

Nietzsche and the Problem of History *Mark Sinclair*

*It is something new in history that knowledge wants to be more than a mere means.*¹

The present essay examines Friedrich Nietzsche's articulation of the problem of history that is to be found in a short but nonetheless pivotal text entitled *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life*.² The text was first published as the second of four *Untimely Meditations* in 1874, and thus in what commentators have come to isolate as the 'early period' of Nietzsche's work. In the essay, I aim to show what sort of a philosophical problem the problem of history is for Nietzsche, and how his response to it offers us a key to understanding the development of his work from its 'early' to its 'middle' period and even his work as a whole. In addition, I aim to give some indications as to how Nietzsche's account of history as a problem has been taken up in the work of 20th century philosophers.

The 2nd *Untimely Meditation* announces the outbreak of a certain sickness or malady of the age: an excess of historical study and historical education within the German, and, more broadly, European culture of the late 19th century. The massive growth of historical studies in the 19th century has been described metaphorically as a 'discovery of the continent of history', a discovery comparable to that of the New World. For Nietzsche, however, this discovery amounts to an excessive concern for the past, and this excess would lead to a sickness – as an excessive consumption of anything usually does – because a limited range of historical knowledge is necessary to the health, happiness and creative powers of a people. Certainly, some historical knowledge is advantageous and necessary to life, but too much of it would be disadvantageous, having a harmful effect on the quality of our life itself.

Although Nietzsche describes several different symptoms of this sickness in the course of his text, he initially makes this latter point by comparing the life of a culture or people to that of an individual: the vitality and vigour of a culture requires a limitation of the range of its historical knowledge, just as the moments of happiness or the moments of decision and action in our personal lives require us to live fully in the present, limiting our recollection of the past; by, in other words, forgetting the past. Without some such forgetting – which is always prior to the possibility of actively remembering something and reflecting on it – we would, of course, become self-conscious to the point of distraction and alienation. If there is a historical malady in modern European culture, then, it would seem that the cure to the sickness lies in finding the right balance, for the sake of our lives, between an excess of historical knowledge or remembering and an excess of forgetting; between living in the manner of someone unable even to lift a finger because, remembering everything, he sees only becoming in things, only the transitory nature of events, and living in the ignorance – however blissful it may be to forget everything as soon as it happens – of a cow or goldfish. The ability to find this balance is what Nietzsche terms the 'plastic power'³ of an individual or people.

On this basis the 2nd *Untimely Meditation* may appear to present some interesting psychological analysis and cultural criticism, but one might wonder how it could be claimed to possess a pivotal importance within Nietzsche's philosophical thinking. The philosophical stakes of this diagnosis of a historical malady begin to become

clearer, however, with the recognition that the sickness arises 'through the demand that history be a science'.⁴ The 'discovery of the 'continent of history' in the 19th century is accompanied by, and, in fact, occasioned by, the apparently reasonable idea that the historian should learn from the modern natural sciences, adopting the position of the neutral and indifferent observer who does not import her prejudices into the object of the study. In her occupation with what can be known objectively in things, with knowledge that is valid for everyone and at all times, the modern scientist attempts to distance herself from her own subjectivity, her own particularity and concerns as an individual human being. This calculating objectivity is, then, what is required from the historian with the demand that history be a science. Henceforth historical knowledge is supposed to be an objective account of past events and epochs, an account that consequently exists for its own sake, rather than for the sake of life or of anything else; and it is the pursuit of historical knowledge for its own sake, which is to say the pursuit of historical knowledge as good in itself, that is precisely, as Nietzsche shows, what leads to an excess of historical knowledge:

Now life is no longer the sole ruler and master of knowledge of the past: rather all boundary markers are overthrown and everything which once was rushes in upon man. All perspectives have shifted as far back as the origins of change, back into infinity. A boundless spectacle such as history, the science of universal becoming, now displays what no generation has ever seen; of course, she displays it with the dangerous boldness of her motto: *fiat veritas pereat vita*.⁵

The demand that history be a science promotes the value of objective truth over and above any actual concern for our lives, and thus it can be characterised by the dictum: *let there be truth and may life perish*.

It is the conception of history as an objective science, then, that is the origin of the 19th century excess of historical knowledge. Yet what is the philosophical basis or the basic philosophical presupposition of this demand for objectivity? It is that the course of history as the object of historical studies is an object arrayed before an a-historical gaze; that, in other words, the human being insofar as it thinks is independent of history, outside of time; or that the human being is, in Nietzsche's words, 'an eternal non-subjectivity'.⁶ In one sense, this determination of the human being as at least partially residing outside of history, and thus time, derives from Plato's determination of the soul in relation to the true, timeless world of the ideas, and it is more or less a constant, in some guise or other, in philosophy before Nietzsche. Even in the work of the 19th century philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, which constitutes an attempt to incorporate history and the history of philosophy in a philosophical system, history can only be understood at the point of what is thought to be its completion or its end, and thus outside of history itself.

In another sense, however, this determination of the human being is peculiar to modernity and modern philosophy, for it is here that thought aims to access truth, eternal truth, in deliberate and methodical abstraction from received wisdom and history. If every age almost inevitably believes itself to be wiser, cleverer than the last, then this tendency is nevertheless radicalised in modernity, which claims to be able to enlighten itself in putting paid to a long history of error. In the text that is generally held to constitute the beginning of modern metaphysics, namely Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*,⁷ we indeed witness the attempt of thinking to

ground itself in and from itself independently of the history of philosophy; according to this method, the human being is apprehended as a self-grounding, timeless thinking thing for which everything else, save perhaps God, is arrayed as an object before it.

Nietzsche's diagnosis of the historical malady as deriving from the demand that history be a science, then, implies a critique of the philosophical tradition and, more specifically, a critique of the basic, Cartesian position of modern metaphysics; a position according to which the human being is abstracted from its own historical life. It follows from this that if Nietzsche is going to offer a different account of historical study than that holding it to be an objective science, this account will involve a transformation of the basic position of modern metaphysics. With what, then, does the *2nd Untimely Meditation* propose to replace the idea of historical study as an objective science? And what is the philosophical or metaphysical basis of this transformed account of the study of history?

Responding to the first question leads to a response to the second. There are, however, two levels to the response to the first question. In general, the task of the historian is compared to that of the artist, and here we meet one aspect of the early period of Nietzsche's work, a period which he himself characterised as an 'artist's metaphysics'. Historical study is shown to be always a question of interpretation and thus creation. The facts of history only have meaning within a framework of interpretation, a framework that the historian imposes on them from her own historical situation, and this is what Nietzsche means when he writes that the 'fact is always stupid'.⁸ The very idea of objectivity, which Nietzsche shows to be an impossible 'ideal', only serves to conceal the particular prejudices and presuppositions of a historian and her age. Against the demand for such objectivity, then, a demand that assumes 'that whoever is *quite unconcerned* about a past event has a calling to describe it',⁹ Nietzsche argues that 'the past always speaks as an oracle; only as master builders of the future who know the present will you understand it'.¹⁰ The meaning of what an oracle says is always, of course, a question of interpretation and, for Nietzsche, only those with a creative concern for our lives in the present and the future are fit to interpret it. In stressing thus the irreducibly interpretative and hence creative nature of historical study he introduces a problematic that has occupied historians themselves to this day, and which will be developed in the 20th century hermeneutic philosophy of, amongst others, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur.¹¹

More specifically, the *2nd Untimely Meditation* articulates three seemingly distinct kinds or modes of historical inquiry, each of which can be advantageous to life, but also disadvantageous if pursued to excess. Briefly, these are: the *monumental*, which celebrates the great deeds of the past, essentially in the fashion of a 'great-man' theory of history, for the sake of great deeds in the future, but which can descend into all sorts of fanaticism and distortion of history; the *antiquarian*, which happily stresses tradition and the roots of the present in the past, but which can become a stultifying force; and the *critical*, which analyses, dissects and criticises the past, thus distancing it from the present. History carried out as a science is predominantly critical history, the excess of which, as we have seen, leads to the historical malady with which Nietzsche is concerned. We are led to imagine, then, that in some sense, a sense that Nietzsche does not at all clarify, history as a creative task would comprise these three modes, which each seem to have a different relation to the past from the

particular perspective of one of the three different ‘moments’ or ‘aspects’ of time: the *monumental* study of history privileges the future insofar as it is concerned with the *possibility* of great deeds, possibility being that which is not yet present or actual; the *antiquarian* privileges the past insofar as it seeks to show the roots of the present in the past; and the *critical* privileges the present, insofar as it seeks to distance the past from the present.

It is by asking in what sense time and its ‘moments’ could be intended here that we arrive at a response to the question of the transformed metaphysical basis of Nietzsche’s thinking. This basis concerns the nature of time and the way that the human being exists as a historical being. First of all, the argument that the study of history is a creative act, and thus a function of the future, does not oppose the conception of an ahistorical, eternal subject with the idea that the human being is simply *in time*, and that is to say in the present moment. Such would be the metaphysical position underlying historicism or historical relativism, which merely negates the possibility of objective historical knowledge with the simple claim that all knowledge is relative to the particular and present historical situation of the knower.

Nietzsche does more than oppose historical relativism to historical objectivism; as he argues, it is the demand that history be a science that ultimately leads to relativism, since from the idea that previous periods of history can be examined objectively there is only a very short, perhaps inevitable, step to be made to the recognition that our age is itself just another one of these periods in history, one with its own prejudices and historical positions. If the study of history is always an act of creative interpretation, then, it is not the case that the human being is either *inside* or *outside* time. It would be much better to say that the human being *is* time, *that the human being is historical in its essence*.

Yet this idea necessitates a transformation of the common and quite traditional linear conception of the nature of time as a mere succession of present moments or ‘nows’ – nows that are no longer present, a now that is present, and nows that are not yet present – that receives its first sustained philosophical articulation in Aristotle’s *Physics*.¹² For the claim that historical inheritance is always a task, that the past is only accessible by means of our opening onto the future, amounts to, and in fact presupposes, the idea that the past *is* what it *is* only by means of the future. But if the past is what is only by virtue of the future, then we can no longer understand the past to be simply sequentially prior, as a ‘now’ which is no longer, to the future as a ‘now’ which is not yet. In order to begin to get to grips with this difficult thought, we are in fact required to transform our understanding of the verb ‘to be’, if any meaning has previously been granted to the verb at all, since on this account it can no longer mean simply to be *present*, for the past *is*, and it is in a sense other than that of a ‘now’ which is no longer.

The *2nd Untimely Meditation* compels us to recognise – in the words of the philosopher Georg Simmel, a reader of Nietzsche, who recognised the ‘logical obstacles’ of this way of speaking – that ‘life is really past and future’.¹³ In his brief text Nietzsche himself does not explicitly elaborate on this sense of life and time; the concept of life that features in the title remains undeveloped and ambiguous within the body of the text itself. Yet it is developed in the most deliberate fashion within Martin Heidegger’s master-work of 1927, *Being and Time*, in which he remarks that

Nietzsche's text 'allows us to suppose that he understood more than he has made known to us'.¹⁴ Heidegger distinguishes between the study of history and what he terms historicity, which is human life or human existence as a being-historical. The former studies the latter, but the latter is the ever pre-objective movement of history or time itself. And yet history or time here is not to be understood according to what Heidegger terms the 'vulgar' conception of time that has been dominant in philosophy since Aristotle; it is here to be understood in its more original guise as what is termed temporality, according to which the past, present and future are not mere successive 'nows' but are rather – as one might say, although the expression is hardly adequate to the nature of the problem, since it supposes that temporality is *in* time – *at one and the same time*.

If, however, Heidegger's *Being and Time* does present us with an elaboration of the particular instantiation of Nietzsche's early 'artist's metaphysics' in the *2nd Untimely Meditation*, then this apparently happy philosophical partnership almost immediately falls asunder with the beginnings of Nietzsche's move beyond this 'artist's metaphysics' itself. These beginnings are indicated towards the end of his short text. For there is one crucial problem that Nietzsche will not allow himself to avoid here, a problem to which the turn to art is, in the end, held to be an inadequate response: in a sense his own thinking suffers from the historical malady that it itself diagnoses; the critical and alienating distance from life that Nietzsche diagnoses in modern historical consciousness and modern metaphysics is ultimately repeated in his own thinking insofar as it is itself a criticism of the age. The problem relates to the very idea of an *untimely* meditation – to pose the problem in an interrogative form: how is it possible to take a critical distance from the present age, without staking a claim to an a-historical truth or an ahistorical essence of the human being? It is as a result of *this* aspect of the problem of history that Nietzsche issues a threefold imperative:

The origin of historical education [...] *must* itself in turn be historically understood, history *must* itself dissolve the problem of history, knowledge *must* turn its sting against itself – this threefold *must* is the imperative of the spirit of the 'new age' if it really does contain something new, mighty, original and a promise of life.¹⁵

With this threefold imperative Nietzsche announces what commentators have called the 'middle period' of his work, which commences with the text *Human all too Human*, and ends with *The Gay Science*.¹⁶ According to these three 'musts', the problem that modern historical education and the modern mode of knowledge represent is no longer to be addressed by means of an appeal to art and the activity of the artist. It is rather to be countered internally, as it were, by means of knowledge and historical education itself; the veritable antidote to the modern historical malady is now to be found within the cause of this malady itself. Such an attempt to 'turn the sting of knowledge against itself' is precisely what Nietzsche attempts in the texts of the middle-period, texts which attempt to overturn the basic, Cartesian position of modern metaphysics by means of an extension, a more radical practice, of objective, scientific knowledge.

Many commentators have held that the transition in Nietzsche's work from its early to middle periods represents a transformation in his estimation of modern science; Nietzsche the artist would become Nietzsche the scientist. It is, however, necessary to recognise that this shift represents nothing like a change of opinion, a change in his

estimation of both modern science and the metaphysical position on which it is based, but rather an attempt to ‘turn the sting of knowledge against itself’ in order to achieve a transformation of the way that we understand ourselves and the world, and, consequently, a transformation of the way that we exist. Perhaps the reading of the *2nd Untimely Meditation* that I have sketched in this essay would allow us to recognise that Nietzsche’s thought as a whole is to be understood less as a set of changing positive philosophical doctrines than as a series of attempts to turn modern metaphysics against itself, for the sake of a ‘promise of life’, i.e. for the sake of a transformed historical human existence.

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¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, tr. W. Kaufmann, New York: Vintage, 1974, § 123, p. 180.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Hackett: Indianapolis, tr. P. Preuss, 1980.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.23.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 31.

⁷ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, tr. & ed. J. Cottingham, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 48.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.37.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹¹ See, in particular, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, tr. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall, 2004) and Paul Ricoeur *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols. tr. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 1985, 1988.

¹² Cf. Book IV of Aristotle, *Physics*, tr. P. Wickstead & F. Cornford, London: Loeb, 1957.

¹³ Cited by Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method, op. cit.*, p. 264.

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p. 448.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 45.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human all too Human*, tr. R. Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press, 1996.