralism. In his earlier article on the limits of limit-experience, it is to poststructuralist thinkers that Jay credits the shift of reflection on experience out of a certain impasse:

It is... the great merit of Foucault, Bataille, and other so-called poststructuralist defenders of its [experience’s] importance that they have forced us to go beyond the sterile choice between naïve experiential immediacy and the no less discursive mediation of that experience that has for too long seemed our only alternative.⁸

In this context, Agamben’s idea, quoted below, should be read as a kind of challenge, and not a withdrawal or lament:

The question of experience can be approached nowadays only with an acknowledgement that it is no longer accessible to us. For just as modern man has been deprived of his biography, his experience has likewise been expropriated. Indeed, his incapacity to have and communicate experience is perhaps one of the few self-certainties to which he can lay claim.⁹

⁵ R. Shusterman *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*, Routledge, New York 1997, Here: “Somatic Experience. Foundation or Reconstruction?”; idem “Dewey on Experience: Foundation or Reconstruction,” in: *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. XXXVI, no. 2.

⁶ Provoked by Rorty, Jerzy Kmita and Anna Pałubicka spoke in defence of “experience,” albeit from different positions from Shusterman, in favour of the cultural (in a sociopragmatic understanding of the term) character of all experience; cf. J. Kmita, A. Pałubicka “Problem użyteczności pojęcia doświadczenia,” in: *Poszukiwanie pewności i jego postmodernistyczna dyskwalifikacja*, ed. J. Such, Wydawnictwo Naukowe IF UAM, Poznań 1992.

⁷ Cf. R. Nycz “Jak opisać doświadczenie, którego nie ma?,” *Teksty Drugie* 2004 no. 5.

⁸ M. Jay “The Limits of Limit-Experience,” 73.

⁹ G. Agamben *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, London 1993 (orig. Ital. ed. 1978), 13, cited in: M. Jay *Songs*, 2.

From cognizing to experiencing the world

The British philosopher Michael Oakeshott, author of the treatise *Experience and its Modes*, saw “experience” as one of the most difficult words in the philosophical dictionary, and the scholar of experience as particularly at risk from the traps of insurmountable contradictions.¹⁰ His book went almost against the tide of the philosophical mores of the time. Amid British philosophy, which was going through a certain retreat from Hegel, he proclaimed himself indebted to *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* (which, as Heidegger recalled, was originally called *The Phenomenology of Experience*) and to Francis Herbert Bradley’s *Appearance and Reality*, which was Hegelian in spirit and idealistic in its significance. These Hegelian references certainly have much to do with the fact that his views are cited today, since the contemporary debate on experience essentially takes place either in opposition to the Hegelian conception of experience or by engaging it in discussion (cf. Gadamer, Heidegger, Lyotard, and Adorno).¹¹ According to Oakeshott, “The real world... is the world of experience,” and the titular modalities of experience are determined by the historically variable principles of its coherence. At the time when he wrote his treatise, three modalities in particular seemed important to him: history, meaning the world *sub specie praeteritorum*: i.e., the world of changing identities; the world of practical life – the world *sub specie voluntaris*, but also *sub specie moris* – consisting of acts and desire and disgust, approval and disapproval; and science – the world *sub specie quantitatis*. Almost three decades later, in an essay from the late 1950s, he also demanded attention for the modality of experience, which he associated with contemplation, and generally referred to as poetry.¹² Oakeshott appealed for wariness of the error of *ignoratio elenchi*, meaning not to mix up various modalities of experience, between which there were no simple relations. It seems, though, that just as for the beginnings of modernity differentiating various modalities of experience was characteristic (in the aforementioned treatise, Jay writes of the religious experience and aesthetic experience emerging in the 18th century from outside of cognitive experience), attempts to question the autonomy of these orders of experience seem to be characteristic of late modernity.

Oakeshott warned against the inclination to excessively easy extrapolation of philosophical conceptions beyond philosophy itself.¹³ Even with this caution in

¹⁰ M. Oakeshott *Experience and its Modes*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985.

¹¹ Cf. H.G. Gadamer *Truth and Method*, trans. rev. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 1975); M. Heidegger *Hegel’s Concept of Experience*, trans. anon., Harper & Row, New York 1989; J.-F. Lyotard *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. G. Van Den Abbeele, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1983; T. Adorno *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton, New York, Seabury Press 1973; K. Krzemińska “Pojęcie doświadczenia u Adorno – zarys wstępny,” in: *Marksyzm po Marksie. Studia i szkice z dziejów filozofii marksistowskiej*, Warszawa 1998.

¹² Cf. M. Oakeshott *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind. An Essay*, Bowes & Bowes, Cambridge 1959.

¹³ Incidentally, Oakeshott’s treatise is at the same time a presentation of an original conception of philosophy as full of experience, and therefore contributes to the dispute over the form of philosophical experience, within which phenomenology,

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mind, we can carefully observe that modern philosophy seen from afar, and thus with a view that misses sometimes important details, interested in the subject and consciousness, can be recognized as a kind of theory and metatheory of experience, an experience whose *organon* is constituted above all by cognition.¹⁴ The detranscendentalization of thought, its historicization and existential sensitivity, bring with them the idea of experience, the instrument of which is a broad view of our experience of the world. The key category here is that of sense (definitely not reduced to meaning), and for all the uncertainty as to what sense is, it would be difficult to conceive and describe experience without it. Certain trends of poststructuralist thought force us to think about experience (or in the place of experience) as a kind of experimenting with the world. The widespread revival in interest in the question of experience is linked with the existential, ontological – and not epistemological – perspective of thinking about it. Experience, together with its “existentialization,” ceases to be a foundation or verification of certainty of knowledge, and all the more often is conceived as an object, or even an aporia of it, that is particularly hard to get to.

The uncertainty of showing and experiencing

There is uncertainty not only in knowledge of experience, but also as part of experience itself. I would like to cite two ideas of witnesses of modernity. The first of them comes from the 16th century, from Michel de Montaigne, according to Stephen Toulmin and Tzvetan Todorov¹⁵ an undervalued advocate of modernity:

There is no desire more natural than that of knowledge. We try all ways that can lead us to it; where reason is wanting, we therein employ experience,

Per varios usus Artem experientia fecit
Exemplo monstrante viam,

Which is a means more weak and cheap; but truth is so great a thing that we ought not to disdain any mediation that will guide us to it. Reason has so many forms that we know not to which to take; experience has no fewer.¹⁶

The second was Zofia Nałkowska's succinct thought from 400 years later, in the 20th century: “Reality can be withstood, as it is not all shown in experience.”¹⁷

hermeneutics, and pragmatism depict their procedures by describing the experiences of the types applicable to them: phenomenological, hermeneutic, or the experience of “pragmatic” practising of philosophy. Richard Shusterman's *Practicing Philosophy* might be seen as an attempt to present this last one.

¹⁴ Cf. M. Szulakiewicz *Od transcendentalizmu do hermeneutyki*, Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej, Rzeszów 1998.

¹⁵ S. Toulmin *Cosmopolis. The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992; T. Todorov *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*, trans. Carol Casman, Princeton UP, Princeton, NJ 2002.

¹⁶ M. de Montaigne *The Complete Essays*, trans. Charles Cotton, Digireads, 2009. 756.

¹⁷ Z. Nałkowska *Dzienniki*, vol. V: 1939-1945, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1996. 445.

The time and register of these statements can be explained neither from the understanding of the truth nor from reality. Incidentally, in their return from exile both concepts seem to be back in favour, partly in the context of their consideration of “experience.” Among the significant characteristics of experiencing the world emerging from these quotations are uncertainty, “merciful” incompleteness, the presence of the dimension of “acute” involvement, but also multiformity. Numerous interpretations have been made of Montaigne’s essay *Of Experience*, but I would like to focus upon his emphasis on the uncertainty of experience. This was also stressed by Agamben in his reading of Montaigne, paradoxically seeing in it the source of the authority of experience, which “is incompatible with certainty.” When “an experience has become measurable and certain, it immediately loses its authority.”¹⁸

Another form of uncertainty of experience is its “negativity,” in the sense given by Gadamer, as openness to that which does not confirm expectations, but also results in a kind of defeat of self-knowledge.

The truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience. This is why a person who is called experienced has become so not only through experiences but is also open to new experiences....

The experienced person proves to be...radically undogmatic....The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfilment not in definitive knowledge itself but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself.¹⁹

Perhaps the expression “self-understanding” which I used, and which I found in modern Protestant tradition, but also in Heidegger’s linguistic tradition, is one that leads to error. This new word essentially means that there is no room here for the immovable certainty of self-knowledge. The word “self-knowledge” rather contains a pietistic subtext, and is a reminder that man is unable to understand himself, and that the path of faith should lead through this failure of self-understanding and self-certainty. This also goes for the hermeneutic use of this word.²⁰

Nałkowska’s succinct thought addresses the fact that the foundation of experience is a certain form of the world making itself available which is at the same time its affection involving the subject: in the sense in which the Aristotelian affection (*paschein, passio*) is connected with action (*poiein, actio*). It appears that all that in humanist literature has been described as the explosion of post-memory, as the post-traumatic culture, and which has resulted in discussion on the aporias of studies in the humanities, is, to use the rhetoric invoked by Nałkowska’s ideas, one of the results of the expression of this unbearable reality that is repressed in our culture.

¹⁸ G. Agamben *Infancy and History*, 18, quoted in: M. Jay *Songs...* 272.

¹⁹ H.G. Gadamer *Truth and Method*. 350.

²⁰ H.G. Gadamer *Dekonstrukcja i hermeneutyka* [Deconstruction and hermeneutics], Polish trans. P. Dehnel, in: *Gadamer i Wrocław*, eds. K. Bal, J. Wilk, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 1997. 157.

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Laurence L. Langer wrote of the neutralization of the Holocaust through the overuse of this occurrence, and its dramatic circumstances, in order to strengthen one's own convictions on the universal properties of the human world.²¹ There is no doubting the existence of such a danger, but abandoning any attempt to understand that which defies understanding also seems undesirable and threatening in its consequences. It is in this question of the Holocaust that a particular clarity was taken on by the issue of the cognitive possibility and applicability, and not just the cognitive representation of experience, as well as the problem of bearing witness to these traumatic events. In Polish, this proximity between experience and testimony also translates into a common etymology.²² Dorota Głowacka once asked whether Holocaust literature is an expression of a new conception of subjectivity, and the survivor a paradigmatic embodiment of the witness, or whether, conversely, the emergence of the new discursive genre that is Holocaust literature caused a consideration of subjectivity in terms of bearing witness.²³ Among the authors she cites as tackling this problem independently from Levinas, alongside Kelly Oliver, Cathy Caruth, and Dominick LaCapra, was Giorgio Agamben, to whose conception of testimony I would like to refer, in the search for factors determining the possible role of the structure of testimony in studying human experiences.

As suggested by the question posed in the original title of his book, "What remains of Auschwitz?," Agamben aims to address the aporia of humanistic studies that goes with the accessibility of the experiences of others, and possibility of bearing testimony and voicing them.²⁴ He is firmly against any positions which consider it better to keep quiet about Auschwitz. For if confrontation with this experience forces us to test the limits of language and possibilities of articulating something that is resisted, then the author of *Quel che resta di Auschwitz* would like to undertake such an attempt; in effect it is this that comprises the content and the seeming paradox of the premise of his book – "hear out that which has not been said." Yet, he argues, if inexpressibility is to signify the impossibility of any articulation, the separation from language, then this is a doubly dangerous procedure, since it either represents a kind of repetition of the murderous gesture of the perpetrators, or endeavours to assign a mystical prestige to the extermination. As a result of this argument, Agamben, despite his diligent efforts to analyze the understanding and history of the concept of "Holocaust," exposes himself to numerous attacks by removing it from his lexicon, as he considers it to be a misleading word. Soshana Felman and Dori Laub once proposed understanding the concept of the Shoah or Holocaust as an "event without a witness." Agamben treated this suggestion as a kind

²¹ L.L. Langer "Neutralizowanie Holokaustu" [The neutralization of the Holocaust] Polish trans. J. Mikos, *Literatura na Świecie*. 2004 no. 1-2.

²² W. Bory. *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2005.

²³ D. Głowacka "Jak echo bez źródła". Podmiotowość jako dawanie świadectwa a literatura Holocaustu, *Teksty Drugie* 2003 no. 6.

²⁴ G. Agamben *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (New York 2002), orig. title *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*.

of challenge, provoking him to consider both the structures of testimony, its aporia, and the state of the witness him/herself. He believes that the conviction in the inaccessibility of these events comes not from the difficulties with passing on intimate testimony, but from the contradictions that lie in the testimony itself. As Agamben himself indicates, his book takes the form of an extended commentary on the testimony of the writings of Primo Levi, the Italian Jew who survived Auschwitz, author of *If This Is a Man* and *The Drowned and the Saved*. Although it would seem that Levi was an excellent example of a witness, having become a writer for the sole reason of testifying and as the imperative of bearing witness was the main motif of his mission as a writer, Agamben, following the suggestion of Levi himself, sees as the most complete witnesses those known in camp jargon as “Muslims.” This meant prisoners whose physical and psychological decline had reached such a state that known categories – physiological, medical and ethical – had become useless. It was not so much even the line between life and death that marked the existence of these beings, as that between human and non-human. Agamben points to the striking fact that for almost half a century the “Muslims” were almost invisible in the historical studies that described the extreme experiences at the camp. Agamben therefore agrees with Primo Levi’s intention in viewing as actual witnesses those who do not speak, who cannot speak, in whose name others speak. As I understand it, the “Muslim” is at once the name of a certain aporia, a sort of empty space, or rather a certain kind of silence, a gap, the unexpressed that forms part of the structure of testimony. Listening to the witness, according to Agamben we have to interrogate this silence. Expounding his conception of the witness and testimony, Agamben goes back to the Latin and Greek etymology of the word “witness.” Latin distinguishes the witness treated as a kind of arbitrator in a dispute between two sides, someone neutral, a “third” party (*testis*), from a witness as one who has experienced certain occurrences from beginning to end, and can therefore testify (*superstes*). Agamben is more interested in the witness in the latter, one might say non-judicial sense, but these linguistic contemplations become the basis for examination of the question of what is according to the author the dangerous mixing and muddling of ethical, legal and theological categories in discussions on the camps. “Guilt,” “responsibility,” “innocence,” “forgiveness” – these words are all entangled in legal language and legal contexts. For Agamben, this confusion of the law, morality and theology is responsible for the fact that for long decades the process of thinking about Auschwitz came to a halt. Meanwhile, the Greek word for “witness” – *martis* (*martyr*) – refers to martyrdom and memory. The idea of the martyr becomes the source of certain complications. Agamben claims that what happened in the camps has little in common with martyrdom, therefore citing Bruno Bettelheim’s conviction that “by naming the victims of Nazism martyrs we falsify their fate.” It is here that the aforementioned critical consideration of the term “Holocaust” appears, as well as “Shoah,” if we remember that in biblical language this word often implies the idea of divine punishment. In his analyses of the Greek etymology of “witness,” however, Agamben highlights what he thinks is an instructive aspect of the early

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Christian texts of the Fathers of the Church, which show that the martyr doctrine always contains a certain attempt to judge the scandal of senseless death, trying to rationalize irrational execution and struggling with its absurdity. His etymological quest also leads him to a further Latin term to shed some light on and specify the meaning of “witness.” Alongside the witness as a mediator – *testis* – and as somebody who experienced the event about which he is testifying – *superstes* – he also gives the concept of witness as author – *auctor*. But Agamben is not interested in the modern meaning of this notion, but rather the oldest one, referring to acts of ratification, sale (understood as transfer of properties), legitimization, and authorization. This means emphasizing that something about which testimony was made existed earlier, and the reality and power of this fact, thing, word must be confirmed. Agamben argues that only these three Latin concepts provide an adequate outline of the idea of testimony. The “personal” dimension of this process points to the requirement of involvement, which is why, according to Agamben, the witness is a subject especially in an ethical sense, and not a subject of cognition. The author specified his understanding of subjectivity by referring to the category of shame. This, and the sense of guilt experienced by survivors, are constant motifs of literature of testimony. Agamben takes issue with these explanations, which make attempts of varying degrees of clarity to link shame with a sense of guilt, attaching these feelings to tragic conflict. For him, the tragic hero has gone forever. He is interested in shame as a feeling referring to something more intangible and difficult to express than a sense of guilt, something extremely intimate. He invokes, and radicalises, Levinas’s idea of shame as a feeling anchored in our inability to detach from ourselves, entrust in something from which we cannot distance ourselves. According to Agamben, the feeling of shame also conceals the inability to detach from something which cannot be borne. In shame, one becomes one’s own witness, including of one’s own lack of remembering and order. Concluding his long and elaborate argument, he claims that the self is constituted in the act of looking at oneself, and shame appears as a hidden structure of subjectivity. There is also a similar dialectic in the structure of testimony, as, according to Agamben, Primo Levi pointed out by insisting on the “Muslim” being recognized as the true witness. In this light, testimony becomes a process encompassing the survivor, in proxy of the one who does not speak, the “Muslim.” Man becomes an inhuman agent. Agamben argues that this situation reveals the insufficiency of two theses of the humanities: “we are all people” and “only some human beings are people.” The structure of testimony emerging from Levin means that we need a new phrase, which Agamben finally specifies with the words “human beings are human as long as they testify to the inhuman.”

Agamben refers to Benveniste and his attempts to go beyond the linguistics of Saussure, overcoming its problems with moving from abstract language to the reality of speech. A kind of link between these levels is linguistic expressions, through which Benveniste says that “we see the experience of subjects establishing and situating themselves in and thanks to language” (e.g., personal pronouns, categories of time). As a result, argues Agamben, subjectivity finds a basis in something as fragile

as a speech event. A speech event is suspended between language and experience, which has no expression.

Finally, Agamben explains his understanding of testimony by referring to Michel Foucault's concept of the archive. To put this in simple terms, we can say that, while an archive constitutes a collection of relations between the expressed and the potentiality of language, the unexpressed, testimony is the system of relations between the expressed and the unexpressed (the interior and exterior of the language). Testimony is therefore in conflict with inexpressibility, which is why Agamben compares the act of testimony with the gesture of the poet.

As we seek to understand the world in terms of studies of the humanities, we inevitably cross into this structure of testimony of the experience of others, and it is this that completes the ethical dimension of cognitive actions.

Translation: Benjamin Koschalka