

# NIETZSCHE'S CRITIQUE OF HISTORICAL REASON

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## ÖZET

*Bu makalede bir erken dönem metni, "Tarihin Hayata Yararı ve Zararı Üzerine", temelinde Nietzsche'nin tarih bilimine, tarih yazımına ve tarih eğitime ilişkin fikirlerini eleştirel bir gözle inceliyor ve değerlendirmelerde bulunuyoruz. Nietzsche'nin hayata ilişkin tüm bir bakış açısını gereğince takdir edebilme bağlamında O'nun tarihe yaklaşımının vazgeçilmez bir öneme sahip olduğunu söylemek mümkündür. Burada ayrıca Nietzsche'nin orta ve geç dönem gelişimine de ışık tutan bir tarih anlayışı eleştirisini görüyoruz. Dolayısıyla Nietzsche'nin çağının ve kültürünün sahip olduğu tarihsel bilinci marazi ve hayat karşıtı olarak niteleyip onun belli yönlerine karşı giriştiği saldırının çerçevesini oluşturan nedenleri eleştirel bir biçimde tartışıyoruz. Nietzsche'nin çare olarak sunduğu şeyi de ele alıyoruz; tarihçinin yaratıcı bir sanatçı ve tarihin kalkış noktasının büyük insanlar olması gerektiğini şart koşan estetik bir yaklaşım.*

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Nietzsche, tarih, tarihyazımı, sanatçı, hayat, değer

## ABSTRACT

*In this article, we explore and critically evaluate Nietzsche's ideas concerning history, history-writing and historical education mainly on the basis of a crucial early period text, "On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life". We argue that Nietzsche's approach to history is indispensable for a proper appreciation of his entire focus on life. Here one can see a critique of historical understanding which sheds considerable light on Nietzsche's later development, as well. Hence we discuss critically the grounds in reference to which Nietzsche attacks certain aspects of the historical consciousness of his age and culture which he considers to be morbid, that is, life-denying. We also treat the remedy he provides, namely an aesthetic approach to history, which stipulates that historian should also be a creative artist and which takes from the idea of great men its point of departure.*

**Keywords:** Nietzsche, history, historiography, artist, life, value

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**Introduction**

In *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1874)<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche attacks the domination of the historical sense in human life which he sees as a characteristic aspect of modern western culture. He finds a deeply pathological aspect in the way in which the modern western humanity shows interest in history and the past. The widespread idea that, by contrast with all others, only the western peoples have a truly historical consciousness, that is, that only they have made history an area of objective scientific study, and have been determined by such consciousness is not something to be proud of but something to be regretted, if the value of life itself, above all else, is to be the paramount concern for us. Thus Nietzsche sets out a devastating attack on what he finds an obsessive and misguided interest in the past dominating the western culture. This Nietzsche carries out with the guiding insight that it is the value of life, its promotion and enhancement, its enjoyment which is first and foremost what truly matters and all knowledge (including the knowledge of history) has its ultimate justification in serving life. To that end, we should learn to forget even more than to remember, and forget especially that which has been, the historical. What is more, we should learn to actively unlearn, to put our senses before our understanding. Not sciences but our senses must guide our way into life; the former is focused on the facts (what has been and what is) while the latter values and knows only the present (what is becoming). In this respect, we are far behind the animals which exist purely in the present and the satisfaction they derive from the present is complete since it is not disturbed by the intervention of memory. It is particularly in historical studies, Nietzsche observes, that memory is raised to a principal status for its own sake and this has, in turn, consequences to the detriment of living in the present. This predominance of memory in the sense of a historical consciousness, this theoretical concern for what has been must be overcome if the health of a people is to be preserved, which alone creates great history. Such health requires that we direct all our energies to fully enjoy the present and to grow as aesthetic actors. Historical mind that seeks intellectual determination of history, on the contrary, represents the primacy of consciousness over against the intrinsic (i.e., aesthetic) demands of life, a consciousness which is, at bottom, the arena of

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<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. P. Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980). Henceforth abbreviated ADH with page number. The text first appeared in 1874 as the second essay of the *Untimely Meditations*. I also used another translation of the text, by R. J. Hollingdale, found in the *Untimely Meditations*, ed. D. Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), where I thought it provided a better rendering. The German original, *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, is readily available on the internet.

active interplay of temporality (of past, present and future), an atrophied life.

In what follows, we attempt at discussing and making sense of such critique of historical consciousness by a careful examination of Nietzsche's text, *On the Advantages and Disadvantage of History for Life*, which also requires references to Nietzsche's several other works, notably *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Twilight of the Idols*, where his mature position seems to come to an expression. In other words we aim at understanding the basic theses of *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life* in the overall context of Nietzsche's thought. In the whole process of the discussion carried out in this article, also, we want to constantly bear in mind the critical question; is it really necessary that a profound interest in history keep us away from a richer experience of the present? Or is it rather the contrary?

### **Remembering and Forgetting**

First of all, we should take into consideration some facts concerning the context of Nietzsche's critique which might give us a preliminary basis to come to an understanding of the motivations behind it. Nietzsche had been trained as a classical philologist. Thus he was, by virtue of his education and profession, deeply engaged with history. We might well, on that score, take what he says concerning history as an "insider's view". Nietzsche's age, 19<sup>th</sup> century, was often characterized by an unusual growth in the sense of history and in the scope, quality and quantity of historical studies and disciplines. On the one hand, there was German idealism (notably, Schelling and Hegel) which made reality a matter of dynamic historical development. On the other hand, there was German historical school with roots in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., Winklemann, Ranke and Mommsen). Almost everything has been approached on the basis of history behind it, situated in its historical context and subjected to historical scrutiny with increasing methodological precision. Their ideal was somehow to carry, as much as possible, the scientific rigour found in the natural sciences to the area of historical consciousness. Humboldt, for instance, explored the historical dimensions of language. Hegelianism (left and right) deepened the critical avenues historical sense opened. Thus David Strauss could make the life of Jesus a subject-matter of critical historical inquiry while Bruno Bauer applied the same historical sense to the critical study of Bible, both with unprecedented consequences. Marx, throughout all his life, remained under the spell of formulating necessary scientific laws for historical development of the social reality, which he thought he really succeeded in doing. Darwin came up with a very influential theory sketching out a historical development for life. Meanwhile classical philological studies, with the newly developed critical methods in this field, delved into the minutest details of ancient languages

**58** *Nietzsche's Critique of Pure Reason*

(Greek, Latin, Hebrew etc.). The result was a culture deeply imbued with critical historical sense and research for everything in life, a tendency frequently mingled with or verged on positivism. Hence, one should not forget that Nietzsche is the child of such an age and speaks (often painfully) against such a background.<sup>2</sup>

Nietzsche situates at the center of his discussion a consideration of the relationship between remembering and forgetting in terms of their functions for life. Through remembering we are attached to the past (the historical), while we become open to the present and to life (the unhistorical) by way of forgetting. Both forgetting and remembering at the right time are crucial for the health and strength of people and cultures. This for Nietzsche also means “precisely this is the proposition the reader is invited to consider: *the unhistorical as well as the historical are equally necessary for the health of an individual, a people and a culture.*”<sup>3</sup> Here by “the historical” Nietzsche simply means what belongs to the past and by the unhistorical what is open as a possibility to my action. Notice that it is implied that “total forgetting” is not only impossible it is also not desirable. This is a bit surprising given that Nietzsche, in this section of the text, also envies the forgetfulness which he finds as characteristic of the animal or of the child, that is, as something which enables uninterrupted immersion in life (that “blissful blindness” Nietzsche interprets as “happiness”<sup>4</sup>). Then, one might infer, implicit to Nietzsche's account is the (somewhat reluctant) recognition that we have some essential difference from animals; we are in history. Nevertheless we can creatively deal with this fact, get free from the past which yet does not mean we can and need to eliminate it.

We should notice that this also involves the creative ability to extricate ourselves from the chains of truths which history brought (e.g., justice, knowledge, reason, concepts, propositions and norms) that compel us constantly to remembrance. As we will see, Nietzsche thinks that art alone can provide us such an ability with which the unhistorical becomes the supreme concern of life. Art releases us to the moment thereby we can engage more freely and fully in the elemental and primal demands of life, in enjoying life, that is, in “rude willing and desiring.”<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche accordingly is concerned in this text with drawing attention to the unhistorical element vis-a-vis the historical element and with setting up a correct relationship between the two which requires that the

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<sup>2</sup>*On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, (trans. P. Preuss), pp. 7-8. For a discussion, see Anthony K. Jensen, “*Geschichte or Historie?* Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation* in the Context of Nineteenth Century Philological Studies”, in *Nietzsche on Time and History*, ed. M. Dries, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

unhistorical element should gain priority and primacy for us. For life itself (“that dark, driving, insatiably self-desiring power”<sup>6</sup>) is, in its genuine character, this unhistorical element on which all history is somehow dependent. It is much like *physis* of ancient Greek thought (including Aristotle) and anticipates Heidegger’s “earth” (*Erde*). What Heidegger maintains as a tense and dynamic interplay between earth and world, and calls us be open to earth as hidden, unmasterable dimension, as ‘a concealed pre-given’ which supports the world, the open realm, we find in Nietzsche as the relationship between the unhistorical and the historical where the primacy of the former is to be observed by humans so that we may have any greatness in the latter.

Consequently, Nietzsche thinks that forgetting and remembering as basic attitudes towards life corresponds to the unhistorical and the historical respectively; we enter into this creative unhistorical element as the authentic realm of life only in so far as we are able to forget, only thanks to forgetting, whereas we, as knowers, in sticking to the historical element, give priority to remembering which consists basically in preserving and reproducing (copying) the past. This priority given to the historical is, in Nietzsche’s terms, represents “an excess of history”<sup>7</sup> with which “life crumbles and degenerates, and finally because of this degeneration, history itself degenerates as well.”<sup>8</sup> This is so because in it “a historical phenomenon is clearly and completely understood and reduced to an intellectual phenomenon”<sup>9</sup>, which actually means, it is rendered “dead”. For Nietzsche, our relation to life as “knowing beings” (say, as subjects) involves the supremacy of remembering and stands in opposition to a relation to it as “living beings” that, as we see in the case of animals, requires a limited degree (perhaps “minimum”) of remembering in the service of immediacy of instinctual access into life. But, at any rate, it seems that we need to keep our interest in the past at a critical minimum so as to be genuinely present in the present, that is, so as to enjoy it fully. Nietzsche, in this context, speaks of “plastic power”<sup>10</sup> that an individual and likewise a people need having as an ability to balance forgetting and remembering in ways that enhance our vital interests. Later this idea gives way to *amor fati* (love of fate). He writes: “My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*.”<sup>11</sup> With that idea, Nietzsche’s concern is not actually fatalism but rather one of reducing, as much as possible, our retrospective tendencies by making it possible for us to say

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 10, 23, 62.

<sup>11</sup>*Ecce Homo*, “Why I Am So Clever”, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. W. Kaufmann, (New York: The Modern Library, ), p. 933.

“yes” to our past as well.<sup>12</sup> Thus it makes us forget what has been and close accounts with the merely past, which is necessary if we are to look forwards towards “future” (i.e., life with fresh disclosures) with a clear conscience. One might say it is necessary that we forget the past in order that we may not forget the meaning of earth. This alone underlies a future-oriented attitude towards life, an attitude in which one says yes to life, one adopts a creative approach to life in which alone one's standing in life as well as the whole world is justified. In many of his writings, Nietzsche identifies this creative approach to life unequivocally as an artistic experience of life. It is in this context that he asserts (again following Schopenhauer) that “world is *justified* (*gerechtfertigt*) only as an aesthetic phenomenon.”<sup>13</sup>

Then it becomes clear that for Nietzsche “history belongs to the living man”<sup>14</sup> (or to the living culture) as a “hearty nourishment”<sup>15</sup>, otherwise it is simply destructive. We should understand this claim in the sense that the value of history must be measured fundamentally in terms of its “use” for a person and for a people. In this respect, history is “useful” when it becomes an instrument and this can happen only when it functions in the hands of a higher living power and culture which is in the rise in the stage of history and therefore never interested in the past for its own sake, instead it seeks to derive possible resources from it to further, in various ways, its power in the present.

Another issue in this context is the fact that Nietzsche, so far as history is concerned, places a huge emphasis on “great men”, so to speak, preaches a cult of great men (a great-man theory of history). What is the point with such a cult? Indeed, somewhat reminiscent of Carlyle, for Nietzsche history is essentially a narrative about great men, not about facts, not about past societies, not about structures of socio-economic life, not about the mysteries of past cultures and, least of all, not about the everyday social life of the ordinary people. Further, it must not be a neutral narrative carried out with scientific distance, detachment and spectatorship (objectivity). Rather it calls for an appreciation of greatness found in great men and an imaginative ability to participate in their lives and deeds. This means that historian must have beforehand a good grasp of what is vital and what is decadent. Such a historian, in turn, can have a taste to grow with the reception of the vital so that he or she can carry it effectively to the present, to a creative engagement in it. That is, not as a mere piece of objective information, but as life enhancing force. For Nietzsche, it is only in the light of “Great men” that history can become

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<sup>12</sup>*Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 223.

<sup>13</sup>*The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. R. Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 8, 33, 113, 114.

<sup>14</sup>*On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, (trans. P. Preuss), p. 14.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 62.

intelligible and gain relevance to the present, that is, not as something inhibiting the present but as something actively furthering and enriching it. Therefore, from Nietzsche's point of view, the idea of great men appears as the very principle to deal with history, to see and evaluate what is essential in it. Such an idea hence lies behind the motivations of Nietzsche's critique leveled against a history-writing that is (as a "scientific inquiry") focused on "facts" and shows less interest in the great men who are the creative actors of history, i.e., creators of history. It is important to note that the idea of great men as the parameters of historical intelligibility can be understood as an attempt to substitute the Greek gods (who made various aspects of life intelligible for the Greeks) within the modern context. Later, notably in the *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, such idea evolves into the idea of *Übermensch* as someone always standing to himself in a relation of overcoming, thus representing an overcoming, a leaving behind of humanity as we know it.

In the context, a critical observation is due. With the purpose of drawing attention to the uselessness of the merely historical knowledge for the present activity, Nietzsche alludes, as an example, to the profession of classical philology (to his own profession) and notes: "... I do not know what meaning classical philology would have for our age if not to have an untimely effect within it, that is, to act against the age and so have an effect on the age to the advantage, it is to be hoped, of a coming age."<sup>16</sup> But Nietzsche here reveals a possible avenue for the worth of historical experience and knowledge for our lives that in turn can be construed as a criticism against Nietzsche himself: total self-absorption in the present kills the true and richer possibilities of it. We need to turn our eyes both into future and into the past, which is something we already do in our everyday life, albeit in a vulgar fashion. Rather, for an enhancement of our life or our living practices in the present we also need to gain a reflective and critical relation to it which in turn presupposes that we can free ourselves, in some way, from the commonsense of the present. Precisely here history can render an invaluable service; namely, through a dialogue with the past we can come to explicate and question the common-sense of the present, viz. its assumptions (about any aspect of our lives) which we, as those who are brought up with these mostly tacit beliefs, take for granted and which imperceptibly operate and rule in our lives. History can do this by presenting to us the past cultures and civilizations of humanity, their practices and ways of life and what is implicit in them, perceptions which people of ancient times had into things and which may vary with those of our own sometimes quite radically. Indeed, we need "the untimely effect" of history as a "dialogue with the other" (a dialogue which, to be sure, can be done in other ways, too, for example with

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

other cultures and traditions that exist presently. But the essential dimension of such dialogue always remains something historical, because cultures and traditions have their “roots”, their living background in their history), a dialogue which can help us question the common-sense that rules in the present as well as help us more effectively explicate what is our own: these two dimensions are inseparable. This, in turn, would free ourselves into a more authentic future (and thus into a more authentic history), into the claim of a live reality, let us say Nietzsche's life.

### History as Science

As is well-known, Nietzsche, in the *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, distinguishes 3 kinds of history-writing; monumental, antiquarian and critical kinds. The monumental history-writing involves “the concern with the classical and the rare of earlier times”<sup>17</sup>, the antiquarian one arises from the feeling of belonging and rootedness, and the critical one, unlike the antiquarian, approach to the past with critical or scientific commitment. As indicated above, Nietzsche thinks that “history belongs to the living man” and this in three respects: (1) as “active and striving”, (2) as one who “preserves and admires”, (3) as one who “suffers and is in need of liberation.”<sup>18</sup> Each kind of history-writing cited above serves for these function respectively, but, at the same time, entails a fatal flaw. Monumental history-writing brings enthusiasm to the present action, but may also entail fanaticism and bigotry. Antiquarian history-writing enhances our sense of belonging to a past but also “hinders powerful resolve for new life.”<sup>19</sup> Critical history-writing, by contrast, gives liberation from the past, but makes history an intellectual object, thus a dead totality of facts. It also leads to a nihilistic reduction of the past achievements of humanity. As we will see, when Nietzsche vehemently criticizes history as a science, he has in mind this critical view of past carried to excess. Now, Nietzsche argues that we need all these three views and senses of history and thus ways of history-writing on the condition that (1) they serve “always only for the service of life”<sup>20</sup>, which dictates that (2) they should not be pursued in excess and (2) different kinds of people need different ways to relate to history: there is no one universal way of dealing with history applicable to all men. This Nietzsche puts in the following way:

each man and each people requires, according to their goals, strengths  
and needs, a certain knowledge of the past, sometimes as

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 23.



monumental, sometimes as antiquarian, sometimes as critical history; but not like a crowd of pure thinkers who only contemplate life, not like individuals hungry for knowledge, satisfied with mere knowledge, whose only goal is the increase of knowledge, but always only for the purpose of life and therefore also always under the rule and highest direction of that purpose.<sup>21</sup>

The text attains its critical point when Nietzsche finds it scandalous to put “the demand that history be a science”<sup>22</sup>, for this is diametrically opposed to the requirement that “life is ... the sole ruler and master of knowledge of the past.”<sup>23</sup>

Here Nietzsche actually attacks a few different things which he sees as inseparably connected. (1) Knowledge for the sake of knowledge; (2) objectivism; (3) intellectualism that brings the primacy and domination of remembering; (4) metaphysics as a search for ultimate origins of things, the absolute grounds of contingent phenomena, ultimately an interest in infinity, in timelessness; (5) excessive interest in the past (treat p. 28). Nietzsche counters all these prejudices by contending that man stands deeply embedded in a pre-objective life which is historical and which is always flowing forward, and therefore human life is essentially temporal. This line of argument is later taken up and developed, in a more systematical way, by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*. Let us briefly examine Nietzsche's criticism of these points respectively.

(1) Nietzsche objects the priority of knowledge in human life, a priority that he sees accorded to it in the western culture which goes back to Plato's episteme. Rather knowledge grows out of life and indeed as a marginal side of it which, if not controlled and ruled by the instincts of life, turns against life and becomes noxious for it. Sublimation of knowledge is nothing but a sign of degeneration and decadence; knowledge is at best a tool, a tool which can have its proper (i.e., life-affirming) function only in the hands of healthy individuals (“great men”). In other words, knowledge is something which always needs to be overcome by a better knowledge and this first requires that “knowledge *must* turn its sting against itself.”<sup>24</sup> When knowledge is elevated to the supreme principle of life to which life (our instincts) is subjected, this becomes especially dangerous and degenerating in the case of historical knowledge: it results in alienation from the present, from the present challenges and drives of life, and ultimately from the live historical movement. Ironically, excessive emphasis on the knowledge of the past leads to falling outside the historical core and

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

creativity of life, from the genuine and live field of history. Historical knowledge for its own sake which Nietzsche observes in the modern history-writing as a scientific discipline (or a would-be scientific discipline) means a way of handling knowledge and history cut off from the future and thus from the present. For, after all, what can a scientific approach to history, within its own methodological framework and strictures, say about future? For it, future necessarily remains a closed and forbidden territory.

(2) This already brings us to the question of objectivism, the hallmark of scientific methodology. Nietzsche sees that a scientific approach to history (which he takes as scandalous) involves objectivism in which historian (or scientist in general) has to efface her subjectivity in approaching to her historical object,<sup>25</sup> that is, she has to look at history from an unhistorical position presupposed, in principle, as accessible to a pure scientific research. All greatness and value to be found in history, everything that makes history worth studying slides away before such a vision and the objective historian is left with nothing but indifferent and colorless generalities, definitions and abstractions, which are just “concept-mummies.”<sup>26</sup> Emphasis on objectivity can be seen as an emphasis on facts and perceiving them purely as they are, which in turn requires, as indicated, effacing our subjective partiality from the mental process of encountering and examining such facts. Here, to paraphrase Nietzsche's text, we may speak of the pertinence of two closely linked problems. First, such objectivity is never something possible because it invokes, on the one hand, the ideal of a neutral observer and, on the other, a non-temporal (and thus non-historical) perspective on history to be employed by neutral observer. Second, however when a historian adopts such an (impossible) position, his experience (and thus account) of history ends up degenerated as well as degenerating for those who learn history in this way. This is because focus on facts on which objectivity anchors turns historical realm into a homogenous space to be reconstructed on the basis of most comprehensive (ideally exhaustive) inventory of facts. But this blurs all vital distinctions between what is historically great and what is not. Objectivity, by virtue of its very nature, cannot provide a proper instinct for historical greatness, because this requires an active involvement of the subjective and indeed its supreme kinds (which not everyone possesses). Rather, the ideal of objectivity, unknowingly and inescapably, takes average, banal and ordinary subjectivity (subjectivity of small man who shows

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<sup>25</sup>Ranke famously asserted that one needs to efface one's “self” in approaching the facts of history in a scientific way. For a detailed discussion, see Hayden White, *The Historical Imagination in 19 Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

<sup>26</sup>*Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), p. 479.

“equianimity” towards everything in life and in history) as the basis of its analysis.

(3) It turns remembering into the ultimate mode in which one is related to life. Nietzsche's text implies that remembering and the intellectual principle, as ways of relation to life, are inseparable, an inseparability which is already implicit in Plato's theory of anamnesis. He believes that such an exclusively intellectual approach to history does not contribute to life, that is, to great and creative actions in the present. Rather it curbs and inhibits creativity in human life. Indeed, Nietzsche believes that for a creative and satisfying life we should (1) minimize the role of the intellectual in our lives and (2) cultivate our aesthetic powers since the two sides of our being (the intellectual and the aesthetic) counteract each other, one growing only to the detriment of another. The former leads to subject-object dichotomy reducing life to phenomena for intellectual gaze, while the latter preserves and fosters our direct communion with and participation in life. Life, however in Nietzsche has a biological character, is an area of instincts and drives, an area of (tragic) exhibition of vital energies (Schopenhauer's *Wille*).

(4) Nietzsche's attack on metaphysics actually is central almost to everything in his thought (even though he always, in some way or another, does some sort of metaphysics from the Schopenhauerian “pessimism” of his earliest years up to his latest position finding expression in the doctrine of “eternal recurrence of the same”). Nietzsche basically understands metaphysics as an intellectual quest for eternal truths. The paradigm case is Plato who argued for a world of eternal truths transcending the concrete world (life, earth and history). He qualifies this metaphysical drive as supremely sick and decadent, as deeply hostile to life, to its sensual and temporal character, a hostility which he calls “ill-will toward time”, or what is the same, “spirit of revenge” (against life) in the *Zarathustra*.<sup>27</sup> Rather “all that is everlasting- that is merely a parable.”<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche intimates that our conceptual-rational way of thinking which manifests itself as scientific objectivity and ultimately as a search for eternal truths owes at bottom to Plato's metaphysical enterprise leads to all sorts of alienation to “life” (life can be associated with the present, the sensual-material existence, the earth, the temporal, and ultimately with the creative history), to a paralysis of vital instincts of human beings and therefore to curbing historical greatness. This Nietzsche identifies with “truth” and on that basis protests the primacy of truth in human life, which, he argues, harbours the dangerous conviction: *fiat veritas pereat vita*, “let there be truth and may life perish.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 111.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>29</sup> *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, (trans. P. Preuss), p. 23.

**66** *Nietzsche's Critique of Pure Reason*

(5) Nietzsche warns against an excessive interest in the past as “hostile and dangerous to life”<sup>30</sup> under a few scores. First he associates with it what he observes as a weakening of personality: “modern man suffers from a weakened personality”<sup>31</sup>, because modern man, among other things, seems too much preoccupied with the past. Thus when Nietzsche speaks of weakened personality, he means a loss of creative self-assertion underlying “history making events”. On the contrary, “no one dares to show his person, but masks himself as an educated man ...”<sup>32</sup> History could not have become an area of interest to the extreme, unless man, that is, Nietzsche argues, the whole (modern) age, first has lost his creative relation to life, turned into “a race of eunuchs required to guard the great historical world-harem.”<sup>33</sup> Perhaps we can detect here a keen psychological observation: we take refuge in the past when we no longer find happiness and satisfaction in the present and when we no longer find power and will in ourselves to freely and creatively orient towards a future. But how can we read the causal relation here?; does unduly interest in the past create weakened personalities or is it something fit only for weakened personalities? Nietzsche's point here amounts to this: “Only strong personalities can endure history; the weak are completely extinguished by it.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, both readings are true; history makes a strong personality (great man, creative individual) stronger and a weak one weaker.

This weakness of character, accordingly, is a distinctive aspect of the modern man, a modern malady which refers basically to an “impotentia”<sup>35</sup> before life and history. Modern man has an interest in history to an excess precisely because he stands farthest removed from historical creativity and venture. Nietzsche sees concrete ties between this lack of historical power and ability in the very core of modern humanity and his inwardness or subjectivity which, to fill such vacuum, tends, in vain, to amass in himself excessive information of the past. In point of fact, with this culture of inwardness (as “eternal non-subjectivity or ... objectivity”<sup>36</sup>) he has lost his ability to receive and appreciate historical greatness, thus “nothing can affect them any longer.”<sup>37</sup> Then we can infer that weakness of personality is a result of such culture of inwardness which does not allow creative self-assertion. For one thing, this inwardness refers to a “chaotic inner world”<sup>38</sup> resulting from “knowledge, taken

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

in excess without hunger, even contrary to need” that “no longer acts as a transforming motive impelling to action and remains hidden.”<sup>39</sup> In this way, it fosters “the contrast of inside and outside”<sup>40</sup>, a gap between what one does and what one feels, and ultimately a hollowness in one's very being. In fact, Nietzsche provides us some sort of causal chain in which such an excessive interest in history proves deadly damaging to life. I interpret the causal chain in the following way. First, through such an excess an age (i.e., our modern age) situates itself in the position of an ultimate judge or arbiter over all other ages of history, which gives rise to an objectivist perspective on history, with which one illegitimately skips over the ineradicable partiality and temporality (viz., historicity) of one's age. This also leads to the repletion of instincts which prevents the maturity and growth of the individual and community. This is followed by the belief that one is merely an epigone in the lifespan of the world. In this case, individual adopts dangerous dispositions of irony and cynicism towards himself. We eventually end up being egoistical to the degree of paralysis and destruction.

Facing such a pervasive emphasis on greatness in Nietzsche, one might rightly ask: how can we understand greatness to which Nietzsche frequently refers? What is the criterion of greatness in actions and deeds which we may identify in history and seek to enact in the present? Perhaps, the most reasonable way, in the overall context of Nietzsche's arguments, would be to understand it in terms of “creativity” which Nietzsche almost identifies with artistic creativity. His *Übermensch* thus is at bottom an aesthetic subject who imposes his will passionately upon life just as a sculptor who hits the stone (perhaps the ugliest, the hardest one) to arouse the reality in it, the aesthetic value. Furthermore, we can better qualify *Übermensch* as an aesthetic genius whose will must build all values and all truth because his only is a truly creative will and we cannot leave such vital task of creating values and truths to the mediocre (given that God is dead and a divine origin for the establishment of values and measure is out of question). Here we can see connections with, among others, Kant who argues that nature (read Nietzsche's life) through genius (read Nietzsche's *Übermensch*) gives the rule to the art. Since we cannot expect from all people to be genius, they should be the receivers and followers of the genius. This of course invites unhappy associations with National Socialism and calls us to ponder the extent to which Nietzsche (among other thinkers) contributed to its pathologies, and above all, to its warped historical perception. *Übermensch* as aesthetic subject or genius can build a genuine world (in the future) through his aesthetic creations (works of art) in which we can alone inhabit meaningfully, i.e., as “living” men.

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

Now Nietzsche maintains that this aesthetic subject alone has the right sort of access to history: “the past always speaks as an oracle; only as master builders of the future who know the present will you understand it”. One may well wonder how one can adequately know the present without first having some knowledge and understanding of the past? Of course, the question can also be raised in the reverse manner. Perhaps here we can note a hermeneutic circle between the past and the present. But Nietzsche's point seems to be of a different kind; he stresses the futural mode as key to the present and to the past which naturally has nothing to do with the objective study of facts but points towards disclosing the true weight of things in the past and in the present through a light brought from future. Great men, as artist geniuses, are “the master builders of future” and they can alone understand the true message of the past, not the scientist (the historian). Or it is also possible to construe Nietzsche's assertion here in the sense that historians only with a creative concern and engagement with life (present and future), only with an artistic vision into it, can penetrate into its depth, i.e., bring it to the present as an active force for life. Then, history-writing involves a special sort of creativity, a firm aesthetic stand in the present, whereby historian can make the past present and dead alive, that is, relevant to our future-oriented creative interests in life. This is actually quite close to what Collingwood calls “re-enactment” in *The Idea of History*, but Nietzsche adds the crucial dimension of creative concern in life which is characteristic of the artist. Perhaps, Nietzsche might call it “re-animation”, viz., making a past human deed or experience live again from out of the futural perspective of life and in the service of life.

In the guidance of this artistic interest and penetration in life, Nietzsche's historian, then, one might think, needs to combine harmoniously these three different approaches to the past, namely monumental, antiquarian and critical. This, however, is not exactly what Nietzsche has in mind, because he believes that these three sorts of dealing with history correspond to three different types of man such that their combination leads only to degeneration.<sup>41</sup> Rather, we'd better to think that such artistic sense of life can guide each kind of historian separately and render what they do useful for life.

After such a huge attack we find in Nietzsche on objective approach to history, on history as science, on our presumptuousness to evaluate other ages, we should rightly wonder whether Nietzsche endorses a historical relativism or a subjectivism with respect to history. In fact, a “sort” of subjectivism is inherent to Nietzsche's view of history as a whole (as is to his entire philosophizing). First of all, Nietzsche does not see history as a totality of indifferent and ordinary facts to be analyzed and assessed by historian scientifically just as

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., pp. 18-19.

natural scientist studies the facts of nature. What a hero achieves is historically not on a par with what the productive activity of masses (“peasants or workers”, Marx) could achieve. What makes history history is creative and great historical accomplishments and deeds, and most of all, “great men” as indicated earlier. Then historian needs some access to the experiences of great men. This means that he must have penetration into their subjectivity, which, in turn, requires having some share of their greatness; “like by like!”<sup>42</sup> History-writing is not a business for ordinary people, but for special individuals (artistic creative individuals, “individuals ... of the rarest kind”<sup>43</sup> who are occupied with future more than with the past “as master builders of the future”, viz., having a creative vision into future) who can re-animate the greatness of the past in the present. And Nietzsche observes that age determines, to a large extent, personality and character of the person (his greatness or weakness). Modern age, in this respect, is the least suited to engage in history creatively. Rather the contrary is the case, it is removed altogether from the capability to take part in the essential creativity of historical life, thus not capable to produce such historians, such distinguished men of judgment and action. Its interest in history is, in various forms, merely a function of its decadence and aggravates such decadence in turn. In other words, our age has no capacity to judge the great achievements, deeds and epochs of the world history, because the type of man which characterizes modern age is a man of weak personality lacking in creativity, spiritual power and real autonomy, in short, lacking in artist's tragic venture into life. He writes:

What is certain is that we [moderns] may not place ourselves in Renaissance conditions, not even by an act of thought: our nerves would not endure that reality, not to speak of our muscles.<sup>44</sup>

In the light of the foregoing, we may now ask; can Nietzsche be considered as a historical relativist? Historical relativism can be held to be the view that the reality of an age (i.e., its culture, facts, institutions, achievements, creations, values and beliefs) refers to a self-enclosed world of experience unique in itself and therefore not understandable truly by other ages which are far from its world of experience. Each age represents such a distinct world of experience not intelligible to another, which is also to say, not having proper access to another, because the partiality (historical, cultural, social etc.) it entails is insurmountable. It is, I think, practically inseparable from the view, designated as historicism, that there is no trans-historical position to assess history. Here I think there is a pervasive danger in Nietzsche's thought that also threatens his version of subjectivism delineated above (namely that we need great men to

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>43</sup>*Untimely Meditations*, p. 93.

<sup>44</sup>*Twilight of the Idols*, p. 539.

write history). Nietzsche comes somewhat closer to historical relativism when he attacks the idea of objectivity in history-writing.

These naïve historians call the assessment of the opinions and deeds of the past according to the everyday standards of the present moment 'objectivity': it is here they discover the canon of all truth; their task is to adapt the past to contemporary triviality.<sup>45</sup>

Hence it is inevitable that if objectivity becomes the principle of your approach to past, you take the standards of the present (i.e., of one's age), its frame of references, as basic to history-writing. Historical objectivity is not something possible; we are "in" history.

This point has also a crucial bearing on Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics on the grounds that metaphysics erroneously presupposes the existence of timeless, eternal truths, truths that stand above the temporal and sensual flow of life. Roughly put, Nietzsche rejects categorically any claim to truth which transcends life as a temporal flow and builds time-free (universal) categories and principles. Thus truths, too, are changeable, for "change" is part of the essence and therefore so is temporality."<sup>46</sup> This, as is well-known, underlies his critique of philosophy and philosophers, which is actually built on a critique of Plato and the whole western philosophical thinking basically as Platonism (including Christianity, "Platonism for the common people"<sup>47</sup>). These philosophers, Nietzsche remarks, "lack ... historical sense ... think that they show their *respect* for a subject when they de-historicize it, *sub specie aeterni*--when they turn it into a mummy."<sup>48</sup> Now given that human history is part of life (historical life<sup>49</sup>), we can safely say that it is neither possible nor desirable, from Nietzsche's point of view, to allow any trans-historical (or unhistorical, or universal) truths. Of course, one should add to this Nietzsche's perspectivism. It is certainly the case that if there are no such things as trans-historical truths and all truths are historical, then historical relativism is inescapable. Because it seems highly improbable that one can get any real understanding and knowledge of China in 1000 BC, or of ancient Egyptian culture, or of Aztec civilization, unless there is no trans-historical criteria to serve as anchoring points of historical inquiry. Then we can, in the genuine sense, neither turn backwards (to

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<sup>45</sup>*Untimely Meditations*, p. 90.

<sup>46</sup>Nachlaß, May-July 1885, KSA II, 35 [55]. quoted in *Nietzsche on Time and History*, p. v.

<sup>47</sup>*Beyond Good and Evil*, in *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. K. A. Pearson and D. Large, trans. Marion Faber (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 312.

<sup>48</sup>*Twilight of the Idols*, p. 479.

<sup>49</sup>"The past continues to flow within us in a hundred waves; we ourselves are, indeed, nothing but that which at every moment we experience of this continued flowing", *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 223.



the past ages) nor leap, imaginatively, forwards (into future); we cannot really transcend the bounds of the historical reality of our time. In speaking of the perils of historical education to which youth is subjected, Nietzsche alludes to it:

mindful of this situation in which *youth* finds itself I cry Land! Land!  
Enough and more than enough of the wild and erring voyage  
over strange dark seas! At last a coast appears in sight: we must land  
on it whatever it may be like, and the worst of harbors is better than  
to go reeling back into a hopeless infinity of scepticism.<sup>50</sup>

Here “land” signifies life and the present. “Wild and erring voyage” is historical education which leads to alienation to life as a voyage over “strange dark seas”, i.e., over the past, which yields “a highly indirect knowledge of past ages and peoples”<sup>51</sup>, that is, a radical uncertainty about them. Thus it creates “a hopeless infinity of scepticism” as opposed to the direct observation of life,<sup>52</sup> which is what we actually need.

If the above observations are justified, then we have got yet another problem. How can Nietzsche get a critical distance towards his age, the modern age, which he so fiercely exhibits in this *Second Untimely Meditation (On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life)*, that is, how can he become “untimely”, if (1) there is no trans-historical criterion to judge an age and (2) we can never leap beyond our times?

Furthermore, let us suppose that Nietzsche can really get an adequately critical distance from his age. Then, it appears that Nietzsche himself, too, falls prey to the same historical malady which he complains of, namely a malady whose essence consists in getting alienated to the present. He urges us to avoid “adapting the past to contemporary triviality.”<sup>53</sup> In this sense, Nietzsche certainly positions himself over against the present and cannot be moving “out of the fullest exhortation of the vigor of the present”<sup>54</sup> which he demands from any healthy engagement with life.

However, against all these worries, if one is to defend Nietzsche in the best light, one might point out that Nietzsche's argument essentially rests on making case for two points. (1) There is a continuity between nature and history. So even if it is clear that Nietzsche repudiates the idea of universal truths, one can by no means ascribe to him, on account of this, a historicism and therefore not historical relativism either; rather, his position is “naturalism”. But, then, we will have difficulties to understand Nietzsche's huge emphasis on “historical greatness”, and his urge to create ever greater histories in the future. And, worse,

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<sup>50</sup>*Untimely Meditations*, (trans. R. J. Hollingdale), p. 116.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 94.

in this case, we should apply positivism (natural scientific standards) to history which means “writing history from the standpoint of the *masses* and seeking to derive the laws which govern it from the needs of these masses ... the laws which move the lowest mud-and clay strata-of society ... laws [which] are worthless.”<sup>55</sup> (2) Nietzsche's basic point in history-writing is a call for a creative artistic power which takes its parameters neither from the past nor from the present, but from an imaginative (though possibly “illusory”) relation to futural historical greatness. This, as discussed earlier, underscores his sort of subjectivism. Indeed, Nietzsche claims that relation to (great) future is an imaginative activity, if it is to be a creative one, one which brings “growing” for the individual. And it is impaired if the determination of facts with utmost accuracy (objectivity as “blind power of the factual”<sup>56</sup> becomes the sole occupation of mind, either as history or as science. This leads to the destruction and paralysis of vital powers of human beings and, therewith, to accompanying irony, cynicism and practice pessimism.

Yet, this second point, too, seems to be deeply question-begging. Setting aside the whole worry of how much this aesthetic future-relatedness (which he sees in “the master builders of the future”, that is, in “the great men”) is really compatible with deriving full satisfaction from, with residing purely in the present to which he calls for in the *Birth of Tragedy* and in the beginning of *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* and which he observes as perfectly the case in the realm of animals, we might indicate another more serious problem. As suggested, Nietzsche draws attention to the creative role of illusions and to the creative potentials of imaginative manipulation. Accordingly, he harshly deploras, because of its slavish effects, our “idolatry of the actual”<sup>57</sup>, our tendency to stick to what we take as actual, present, objective or real. Objective correctness in history-writing is something trivial at best and decadent at worst; what counts is what can give force to our future historical action and creativity. By contrast, illusory fictions (futural as well as retrospective) as projections which artistic imagination alone can come up with, can function a great deal. As opposed to Nietzsche, here one might argue that our sense of reality is important; it reacts any violation and demands due respect. Accordingly, we may not play with things as we please. Kant, in the *Critique of Judgment*, gives the example of a youth who knows how to reproduce the song of nightingale bird. When that boy, employed by a jovial host who wants to play a trick on his guests, reproduces the note, the guests unaware of the trick take great delight and satisfaction from this. “But the instance that one realizes that it

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 105.

is all a fraud no one will long endure listening to this song that before was regarded as so attractive.”<sup>58</sup>

This is in fact a pervasive danger in Nietzsche's whole thought when he wanted to see all possible worth and value in life as solely lying in its being transfigured into an aesthetic playground. History, as much as the world, gains its full meaning and justification only through such an aesthetic transfiguration, or what is the same, aesthetic re-evaluation. Therefore, Nietzsche's thought precludes us, among others, from facing up what has been (e.g., world wars, Holocausts, Nazism, Pol Pot etc.), with a seriousness that it demands, which above all requires that we get true to it in its simple and plain factuality. This ethical solemnity Nietzsche would only scorn. Despite all these worries, I want to conclude with a positive observation regarding Nietzsche's approach to history. Nietzsche, notwithstanding, can help us open a new sense of the historical in which the historical gets its true importance in the light of the futural, viz. before the demand of a live reality which is not separable from us humans and which seeks ever more fresh and fuller disclosure, i.e., a greater history, through the present towards the future. Such a live reality Nietzsche calls “life” (*Leben*), or interchangeably, earth (*Erde*) and will (*Wille*). This, in turn, implies that we cannot just content ourselves with being slavish receivers or complacent preservers of what has been handed down to us (i.e., history or tradition); rather we need to stand beyond and be surpassors, whereby we say yes to our creative freedom in response to such a live reality claiming us.

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<sup>58</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. N. Walker, trans. James C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), p. 132.

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