

## Towards an Ontology of the Caesura. Reflections on the Russian-Ukrainian war

Mikhail Minakov <sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *This essay is based on the eight theses that range from fundamental questions raised by pluralistic ontology to the ontology of history and then to the meaning of our time, Zeitgeist. The aim of these theses is to demonstrate that philosophical reflection within the framework of the current historical caesura there still is the grounded hope for a new bright future.*

**Keywords:** *differential ontology, Beings, Nothingness, World, existence, Human, history, continuity, caesura*

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The lifeworlds of the eastern European peoples have changed by the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. Even though the military actions are so far limited by the territory of Ukraine, this war is an event of the history of entire humanity.

In this essay I reflect from the point of view of a pluralistic ontology — a philosophical position that takes, as its starting point, the recognition of both Differences and Nothingness as the origin of the World and that tries to respect both, Being and Becoming. From my point of view, the World is the topos of an ongoing meeting of multiple Beings; human and non-human existences; created and non-created things.

In this essay I will posit eight theses that range from fundamental questions raised by pluralistic ontology to the ontology of History and then to the interpretation of our Zeitgeist. I will do my best to demonstrate that even today, from within a deepening caesura, when a growing part of humanity is experiencing a first-hand encounter with Nothingness, the hope for a new bright future has some ground and must not be neglected. The pessimism that seems to have taken over contemporary philosophical debate should not prevent us from paying attention to the glimmers of hope in the gathering darkness of the Russian-Ukrainian and possibly the new global war.

## 1. Human is a creative-destructive catastrophic existence

Human is both an existential hope and, at the same time, an ontological catastrophe. Catastrophe (from καταστρέφω) is, in the original sense of the word, a turning and overturning, which I interpret as the turning and overturning of some original ontological order. But even in this catastrophic order-changing overturn, Human<sup>2</sup> is still the hope since s/he establishes a new order on the basis of the former. Thus, out of *nature*, the orders of *culture* are created, just as a *civilization* is created out of a *natural state*, or as the *choice* one makes that establishes the situation of one's own unique destiny is made out of one's *thrownness* (Heidegger's *Geworfenheit*) into the World.<sup>3</sup>

So human catastrophization manifests human existence as a life-asserting energy capable of founding new beginnings and of impacting on the World and its orders. In that respect, to be Human means to both exist simultaneously as existence-thrown-into the World that was founded before us, and also accept this Worldly order as a gift of all human and non-human existences before us, to rebel against the gifted order, to create chaos and then return order to the World — but this order, established with our participation, with its unique new beginnings seeded by us, is also a gift for future human and non-human existences.

This creative destructiveness is the specificity of Human's existence in the World, which unites Human's divinity-fighting reaction to being thrown-into this World, and the divine-human capacity for creativity, for the seeding of the new in the World.

Human creative destructiveness manifests a specific contradiction of existence, a contradiction which is both ontological and performative. The ontological contradiction manifests itself both in the divine ability to create something that did not exist before and also in the animal finitude of Human. We can, indeed, start something that goes far beyond our lifetimes. The performative contradiction manifests itself in the condition that Human — present in the World as someone thrown-into it not by her/himself, as someone whose trajectory given by the Thrower (by one of many Beings) — proceeds as a living-toward-an-end; and at the same time Human lives on in the every-moment's effort to be present here and now, in living her/his life situation, in creating new lives, in destroying the lives of our own kind and of other species, and in indivisible communication with other human and non-human existences and things. However, Human performs in constant deviations of the trajectories given by its initial thrownness. In all these manifestations, Human constantly transgresses, violates boundaries established by others and by her/himself.

These ontological and performative perspectives allow us to understand Human as a creative-destructive catastrophical and ordering existence.

## 2. History is an event-of-events in the pluralistic World

The catastrophically destructive creativity of Human lies at the heart of History,<sup>4</sup> in an ongoing interpersonal experience consisting of four elements. The first element includes events individually and commonly experienced and remembered within the anonymous structures of the World referred to as Tradition, Language, Community, Archetype, etc. — all gifts of existences which preceded our own. The second element comprises events individually and commonly remembered as written or orally transmitted history. The third element consists of situations individually and commonly experienced now with prospect of becoming anonymized sedimentations (element 1) or remembered history (element 2). Finally, the fourth element of History embraces the possible events that may happen with individuals and communities in the future (assuming that Humanity still exists).

History began long ago, in connection with the original throw of dice bringing Human, human communities, and even humanities<sup>5</sup> into the World — and it lasts as long as Beings continue throwing us into the World. We exist as we get born, accept the World, destroy its parts, re-create them, live-through our biographical events, and die.

Here, I introduce the concept of plural Beings instead of Being as only One (*die Seyne* in German and *бытия* in Russian). If one starts one's ontological reflection with Differences (as in the differential ontologies of Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze<sup>6</sup>), then the World can be described as a sphere of Nothingness, where different Beings-Seyne, human and non-human existences, created and non-created things coexist and influence each other. In that pluralistic ontological perspective, the World is an original, absolute plurality that opens up and preconditions everything that is, was, will and can be. The World is also a place where Beings throw-in human existences and set the random orders for the initial conditions of each Human's presence in the World.

With that perspective in mind, History can be defined as a single word which encompasses an indefinite plurality of eras, periods, collective destinies and individual experiences of being present and of becoming in the World. History is plural, and the word History must be spoken of, contrary to grammar, in the plural — as multiple experiences of Beings and existences open to comprehension during lifetime and to transmission of these experiences in storytelling, retelling,

interpretation, memory, and oblivion. History consists of atomic events through which once-and-for-all contradictory human existences have manifested their presence and transmutations in the World — and through which Beings also signal their co-presence through these human existences. Even if humanity ceases to exist — after the end of History, when no human existence remains in the world of orphaned Beings, non-human existences, and things — human History will remain an irreplaceable event of events in the multidimensional World.

### **3. Social reality is a realm of human destructive creativity**

In its destructive-creative existence, Human participates in constant change — from initial order to catastrophe to the renewed order of the World. Due to the proactive nature of Beings, human and non-human existences, the World is constantly being redefined and is continually being seeded with new beginnings — all of this on the rubble of former beginnings, or in continuation of them. Every human presence in the World is limited to a time span of individual existence from birth to death. But human presence also transgresses these time limits through the intersubjectivity of existence and through the interobjectivity of material change resulting from human destructive creativity. As human beings, we are born into the World created before us and leave it changed by us. Human is an important part of the multitude of forces involved in the interaction of destruction and re-creation of the World.

The above pluralist ontological provisions find their fulfillment in many practical spheres of the World, including politics and economy, just two of the many dimensions in which the destructive-creative existence of Human manifests him/herself. Studying politics and economy, for example, and their many phenomena means adding to the understanding of what human existence is in her/his individual presence and becoming and collective co-presence and co-becoming.

Dominance and subordination, conflict and agreement, war and peace, dependence and freedom, crime and justice, servitude and citizenship, personal gain and common wealth, capital and exploitation, richness and poverty — these and many other political or economic phenomena derive from our intersubjective co-presence and co-becoming. In this co-presence and co-becoming, people are conditioned to communicate, to interact, to partner, to compete, to make decisions, and to implement decisions together. This communication — whether *κοινωνία* of citizens or competition of economic actors — is a multilateral and multidimensional process that allows human individuals to become co-citizens, members of a particular political community, or act as players in financial markets or production cycles,

exploiters and exploited. It also allows Human to accept and change parts of the World in terms of equality or inequality, to take active or passive positions, in acceptance of or resistance to central or marginal roles. Each such communicative act is an act of creation: these are decisions that change Human's behavior and the material conditions of lives, of *social reality*. Social reality is a realm of forces and phenomena which are important for understanding what Human, History and the World are.

#### **4. Imagination is the creative force that predefines the making and the understanding of History**

Participation in communication and all relevant social practices is linked to social imagination, in which thinking and practice, individuals and groups, the ideal and the real are inseparable. Imagination is a complex cognitive-performative act that integrates various human capacities in achieving stable cognitive and existential positions, namely beliefs, judgements, and decisions that translate into behavior and in material contexts. By creating images that cause changes in the World, the imagination is a key element of the human capacity to communicate, to destroy and to create.

For more than two thousand years, philosophers have regarded imagination as a cognitive function, combining phantasy (Plato, Aristotle) and productivity (Kant) to make sense of others' existence and/or of one's own (Heidegger, Ricoeur).

A summary of the long evolution of philosophers' understanding of the imagination was offered by Paul Ricoeur. He specifically notices that in the history of philosophical thought — from Plato's and Aristotle's debate on ideas through the phenomenological-hermeneutic debate on the ontological conditions of understanding and interpretation — contemporary philosophy developed the concept of imagination as one that signifies an act that can be used simultaneously in three ways:

first, to think of things which are not present in the current perception, but which can exist potentially;

second, to create in the mind images of things or situations that do not and cannot exist in actuality but can only exist in the imagination;

and third, to bring about images representing things, persons, situations and/or ideas which are known to exist in actuality.<sup>7</sup>

By combining the *modus operandi* of possibility, fantasy, and virtuality, imagination allows Human to *solve problems* — that is, to manage situations of uncertainty by combining work with the past (memory), work with the future (possibility) and work with the current situation (intellect).<sup>8</sup> But a far more important aspect of imagination is its power to combine the cognitive, emotional, social, political, cultural, and other elements of human existence into a single experience. In the imagination, there is the power of human existence to make existential projects — something they throw onto Nothingness that becomes part of the World due to Human’s living out the projection. This projection of an imagined and yet non-existent draft leads (ideally) to the fulfillment of the chosen project when the intended comes true.<sup>9</sup> Thus, imagination is an important human capacity to participate in changing the World and in co-constructing social reality. Imagination turns out to be the source of the meaning of social life, providing human individuals and collectives with a framework for interpreting and practically changing their realms of the World, their social reality.

Imagination is a part of human creativity and is practiced in different realms of human life. From the perspective of political theory, for example, the “process of imagination extends not only to how we anticipate the development of our personal lives, but also how we envision the future of our social groups, be they micro-groups such as families, or macro-groups such as nations or even the fate of humanity itself”.<sup>10</sup> Imagination turns individuals into participants and co-authors of transpersonal, imaginary projects, both socially real, morally accountable and affectively perceived.

Political imagination is one aspect of broader social creativity. Such imaginative creativity consists of at least four elements. First, by combining cognitive, aesthetic, and emotional acts with behavioral consequences, this imaginative creativity has its own — social or political — materiality. It can translate into a phenomenon of collective life, be it tribal, communal, or national. Second, this materiality is related to imaginative creativity through its capacity both to solve present problems by recycling personal and collective past experiences into fantasies about the future, and also to allow new beginnings which use the past to envision the future. Third, imagination transcends the ideal and the material, as well as the individual and the collective; it conditions social or political action in order to change the current state of affairs. And finally, fourth, the production of imagined social or political projects leads to materially manifested results in the collective political arena. Overall, social creativity can be seen as an existential and functional unity of the three aspects of imagination:

first, the real aspect, where imagination is embodied in social reality and participates in its reproduction;

second, the intersubjective aspect, where imagination refers to the experiences of individuals and groups simultaneously in some social or political action;

and third, the ideal aspect, where the imagination focuses on alternatives to the current situation, proposing possible solutions to some community or to an individual.

In historical studies, we are constantly confronted by the fact that in interactions between social processes and group perceptions of the present, the future and the past, Humans and communities conflate fantasies, on the one hand, with real political consequences, on the other. Thus, imagination is a creative force that predefines both the making and the understanding of History. History is not only the event of all events where the human presence and becoming in the World has left its trace, but also the narrated story produced by the imagination of the present, the future and the past. These two sides of History — existential and narrative — should not be separated if one wants to understand it.

## **5. History is a combination of continuities and caesuras**

This power of imaginative creativity is especially evident in significant historical moments that involve all human (and often non-human) existences and occur in relation to a common event within an overarching story. For example, a key point which occurs in the context of some deep social, political, or ecological crisis which leads to the end of some form of order. The key point, which typically initiates a caesura, can be seen in relation to an event contained within a story. This break in the perceived or actual state of order is comparable with the re-throwing of dice and landing it in some specific position in an ontological act of deep change in the World. This seeds a new order where new events match with new stories of past, present, and future. Consequently, History is an endless plurality of events and narrations where different actors present in the World constantly throw, throw out and re-throw their projects and tell (and re-tell) their stories. If the World stems out of Nothingness, History proceeds in multiple times and spaces, in the duration of orders and in their ruptures, in their continuities and in their caesuras.<sup>11</sup>

Continuity is the element of History that gives both human and non-human creativity the place and time to flourish. The caesura is the element of History in which continuity is broken, fully or partially. In continuity, human presence gets

stuck into — and gets stuck in — its projects and often has less and less access to its own authenticity, while within the caesura, Human returns to the most fundamental and tragic levels of its own presence and meets with a moment of Nothingness before the new historical event is thrown-in.

The caesura gives catastrophe the momentum that offers Human the possibility to bravely meet with its own ungroundedness and participate in the creation of a new order based on the revised structures of human subjectivity, truth regime, and power dispositions. Depending on whether they are viewed from periods of continuity or from moments of caesuras, both the World and History are seen differently. Continuities direct the human attention on the surfaces of Gaia, while caesuras open up chthonic depths, facilitating meetings with selves and Beings.

Still, it is important to stress that caesuras vary by depth. They can be founding events like the Big Bang that started the current cosmic order and separated it from the situation before. Caesuras can be vital changes, like the ones that transformed one geological period into another one with a meteor strike that induced a critical change in environmental conditions which fundamentally changed the form of life on Planet Earth. Caesuras can also be seen in events that spark wars and revolutions (political, social, scientific etc.) that change social imagination and redefine social creativity. Also, there can be attempts of caesuras when the rupture of some historical process was not deep enough, and the energy of continuity prevails over the energy of caesura; in this case, the continuity continues itself after the end of the caesura attempt. Thus, the caesura is a turning point manifesting in actuality the ontological, existential and social structures of History with different depth and different consequences.

## **6. The post-Soviet caesura was the end of Soviet continuity and the seeding of the post-Soviet era**

An example of a caesura which manifested at different depths and with different results can be seen in the revolutionary period of 1989–91. For Humans and the communities living between the Adriatic and the White Sea, from the eastern spurs of the Alps to the Kamchatka sopkas, these few years sparked a process of rethinking of recent history, rejecting the political systems and the structures of social imagination associated with Soviet Communism, the Eastern Bloc, and the Cold War, and most importantly, throwing their common and individual projects into Nothingness — the openness of the future — and seeding the new beginnings of the new post-communist epoch.

The post-Soviet period began with the caesura of 1989–91 that stopped the communist order's continuity and gave a start to new period. This historical period can be defined in spatial, temporal, and social terms. Spatially, the post-Soviet period concerns communities and societies that took shape after (but not necessarily as a consequence of) the collapse of the Soviet Union. It also concerned the Western nations who left the Cold War with the victory in their hands.

The post-Soviet period's timeframe is the approximately thirty years between the caesura of 1989–91 and the one that began with the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022. The Soviet order came from the caesura opened by the February and October revolutions of 1917 and the long Civil War of 1917–22, which perpetuated the meat-grinding horror of WWI in the vastness of Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia. The Soviet order ended with *Perestroika*, the time unleashing the emancipatory civil, religious, entrepreneurial, and ethno-national creativity, which began in 1986 but turned into a caesura approximately between 1989 and 1991. This creativity has also opened the Western experience for the post-communist peoples who changed their social realities in accord with the imported models.

For Soviet practices, values, and institutions, *Perestroika* was a *Catastroika*, a catastrophe for the communist social realities, political systems, and values associated with Soviet Marxism, and the inability of the ruling elites to secure their interests with the old instruments of control and violence. For the peoples living in the USSR, the caesura of 1989–91 was a revolution that opened opportunities to build new national states, open market economies, functional democracies, and Europe-inspired societies. That caesura also tried to break with Soviet Human (as a form of subjectivity), with Soviet Marxism (as a form of truth regime), and with totalitarian state and society (as a form of power structure). And the Western democratic and economic experience (mostly in the neoliberal form) was influential on the post-Soviet social imagination.

However, as the events and narratives of the post-Soviet period demonstrated, this caesura had different depths and broke differently with the Soviet continuity. This difference is obvious for Baltic countries, Ukraine, Russia or Kazakhstan. And these differences were foundational for post-Soviet continuities in different societies.

## **7. The post-Soviet creativity was doomed by its anti-Soviet determination**

As a historical epoch, the post-Soviet period was a thirty-year timeframe in which human existences showed their destructiveness and creativity, their power to imagine and act, their commitment to and fear of freedom, as well as their capacity to both

think and to betray the thinking. Since the end of 1989–91 caesura, the post-Soviet period started with the invention of a “post-Soviet Human”, of a human existence and of communities that lived and acted in the times between 1991 and 2022 in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia formed largely by people who built their social realities through a rejection of Soviet historical experience.

The term “post-Soviet” provokes a symptomatic aversion for many of us, especially in the last ten years, when the *third autocratic wave* has brought Soviet practices and ideologies back to life in many countries. The deeper the societies of our region fell into the regime of ideological monopoly, the harsher was our reaction to the mention of *Soviet*, even with the prefix *post*. This symptom is connected to the fact that some elements of the Soviet system survived through the caesura everywhere: in some countries, these fragments of the Soviet system survived in the form of locally or socially limited, marginal forms; and in other societies, Soviet elements were used to substantially rebuild the previous order.

However, it is important to stress that in the term *post-Soviet*, the stress is made not on the second part of the word (Soviet) but on the first. The term post-Soviet refers both to a historical period and also to a social experience based on the rejection of Soviet practices and values, on the process of self-overcoming by many individuals and communities, and on the revolutionary attempts to create new social worlds in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia. The post-Soviet period was a time in which attempts were made to overcome the Soviet-communist legacy, to do away with the totalitarian Soviet experience, and to break with the continuities of imperialism and colonialism. But the tragedy of post-Soviet Human and of that era stemmed from the fact that the social imagination of this period was too determined in making the future by pursuing the past. Thus post-Soviet creativity followed the past and betrayed many new beginnings that the caesura of 1989–91 seeded.

Thus, post-Soviet meant anti-Soviet, the era of overcoming the traumas of the twentieth century and of finding ways into the future, based on human creativity largely determined by this negation of the past. Historical events and narratives of that period were diverse, but too much linked to the dooming past which inhibited the social imagination and repressed human creativity.

## **8. Looking at the World from inside the new caesura started by the Russian-Ukrainian War**

Even though my position of ontological pluralist was formed years ago, I systematized this reflection on the ontology of History and the current caesura in our new

intellectual condition — in the situation of the caesura which has beleaguered Eastern Europe since the start of this terrible war.

On the epiphenomenal level, the post-Soviet period ended with an open and unprovoked attack on Ukraine by the Russian Federation. Although the military conflict in Ukraine began in 2014, it was in February 2022 that a new Pandora's box was opened, and the demons of the historical caesura released. This event marked a rupture with post-Soviet continuity and set in motion the catastrophic processes that could soon change the entire World's order.

As soon as the first missiles exploded in Kyiv on February 24, 2022, the post-Soviet era ended. It can be seen as the historical period that spans from the end of communism and the Cold War to the beginning of a new global conflict. This conflict has many dimensions: the war in Ukraine, the deepening confrontation between Russia and Eurasia on one side; the US and the West on the other; the growing socio-economic and cultural-political division of Europe into Western and Eastern halves; the global aggravation of contradictions between autocracies (China, Russia, India, Iran, Turkey, and the Gulf monarchies) and democracies (the US, EU member states, Britain, Canada, Japan and Australia). The future of this confrontation — the new order after the ongoing catastrophe — is not yet known.

This new global confrontation has an important Ukrainian dimension: the Ukrainian Patriotic War unfolds in the form of nationwide resistance to the Russian invasion. Simultaneously, Ukrainian society is losing its social structure: families and communities are destroyed by mass emigration; power structures are being revised at such a profound level that the very statehood of Ukraine is at risk; the bombing of nuclear power stations is about to change the nature of a big part of Eastern Europe for centuries ahead. Ukraine's political economy is crumbling before our eyes. Humans present in Ukraine at the moment are forced into encounters with Nothingness and to learn about their own authenticity. But this war is not just part of Ukrainian history — it is a much, much bigger event. As it extends into neighboring countries, the caesura reaches out to a much bigger scale.

We live in a historical caesura that is a global event. In this caesura, the dice of Destiny is still rolling and the meeting with Nothingness is being experienced by a growing part of humanity and by communities within this humanity. It changes the quality of life in the Baltic and the Balkan regions, in Sri Lanka and Britain, in Ethiopia and Philippines. The future is open to the worst risks and the best opportunities that the World can offer. And this offer is dependent as much on human creativity as it is on the interplay of other forces commonly known as Destiny. If our creative force

were to dominate over our destructive force, the future may actually turn out to be better — wiser, more inclusive, more consolidated, and more just than the present or the previous.

So I finish with the words that I used at the start of this report: Human is an ontological catastrophe and an existential hope. It is up to us which of our energies will shape our common future, the continuity to come for us, our families, and our communities.

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- <sup>1</sup> This essay is based on the report delivered as a keynote speech at The XVII Annual Estonian Philosophy Conference on 25 August 2022 at Käsmu, Estonia.
- <sup>2</sup> Here I use the word *Human* with a capital letter when referring to a noun signifying unique human existence (*Dasein*), and *human* with a small letter when referring to an adjective signifying some specificity of human existence.
- <sup>3</sup> See: Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: M.Niemeyer Verlag, 1967) 175ff. I should also note that the World is thrown itself as “*der Fall*”, some event as it is — in the first thesis of the Treatise; see: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 2013) 11.
- <sup>4</sup> Here I distinguish between *History* (with the capital letter) as the event of events and *history* as what we remember (by heart or by text).

<sup>5</sup> History of humanities is rather new discipline; more on it can be found at: Rens Bod et al. “A new field: History of humanities.” *History of Humanities* 1.1 (2016): 1–2.

<sup>6</sup> See: Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978); Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Imagination in Discourse and in Action”. In Robinson, J. F., Robinson, G. (eds.). *Rethinking Imagination: Culture and Creativity*, 120–125 (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> On that, see: John Dewey, *The Essential Dewey: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy* (Vol. 1) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) 32, 87ff, 189ff; Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers* (Vol. 3) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 167ff .

<sup>9</sup> This imaginal force is studied by phenomenologists and hermeneutics including Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Alfred Schütz, and Cornelius Castoriadis.

<sup>10</sup> Claude De Saint-Laurent, “Thinking Through Time: From Collective Memories to Collective Futures”. In: De Saint-Laurent, C., Obradovic, S., Carriere, K. R. (eds.). *Imagining Collective Futures: Perspectives from Social, Cultural and Political Psychology*, 2-13 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Compare this with Deleuzian picture of *the differences* (*Difference and Repetition*, 50, 118 etc).