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# Nietzsche's Ethics of History

*Peter Berkowitz*

In *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* Nietzsche sets forth prescriptions for placing history in the service of human excellence. Nietzsche's prescriptions are based on a substantive metaphysical doctrine and a definite conception of human needs and capacities. Contrary to the dominant trends in recent scholarship that depict Nietzsche as primarily a teacher of antifoundationalism, historicism, and perspectivism, in his major thematic statement on the matter Nietzsche views history as a means to discover and to display nonhistorical and enduring knowledge about human nature and the rank order of desires, human types, and forms of life. For Nietzsche, the task of the "genuine historian" is nothing less than the transformation of history into poetry in the effort to defend wisdom, to distinguish nobility from baseness, and to establish the love of truth as a resplendent vice and noble faith. Nietzsche's account of the right use of history suggests an underappreciated unity in his writings by raising the possibility that in his several histories Nietzsche wrote from the perspective, and assumed the responsibility, of the genuine historian.

It is generally agreed that Nietzsche gave dramatic and ground-breaking expression to notions of historicism, relativism, perspectivism, and nihilism, notions which, among other things, imply the artificiality and transitoriness of moral and political standards. What is striking about this general agreement is that it prevails whether historicism, relativism, perspectivism, and nihilism are hailed as tokens of liberation and empowerment or denounced as scourges of the human spirit.<sup>1</sup> Leading scholars,

1. For example, whereas Alexander Nehamas finds in Nietzsche's writings the resources for fashioning a coherent, viable, and attractive model for self-creation, Martin Heidegger decries the arrogant frame of mind that teaches that the will produces and imposes structure and value on the external world. Whereas Michel Foucault credits Nietzsche with introducing genealogy, a revolutionary and comprehensive form of social inquiry grounded in the assumption that morality and knowledge are, have been, and always will be nothing more than reflections of envy and desire for power, Alasdair MacIntyre, essentially embracing Foucault's characterization of genealogy, concludes that as a method of moral inquiry genealogy is hopelessly irrational. Finally, Mark Warren seeks to rescue what he regards as Nietzsche's central notion, human agency, from what Warren views as Nietzsche's repugnant and extraneous remarks about morality and politics. This stands in sharp contrast to Bruce Detwiler who, proceeding from the premise which he shares with Warren that Nietzsche denies that morality has a rational, natural, or divine basis, argues that Nietzsche's sweeping

both advocates and critics, converge on at least one major point: a key feature of Nietzsche's achievement was his frank and decisive renunciation of suprahistorical moral and political standards. This scholarly consensus, however, misrepresents what Nietzsche plainly says in broad daylight about his undertakings and ambitions, distorts the logic of his arguments, and obscures the moral and political significance of his thought.

To be sure, the proposition that "There are no moral phenomena at all, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena—" (BGE 108)<sup>2</sup> constitutes a pillar of Nietzsche's thought. That phenomena lack intrinsic moral significance can be seen, for example, in Nietzsche's teaching in *The Birth of Tragedy* that tragic drama renders visible the chaos at the heart of the cosmos (BT 7); in the assumption crucial to *On the Genealogy of Morals* that morality and religious belief are the offspring of human desire and artifice (GM

denial is in fact intimately connected to his recurring accounts of a radically aristocratic political order. See Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); Martin Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead,'" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. James Lovett (New York: Harper & Row, 1977); Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984); Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990); Mark Warren, *Nietzsche and Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987); and Bruce Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

2. References to Nietzsche's works appear in the text. The following abbreviations are used: *The Antichrist*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (1954; rpt. New York: Viking, 1968), noted as A; *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), noted as BGE; *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Birth of Tragedy/The Case of Wagner* (New York: Random House, 1967), noted as BT; *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage, 1969), noted as EH; *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage, 1969), noted as GM; *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), noted as L; *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities International Press, 1979), noted as PT; *Philosophy and the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. Marianne Cowan (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1962), noted as PTG; and *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), noted as UD. In a few instances I have made minor adjustments to the translations.

Preface); and in Nietzsche's vehement attack in *The Antichrist* on the "theologian's instinct" for striving to view the world from a supposedly superior yet in fact malevolently falsifying vantage point, the vantage point of pure spirit (A 8, 9). It is easy to see, and the authorities have all seen, that Nietzsche insists that morality is a human invention lacking rational, natural, or divine foundations.

One cannot, however, explain the energy and massive attention commanded by Nietzsche's attack on foundationalism by the fact that it lies on the surface of Nietzsche's writings, for Nietzsche's appeal to foundations or reliance upon enduring and intelligible moral standards has often been passed by or underrated, though it is no less passionately expressed, prominently displayed, and pivotally placed in Nietzsche's speculations. For example, *The Birth* portrays tragedy as the supreme achievement of Greek genius and the model for the cultural renewal of Germany in the nineteenth century because tragedy elevates the spirit, reveals "the essence of things," and makes men wise (BT 7). The *Genealogy* places a premium on the acquisition of knowledge by the genealogist (GM Preface and I. 1), proclaims truthfulness the hallmark of the noble man (GM I. 5), and calls the dignity of creativity into question by making it an identifying mark of the slavish man (GM I. 10). In *The Antichrist*, organized Christianity, Buddhism, and Jesus are evaluated in accordance with their capacity to recognize and respect the truth (for example, A 9, 15, 20, 23, 32, 33, 39, 43, 47, 50, 52, 53, 62), while the ancient Hindu law of Manu is offered as an illustration of a political order that conforms to the dictates of nature (A 57). In sum, alongside and in constant tension with Nietzsche's weighty cluster of opinions affirming that the world lacks a rational, natural, or divine order, that morality is artifice and pathology, and that the will is sovereign, is a rival and equally weighty cluster of his opinions asserting that the cosmos has an intelligible character, that there is a suprahistorical ethical order, and that knowledge of these matters brings health, liberates, and ennobles. It is the unresolved antagonism between these sets of fundamental convictions that animates and orders Nietzsche's thought.

The contest of extremes in Nietzsche's thought has been underappreciated, owing, in part, to the uncritical acceptance of the commonplace that Nietzsche writes in aphorisms and frag-

ments. Both Alexander Nehamas and Eric Blondel have helpfully called attention to the fact that Nietzsche deployed a variety of styles including the essay, scholarly treatise, polemical pamphlet, maxim, psalm, parable, and complex narrative.<sup>3</sup> Yet both scholars overlook one particular genre that Nietzsche returns to throughout his career, namely the genre or form of the history. The fact is that Nietzsche produced three comparatively sustained historical studies: *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), his first book; *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1886), a book from his prime; and *The Antichrist* (1888), one of his last works. These three major attempts, spanning his career, to derive lessons about art, morality, religion, politics, and philosophy from the study of ancient history reflect the remarkable unity of his thought.<sup>4</sup> This unity is that of a contest with its characteristic rivals, rules, and standards. Understanding Nietzsche's histories, in particular the moral intention and theoretical guidelines that inform them, can help restore measure and precision to the understanding of the contest of extremes which lies at the foundations of his thought.

Nietzsche's histories are, to be sure, of a very peculiar kind. They represent a form of history that sacrifices exact historical or scientific knowledge to the accurate determination of the value of rival forms of life.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to popular beliefs about his thought,

3. See Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, pp. 13-20; and Blondel, *Nietzsche: The Body and Culture*, trans. Seán Hand (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 18.

4. Perhaps one cause of Nehamas's and Blondel's failure to see the importance of the genre of history in Nietzsche's writings is the topical and thematic approach they adopt to interpreting his thought. This approach, which passes by Nietzsche's books in favor of fragments drawn from them, has been called into question by a eminent former practitioner of it. Tracy Strong has reached the conclusion that the topical and thematic approach is opposed to the manner in which Nietzsche wished to be read. In the Epilogue to the second edition of his book, Strong looks forward to the day "when we will start reading Nietzsche as he wanted to be read, that is, to read his books as books and not as collections of sayings." See Tracy B. Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration*, Expanded Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975, 1988), p. 317. A study of Nietzsche's histories can contribute to Strong's worthy hope.

5. For example, in the Preface to his *Genealogy*, Nietzsche stresses that his chief ambition is to determine the value of morality and that this requires "an actual history of morality," that is the discovery of "what is documented, what can actually be confirmed, and has actually existed, in short the entire long hieroglyphic record, so hard to decipher, of the moral past of mankind" (GM

Nietzsche's histories are incompatible with historicism either of the moderate variety which holds that beliefs and practices must be understood in terms of the distinct epoch to which they belong, or with the more radical historicism which asserts that beliefs and practices, especially those rooted in morality, must be opaque to the outsider looking in as well as to the insider looking out. Nietzsche's primary quarrel in his histories is not with claims about the possibility of objective historical knowledge or the reality of suprahistorical moral goods. His own theoretical speculations and sensational proclamations notwithstanding, he routinely takes the possibility of objective historical knowledge, especially about morality, for granted. For Nietzsche, the key question is the value or moral significance of objective historical knowledge, especially that produced by professional scholars. His conclusion is that such knowledge is disastrously harmful. University professors misuse history not because they wrongly presume that they can acquire objective knowledge, but because they succeed all too well in spreading the poisonous information about the actual foundations of religion and morality, information that in Nietzsche's view undermines the basis for bold, free, and heroic deeds (UD 7, p. 95).

Preface 5, 6, 7). Although, in his *Genealogy*, he reaches substantial conclusions about the value of morality, Nietzsche does not provide anything resembling the almost conventional kind of history of morality that he promises to supply. Nevertheless Michel Foucault, fastening on what Nietzsche says and ignoring what Nietzsche does, declares that "Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary." See M. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," p. 76. In fact, the inspiring portrait of the genealogist as the exemplary scholar that Foucault draws is nonsense: if genealogy consists in the careful gathering of vast source material and patient attention to detail as Foucault says it does, then Nietzsche is no genealogist. For Nietzsche's genealogy is not gray. Inasmuch as Nietzsche reduces the whole complex and multifarious moral past of mankind to two competing moralities, it is closer to the truth to say that in practice Nietzsche's genealogy is painted in black and white. Nor is Nietzsche's genealogy meticulous. Inasmuch as Nietzsche names no names, dates no events, and shows scant concern for variations, anomalies, and details, it would be more adequate to call his genealogy inspired guess work, suggestive speculation, or a likely tale. And Nietzsche's genealogy, strikingly devoid of empirical evidence or scholarly apparatus, is anything but patiently documentary. Foucault obscures the character of Nietzsche's genealogy—in particular the tension between Nietzsche's rhetoric about, and his practice of, genealogy—by taking Nietzsche's rhetoric at face value and ignoring his practice.

Paradoxically, the general aim of Nietzsche's histories is to discover and display nonhistorical or permanent knowledge about human nature and the rank order of desires, human types, and forms of life. Close examination would bear out, I believe, that in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche analyzes the origins of ancient Greek tragedy to distinguish good and bad art, and to vindicate wisdom as the ground of human excellence; that in *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche examines the ancient origins of moral prejudices to distinguish good and bad moral prejudices and to establish a new rank order among values; and that in *The Anti-christ* Nietzsche ruthlessly exposes the origins of organized Christianity and lavishly praises the moral intentions governing Buddhism, Jesus, and the Hindu Law of Manu to distinguish good and bad religions and to throw light on the moral and political significance of the religious instinct. In sum, in each of his histories Nietzsche transforms history into poetry to defend wisdom, to distinguish nobility from baseness, and to establish love of truth as a resplendent vice and noble faith.

The modest aim of this article is to show that Nietzsche reveals the moral and theoretical basis for the poeticizing of history on behalf of philosophy in *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*. This polemical critique of modernity's oversaturation with history provides definite prescriptions for placing history in the service of human excellence. Under the assumption that the past is intelligible, Nietzsche proceeds by first emphasizing that history can serve life by providing a vantage point for identifying the characteristic weaknesses of one's age and models for overcoming one's time. He then distinguishes two basic ways of living, the unhistorical and the historical. This distinction roughly corresponds to that between sentience and self-consciousness. Nietzsche argues that a healthy human life requires a judicious mix of both the historical and the unhistorical. The mix is achieved through a shrewd practice of the three kinds of history: monumental, antiquarian, and critical. Contemporary culture, however, cultivates the historical sense without restraint, weakening the personality of modern man, perverting science and scholarship, and dishonoring philosophy by politicizing it and making it a subject of universal education. Philosophy or service of the truth turns out to be the *sine qua non* for good history since good history rests upon knowledge of "true but



deadly" doctrines and the "true needs" of man. Good history also depends upon creativity, or the free reshaping of the past to suit the real needs of the present. Nietzsche's master or "genuine historian" is a philosopher and artist: he writes edifying historical poetry based on knowledge of metaphysics and human nature for the education of superior human beings.

In sum: the art of the genuine historian springs from and reflects his understanding; his ethics hinges upon his metaphysics; his making is based on knowing. Concurring with Aristotle that poetry is more philosophical than history, Nietzsche poetizes history to serve philosophy.

### The Historical, the Unhistorical, and the Suprahistorical

Nietzsche introduces *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, a meditation on the "value of history," with a remark from the poet Goethe which he endorses as his own: "In any case, I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity" (UD Foreword, p. 59). At the very outset Nietzsche indicates that while knowledge must be understood in terms of morality or how one should live, morality has a knowable shape. Though Nietzsche's initial categories appear biologicistic, the structure of his argument is moral: augmentation and invigoration are good, what impedes them is bad. Of course augmentation and invigoration lack a self-evident meaning. They point to without specifying what is higher. Yet Nietzsche leaves little room for doubt that his repeated stricture that history must serve life does not refer to mere life, or self-preservation, or prolonging "the self-seeking life and the base and cowardly action" (UD Foreword, p. 59). History ought not to serve life however understood, but rather should promote a certain form of life, the "higher life" (UD 3, p. 75) and the "higher unity" (UD 4. pp. 80, 82). As Nietzsche's examination of the value of history unfolds, he increasingly specifies the form and content of the higher life, revealing it to be indissolubly bound up with philosophy understood as service of the truth and art placed in the service of human excellence.

History, Nietzsche goes on to explain, though needed to augment life and invigorate action has in his day come to stunt life and paralyze action. Acknowledging that this critical observation



may provoke public censure, he nonetheless allows that his criticism of his contemporaries could redound to the glory of his age. Risking unpopularity is warranted on the Socratic ground that it is likely to yield a gain in knowledge; at worst, Nietzsche hopes that provoking defenses of the age and its movements will result in his being "publicly instructed and put right about the character of our own time" (UD Foreword).

In Nietzsche's view, his age betrays distressing symptoms of a general malady: too much of the wrong kind of history. Declaring his meditation untimely because while his contemporaries take pride in their "cultivation of history," he views their preoccupation with the past as a crushing burden and consuming disease,<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche assumes the role of physician of culture ascribing paramount importance to learning the truth about the character of his time in order to cure the plague by which it is ravaged. He stresses that his untimely understanding of the menace of history and his uncommon capacity to experience history as noxious are acquired through historical studies:

it is only to the extent that I am a pupil of earlier times, especially the Hellenic, that though a child of the present time I was able to acquire such untimely experiences. That much, however, I must concede to myself on account of my profession as a classicist: for I do not know what meaning classical studies could have for our time if they were not untimely—that is to say, acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come.<sup>7</sup> (UD Foreword)

For an age saturated in history, professional, scholarly studies of the ancient world are justified on practical grounds: the objective historical knowledge they provide can liberate from contemporary prejudice and show the way to a healthy existence.

History in its primary sense, for Nietzsche, refers to an essential feature of the human condition. Whereas animals live unhistorically, wholly absorbed in the moment, human beings

6. Goethe's *Faust* is an example of one who suffers from the scholarly obsession with historical knowledge. *Faust's* colleague Wagner is an example of a man who does not know that he is afflicted (Goethe's *Faust*, Part I: 354-429, and 522-602).

7. See also "The Struggle between Science and Wisdom," in PT, p. 127, and PTG 1.

live historically, in the painful and dizzying awareness not only that the past is always receding and fading from sight, but that happiness is fleeting and the future uncertain (UD 1, pp. 60, 61). Though men and women may envy the untroubled stupor of the animals who lack awareness of time, and may also long for the "blissful blindness" of the child who as yet lacks a past, the fact remains that the historical sense is what lifts human beings above brute existence. Since, however, an overdeveloped historical sense inhibits action by multiplying possibilities and diminishing the feeling of personal responsibility, the sense itself must be inhibited or circumscribed. Man's historical sense must be harnessed by a capacity to think unhistorically; this requires a conscious and deliberate effort to limit consciousness and act without deliberation. To describe unhistorical thinking Nietzsche speaks first of forgetting and then more gracefully he alludes to forming horizons; in both cases he stresses that forms, structures, and boundaries must be imposed by human beings on experience to subdue the ceaseless and senseless onrush of events. In language that anticipates the constellation of problems inhering in the doctrine of the eternal return, Nietzsche indicates that the task for a human being is to learn to forget, to understand how the "it was" weighs down upon and confounds human existence, to recognize "what his existence fundamentally is—an imperfect tense that can never become a perfect one," and to overcome knowledge of the flux or universal becoming (UD 1, pp. 61, 62). One forgets by deploying "the plastic power," that is, capacity to subdue, digest and exploit the past for the sake of life and action in the present (UD 1, p. 62). By means of such unhistorical thinking what cannot be used is rudely excluded by impenetrable boundaries and what has outlived its usefulness is unceremoniously discarded and forgotten.

Since Nietzsche holds that the health of an individual, people, or culture depends upon the proper mix of the historical and the unhistorical, and since unhistorical thinking means forcibly closing one's mind, a healthy life inevitably rests upon injustice and errors (UD 1, pp. 64, 65). Accordingly, great deeds—every beautiful work of art, glorious battlefield victory, and passionate love—require a studied ignorance, a self-imposed blindness and deafness to obligations and dangers (UD 1, p. 64). But a few rare individuals, Nietzsche anticipates, will rise to a "suprahistorical vantage point" [*überhistorischen Standpunkt*] from which they will

discern "the essential condition of all happenings--this blindness and injustice in the soul of him who acts..." (UD 1, p.65). The "suprahistorical man" [*überhistorischen Menschen*] suffers nausea as a result of his correct perception that history is a meaningless series of equally valueless moments. Contrary to the historical man who is deluded about the "meaning of existence," the suprahistorical man knows that existence rules out salvation, and that despite the great variety in the history of nations and individuals, existence is always the same, a perennial flux devoid of intrinsic significance.

In Section I Nietzsche comes close to saying that greater than great deeds is understanding the injustice and delusion that make great deeds possible. He retreats temporarily from this preference for nausea-inducing wisdom,<sup>8</sup> acknowledging that his choice may reflect a prejudice, he opts for unwisdom, life, health, and action. But having halfheartedly renounced wisdom in favor of life, Nietzsche reaffirms that life or a good life cannot do without wisdom or philosophical questioning.<sup>9</sup> Enduring nauseating wisdom enables a few rare souls, guided by a "higher force" (UD 1, p. 67), to harness the historical sense so that some others may live a life of bold, free deeds.

### The Kinds of History

There are three pure species of history: monumental, antiquarian, and critical. Each ministers to distinct human needs and longings; each is susceptible to characteristic abuses. Reversing conventional estimations which hold that history is the preserve of students and scholars, Nietzsche declares that history belongs to the powerful man of great deeds who, lacking models, teachers, and comforters among his contemporaries, turns to history for examples of human excellence. Monumental history provides these images of past greatness. It is governed by the moral impulse or command to beat back all that is base and petty and to

8. A preference Nietzsche embraces in BT 7, 9; BGE 39; GM I 1 and III 24-27; and A Preface.

9. "The question of the degree to which life requires the service of history at all, however, is one of the supreme questions and concerns in regard to the health of a man, a people or a culture" (UD 1, p.67).

preserve what is exemplary and rare. It is driven by the demand "that greatness shall be eternal" [*ewig*] (UD 2, p. 68). It is informed by the methodological assumption that greatness has an enduring and intelligible look, that the enduring character of human excellence is accessible to the master historian and can be effectively transmitted by the historian's art. Dismissing the idea that history repeats itself endlessly without addition or subtraction at definite intervals, Nietzsche declares that monumental history properly rejects the demand for "absolute veracity" [*volle Wahrhaftigkeit*] (UD 2, p. 70). Though haughtily indifferent to mapping the intricate skein of cause and effect relations determining events in history, the practitioner of monumental history does not thereby abandon truth as a standard. To the contrary, the explicit aim of monumental history is to exhibit the enduring truth about human excellence.<sup>10</sup>

Nietzsche is the first to acknowledge that because monumental history forgoes minute, painstaking analysis it incurs the danger of becoming "free poetic invention" (UD 2, p. 70). Men of power and achievement, deceived by beautiful images of triumph and mastery torn loose from the actual dense web of cross-cutting causes and effects in which all deeds occur, may be tempted to reckless, disastrous adventures in rewriting the past and scripting the future. But the harm that monumental history can cause among great spirits is small, in Nietzsche's eyes, compared to the crimes perpetrated by weak, inartistic natures who arrogate to themselves the privilege of practicing monumental history. The inept and the unfit, always for Nietzsche the vast majority, transform images of past greatness into idols to be worshipped rather than models to be emulated and surpassed. Indeed the weak multitude is the inexorable enemy of human nobility: the idols or gods their monumental histories glorify freeze a single image of excellence as divine and absolute, sternly prohibiting fresh acts of human courage and strength (UD 2, pp. 71, 72). Nietzsche's emphatic distinction between good and bad monumental history, between true and useful and false and disadvantageous images,

10. In the Preface to *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* Nietzsche emphasizes that the reason for studying ancient philosophy is "to bring to light what we *must ever love and honor* and what no subsequent enlightenment can take away: great individual human beings" (PTG Preface, p. 24).

affirms what he subsequently states plainly, that history serves life not when it promotes mere life, but when it fosters the higher and highest forms of life (UD 3, p. 75; UD 4, pp. 80, 82).

Whereas monumental history chronicles the exploits of, and serves chiefly as a spur to action for, outstanding individuals, antiquarian history belongs to "him who preserves and reveres" and addresses the needs of communities and traditions (UD 2, pp. 72-73). Antiquarian history serves life by teaching veneration of a people's or nation's past; it infuses inherited customs, kin, and countrymen with solemn significance, providing the present and the future with the conditions that served life in the past (UD 3, p. 73). Like monumental history, antiquarian history commits injustice against the past by distorting the historical record. This justified injustice only ceases to be just when the preservation of the old becomes an end in itself; then piety deteriorates into an insatiable, indiscriminating hunger for information about antiquity. Antiquarian history degenerates into antiquarianism when study of the past is divorced from service to the present. Antiquarianism undermines "higher life"; but even in the best case antiquarian history "paralyzes the man of action" by concentrating on the preservation of past forms of life at the expense of the creation of new forms of life (UD 3, p. 75).

The antidote to excessive antiquarian history is critical history. Critical history closely resembles the familiar scientific and scholarly study of history. A crucial difference is that critical history, like monumental and antiquarian history, has an explicitly ethical dimension. Critical history is properly deployed to dissolve the claims that the past makes on the present so as to free "the man of action." The practice of critical history rests on a crucial theoretical assumption, call it a foundation, at once normative and descriptive:

every past . . . is worthy to be condemned—for that is the condition of human things: human violence and weakness have always played a mighty role in them. It is not justice which here sits in judgment; it is even less mercy which pronounces the verdict: it is life alone, that dark, driving power that insatiably thirsts for itself. Its sentence is always unmerciful, always unjust, because it has never proceeded out of a pure well of knowledge; but in most cases the sentence would be the same even if it were pronounced by justice itself. "For all that exists is *worthy* of perishing. So it would be better if nothing existed." (UD 3, p. 76)

Critical history mercilessly lays bare the violence and weakness, the errors and accidents, the aberrations and atrocities in which all human action is rooted. The danger of critical history is that it will demoralize men by revealing that what Nietzsche refers to as "first nature" [*erste Natur*], that is character, is an unstable mix of vile elements. The danger is averted by summoning "a new, stern discipline" to fashion a second nature [*zweite Natur*] to replace the feeble original (UD 3, pp. 76-77). Although in this context Nietzsche uses the term *nature* to denote something essentially man-made and perishable, the nameless and vague, though decisive standard which condemns the "first nature" and governs the fashioning of the "second nature" has no identifiable maker and no apparent limits to its duration. Evidently, although human natures are artificial, the standards governing the making of human natures are not.

History serves the more exalted forms of life when a constantly varying mixture of monumental, antiquarian, and critical history is judiciously practiced; that means "always and only for the ends of life and thus also under the dominion and supreme direction of these ends" (UD 4, p. 77). According to Nietzsche's diagnosis, however, the healthy relationship between life and history was ruined in nineteenth-century Europe by the transformation of history into a science or scholarly discipline [*Wissenschaft*] (UD 4, p. 77). Science's inner compulsion to classify, order, and explain the world mechanically lets loose the floodwaters of history and washes away the unhistorical disposition. Modern man, Nietzsche disgustingly declares, has become a "walking encyclopedia," stuffed to overflowing with the customs, art, philosophy, and religion of previous ages (UD 4, p. 79). Nietzsche's modern man, the original couch potato, is an overstimulated, passive, vacant spectator of all that has ever been. As a repository for the achievements of other cultures, modern man becomes incapable of "taking real things seriously" (UD 4, p. 79). Nietzsche's objection to the unrestricted reign of science is both moral and philosophical: too much truth about history saps vigor and drowns the truth about what is good for human beings. In a culture ravished by the malady of history, "the great productive spirit" is compelled to turn against the "destructive and degrading" effects of the reining pseudo-culture, and embracing the "divine joys of

creation and construction . . . ends as a solitary man of knowledge and satiated sage" (UD 4, p. 82).

But even the great productive spirits are imperilled by the onslaught of history. History weakens the human capacity for awe, destroys the instincts, and distances human beings from real events in the world by insisting that "subjective depths" contain the key to all riddles (UD 5, pp. 84, 85). This triumph of subjectivity all but ensures that "history does not make any personality 'free', that is to say truthful towards itself, truthful towards others, in both word and deed" (UD 5, p. 84). And this loss of freedom or truthfulness toward oneself and others is, on Nietzsche's account, sharply at odds with what is good for human beings. Because of his firm ideas about the human good and human excellence Nietzsche can anticipate

a culture which corresponds to true needs [*wahren Bedürfnissen*] and does not, as present-day universal education teaches it to do, deceive itself as to these needs and thereby become a walking lie. (UD 5, p. 85)

The weak and self-deluded human character caused by oversaturation with history leads to the degradation of "the most truthful of all sciences, the honest naked goddess philosophy" (UD 5, p. 85). The advent of professional philosophy, the proliferation of institutionally supported reading, writing, and speaking about everything under the sun is a consequence, Nietzsche asserts, of the historical sense run amok. Scholarship and criticism replace philosophy. The attempt to fulfill the "law of philosophy" [*Gesetz der Philosophie*] in life and deeds is abandoned. Instead, scholars undertake the project of stuffing and mounting for public exhibition the well-preserved carcasses of once magnificent but now extinct philosophical doctrines (UD 5, p. 85). And critics overlook the works themselves to focus on the history of the author (UD 5, p. 87). The result is that scholarship and criticism only produce more scholarship and criticism; both are irrelevant at best and generally poisonous to right action.

The replacement of philosophy with scholarship and criticism harms life and paralyzes action by rendering them unworthy objects of investigation. Indeed, Nietzsche defines the degradation of modern man in terms of his rage for criticism.



The critic's critical pens never cease to flow, for they have lost control of them and instead of directing them are directed by them. It is precisely in this immoderation of its critical outpourings, in its lack of self-control, in that which the Romans call *impotentia*, that the modern personality betrays its weakness. (UD 5, p. 87)

In response to the pathetic self-aggrandizement of scholars, bold measures are required to remind human beings of the "law of philosophy" and to make it possible for at least a few of them to live in accordance with it. The key is the right kind of education, a historical education provided by the "genuine historian."

### The Genuine Historian

That the question of philosophy is no passing fancy but at the heart of Nietzsche's theory of histories is borne out by his brief but highly suggestive discussion of "objectivity" [*Objectivität*], "justice" [*Gerechtigkeit*], and the "striving for truth" [*Streben nach Wahrheit*] (UD 6, pp. 88-89). Nietzsche denies that the quest for objectivity in modern historical studies arises from the desire to do justice since modern man lacks the requisite courage and stern will for just action. Justice, often thought to be the preeminent political virtue, has, for Nietzsche, nothing to do with the fair distribution of resources, the remedying of injuries to body and property, or the promotion of the common good. Rather, Nietzsche's understanding of justice is more akin to that of Socrates—whom Nietzsche invokes as an authority in this context (UD 6, p.88)—inasmuch as Socrates understood justice as the health or right ordering of the human soul.<sup>11</sup> Justice, "the rarest of all virtues," at once a moral and intellectual virtue, governs the desire for truth (UD 6, p. 88; also UD 5, p. 83). Those who possess it are venerable because "the highest and rarest virtues are united and concealed in justice" (UD 6, p. 88). The just man, rare and solitary, is "the most *venerable* exemplar of the species man" (UD 6, p. 88). The truth that the just man seeks differs from both "cold, ineffectual knowledge" and instrumental knowledge. The service of truth rooted in justice strives to reach a true judgment about

11. Plato's *Republic* 443c-445b, also 592b.

humanity. Such a striving for truth is rare owing to both inclination and capacity: "The truth is that few serve truth because few possess the pure will to justice, and of these few only a few also possess the strength actually to be just" (UD 6, p. 89). The difficulty in serving truth has as much to do with the scarcity of virtue as it does with the inherent elusiveness of truth.

Serving truth differs from maintaining objectivity. Indeed, "Objectivity and justice have nothing to do with one another" (UD 6, p. 91). Very often the claim of objectivity masks a political agenda or reflects a confusion of conventional norms with universal principles of judgment. Whereas justice requires distinguishing between what is grand and noble and what is mean and petty, objectivity, as Nietzsche sees the term used by modern scholars, refers to a principled neutrality toward all events and individuals (UD 6, p. 93). Objectivity so conceived is constitutionally unable to respect or report the truth about nobility and baseness. Accordingly, Nietzsche condemns modern man's objectivity because it springs from weak natures, fails to recognize crucial moral differences, treats unlike cases alike, and is oblivious to "what is worth knowing and preserving in the past" (UD 6, p. 94). Paradoxically, the problem with conventional objectivity is that it conceals or distorts the facts about the higher life.

In contrast to the injustice that nourishes modern man's objectivity, "a stern and great sense of justice," Nietzsche holds, is "the noblest center of the so-called drive to truth" (UD 6, p. 89). Whereas historical objectivity consists in reporting facts without judging or judging falsely, justice demands that history serve the goal of displaying what is high and rare. Whereas historical objectivity seeks general propositions, justice requires images of wholeness and beauty. Thus, the value of history

will be seen to consist in its taking a familiar, perhaps commonplace theme, an everyday melody, and composing inspired variations on it, enhancing it, elevating it to a comprehensive symbol, and thus disclosing in the original theme a whole world of profundity, power, and beauty. (UD 6, p. 93)

This weighty task belongs to "the genuine historian" [*der ächte Historiker*] (UD 6, p. 94). The genuine historian is both a knower

and a creator whose comprehensive making or art is based on his universal knowledge. He

must possess the power to remind [*umzuprägen*] the universally known into something never heard of before, and to express the universal so simply and profoundly that the simplicity is lost in the profundity and the profundity in the simplicity. (UD 6, p. 94)

Rich with great and exalted experiences, "great historians" recover, correctly interpret, and beautifully express through their histories "the great and exalted things of the past" (UD 6, p. 94).

Thus, the great or genuine historian is the supreme educator. But is the supreme educator the supreme human type? Nietzsche proceeds to counsel his readers: "Sate your soul with Plutarch and when you believe in his heroes dare at the same time to believe in yourself" (UD 6, p. 95). Since Plutarch does not chronicle the careers of historians and artists, or for that matter philosophers, but celebrates political lives, the deeds of soldiers, statesman and rulers, Nietzsche leaves unclear the rank of the genuine historian whose heroism consists in recovering and chronicling the heroism of the past.

Nevertheless, the genuine historian shares with the highest types found in Nietzsche's work, the superman and the philosopher of the future, a passion and need for knowledge. Indeed, what justifies Nietzsche in distinguishing the crimes against the truth perpetrated by modern man's objective history from the omissions, embellishments, and fabrications crucial to the task of the genuine historian is superior knowledge of a specific sort. Fabrications or lies about history are justified by the service they render in fostering human excellence. And this service requires that history honor the truth in two decisive respects. First, useful history must rest upon an unflinching recognition, followed by a skillful concealment, of doctrines [*Lehren*] Nietzsche considers true but deadly: "the doctrines of sovereign becoming, of the fluidity of all concepts, types and species, of the lack of any cardinal distinction between man and animal . . ." (UD 9, p. 112). Second, useful history must be informed by human beings' "real needs" [*ächten Bedürfnisse*] (UD 10, pp. 122-23; also UD 1, p. 66, and UD 5, p. 85). More boldly put, history serves life well only on the basis of true knowledge of metaphysics and human nature.

Nietzsche's genuine historian is a lover of truth who transforms history into art to educate noble natures and cultures (UD 6).

### Self-Knowledge and Self-Creation

Nietzsche's exploration of the right use of history is not merely theoretical; he also advances prescriptions for the right use of history in the Germany of his day. One of the first truths that must be recognized if Germany is to be rescued from the cultural philistinism to which, in Nietzsche's view, his generation has sunk is "a *necessary truth*: the truth that the German possess no culture because his education provides no basis for one" (UD 10, p. 119). Whereas "Plato considered it necessary that the first generation of his new society (in the perfect state) should be educated with the aid of a mighty *necessary lie*," the first generation of a revitalized Germany must be educated in the necessary truth that it has been made sick by history (UD 10, pp. 118, 119). Before learning how to forget, the new generation "must taste this truth drop by drop, like a fierce and bitter medicine," and achieve the self-knowledge that it has been "ruined for living, for right and simple seeing and hearing," indeed, that it may not even be able anymore to find in itself "true life [*wahrhaftiges Leben*]" (UD 10, p. 119). Before those who have been made sick by history can remake themselves they must unmake themselves, and before they can unmake themselves they must see how poorly their "first natures" (UD 3, pp. 76-77) have been made. And this presupposes both a notion of right making and a standard governing the making of natures that are themselves intelligible and not made.

In the concluding passages of *Uses and Disadvantages* Nietzsche hopefully declares that the "malady of history" can be cured by administering the hard medicine consisting of the unhistorical and the suprahistorical (UD 10, p. 120). The former involves creating horizons to repel the ceaseless onslaught of what is transient, mortal, and devoid of inherent significance; the latter designates those powers "which lead the eye away from becoming towards that which bestows upon existence the character of the eternal and stable, towards *art* and *religion*" (UD 10, p. 120). The cure for too much history closely resembles a formula that

Nietzsche employed a decade later in his notebooks during the period in which he was composing *Zarathustra* to describe the "supreme will to power," that is, "To stamp [aufzuprägen] Becoming with the character of Being" (WP 617).<sup>12</sup> A comprehensive understanding of the human condition reveals that "the eternalizing powers of art and religion" must combat the historicizing and reductivist powers of science for the sake of human excellence (UD 10, p. 120). Science is the nemesis of art and religion because science's relentless quest for the historical determinants of actions and events reveals a world of endless flux or becoming and thereby "robs man of the foundation of all his rest and security, his belief in the enduring and eternal" (UD 10, p. 121). Scientific or objective knowledge must be harnessed in accordance with "a *hygiene of life*" (UD 10, p. 121). The restoration of health depends upon the task Nietzsche assigned to the genuine historian: forming horizons and endowing existence with the character of eternity through edifying poems that take the shape of histories.

The poetic activity of the genuine historian depends upon studying and employing the past according to the "rule [*Herrschaft*] of life" (UD 10, p. 122). But how is knowledge of the "rule of life" acquired? As in the *Foreword*, Nietzsche affirms in concluding that the study of ancient Greece provides an invaluable standpoint from which to discern the defects of the modern age. And Nietzsche adds that ancient Greece also provides the teaching that is the foundation of health and the surest guide to the ends of life.<sup>13</sup> Modern man can become human again by heeding the injunction of the God at Delphi, "Know yourself" (UD 10, p. 122).<sup>14</sup> Now broadly speaking "Know yourself" is susceptible to

12. Nietzsche uses a related verb, "*umzuprägen*" to describe the characteristic activity of the genuine historian (UD 6, p. 94).

13. See also UD 8, p. 103: "the thought of being epigones, which can often be a painful thought, is also capable of evoking great effects and grand hopes for the future in both an individual and in a nation, provided we regard ourselves as the heirs and successors of the astonishing powers of antiquity and see in this our honor and our spur."

14. Hobbes, too, for all his rhetoric about science and system, invokes the injunction "Read thyself" as the primary basis for moral and political knowledge. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Introduction.

two fundamental interpretations, one pointing outward and universal in scope, one pointing inward and focusing on the particular. Following a tendency more characteristic of Plato and Aristotle, "Know yourself" may mean know the universal features that define a human being. Following a tendency more characteristic of Rousseau, romanticism, and modernism, "Know yourself" could mean know the specific and original features that constitute your unique personality. Which is closer to Nietzsche's meaning?<sup>15</sup> Working against the subjectivist interpretation of "Know yourself" is the fact that in *Uses and Disadvantages* Nietzsche sharply criticizes the cultivation and celebration of subjectivity as a symptom of modern decline (UD 4, pp. 80-81; UD 5, pp. 84-85). Speaking in favor of the universal interpretation is the fact that Nietzsche's description of Greek excellence depends on the distinction between real and apparent needs and on the importance of grasping the former so as to abolish the latter (UD 10, p. 122). Nietzsche insists that modern man must do as the Greeks did: each must "organize the chaos within him by thinking back to his real needs" (UD 10, p. 123). Thus, Nietzsche firmly grounds self-creation (organizing the chaos within) in self-knowledge (real needs). Yet the knowledge of one's real needs does not come easily or naturally. Self-knowledge and hence self-creation depend—apparently everywhere and always—on specific virtues, prominent among which are honesty, strength and truthfulness of character, and courage (UD 10, p. 123).<sup>16</sup> Virtue is necessary for

15. This important question will never arise if one infers from a narrow range of Nietzsche's utterances that Nietzsche rejected the very idea of self-knowledge in the Socratic sense. This is what Alexander Nehamas does. He flatly asserts that Nietzsche rejected self-knowledge as Socrates understood it because "Nietzsche denies that in Socrates' sense there is either a self that can be known or a knowledge that can capture it" (Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, p. 26). Sometimes, of course, Nietzsche does deny the possibility of Socratic self-knowledge. Not less frequently, however, Nietzsche affirms its reality and its centrality to human excellence. Nehamas fails to investigate the perspective that accounts for both Nietzsche's denial and his affirmation of Socratic self-knowledge. Arbitrarily focusing on one side of Nietzsche's thought or a single perspective within it, Nehamas puffs up the part and presents it as the whole.

16. Again, it is instructive to compare Nietzsche with Hobbes who insists that reading the universal features of human passion from a close examination of one's own passions is harder than learning any language or science. *Leviathan*, Introduction.

the identification of one's real needs and once identified for satisfying them.

A people whose self-creation is based on self-knowledge embodies the true or Greek conception of culture, that is "the conception of culture as a new and improved *physis* [nature]" (UD 10, p. 123). The Greeks were able to create this new and improved nature, Nietzsche emphasizes, thanks to "the higher force of their *moral* nature [*sittlichen Natur*]" (UD 10, p. 123). Intellectual and moral virtue are the foundation of true culture, and philosophical virtue most of all:

every increase in truthfulness must also assist to promote *true* culture: even though this truthfulness may sometimes seriously damage precisely the kind of cultivatedness now held in esteem, even though it may even be able to procure the downfall of an entire merely decorative culture. (UD 10, p. 123)

Nietzsche concludes by attributing marvelous powers to "true culture," an image of which he finds in Greek culture. He proclaims that true culture overcomes the distinction between inner life and outer conduct, does away with convention, and brings about a unanimity of life, thought, appearance, and will. These are thrilling and inspiring possibilities. Yet the very combination of moral and intellectual virtues that Nietzsche says underlies such a culture--honesty, strength and truthfulness of character, courage--compels one to observe that Nietzsche does not sketch or analyze the structure of such a culture but rather only states its principle and its aspiration. While it is clear by the end of *Uses and Disadvantages* that Nietzsche yearns for a perfect reconciliation of extremes, what that perfect reconciliation looks like in practice remains extremely obscure.

## Conclusion

There is a contest of extreme and rival opinions at the foundations of Nietzsche's ethics of history. Nietzsche himself does not overcome, within the confines of *Uses and Disadvantages*, the conflict between his opinion that values are created by human beings and imposed by them on a senseless world, and his conviction that historical knowledge is possible and that the metaphysical



structure of the cosmos and the rank order of types of human beings are intelligible. Whether what Nietzsche has left unreconciled can be reconciled by others is an open question. And whether Nietzsche effects such a reconciliation elsewhere, for example in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* a book that Nietzsche regarded as his most profound and farsighted,<sup>17</sup> or in *Beyond Good and Evil*, a work that Nietzsche characterizes as a fundamental criticism of modernity that at the same time points to a kind of excellence "that is as little modern as possible" (EH III "Beyond Good and Evil" 2), is an important question that cannot be resolved here for it depends upon a careful analysis of those works. Meanwhile, the discovery of an unresolved contest of extreme and conflicting opinions in *Uses and Disadvantages* does not negate Nietzsche's achievement but rather constitutes a step in extricating it from the suffocating reverence and the silly adulation to which it has been subject. *Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* throws light on Nietzsche's grand attempt to reconcile philosophy and art in a good life by grounding the most admirable forms of making in the most comprehensive kind of knowledge.

Nietzsche's account of the right use of history suggests an underappreciated unity in his writings by raising the possibility that in his several histories Nietzsche wrote from the perspective, and assumed the responsibility, of the genuine historian. If the genuine historian fashions artworks, in the light of true metaphysical knowledge and accurate understanding of real human needs, out of raw materials drawn from history in order to educate toward human excellence, what might one expect to discover in studying Nietzsche's histories? It would, for example, be consistent with the hypothesis that Nietzsche writes history as a genuine historian to find that in reconstructing the origins, peak moment, and demise of Greek tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche shows the role that the right or perfected form of art plays in making men wise; that in reconstructing the origins of our moral prejudices in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche

17. See TI "Skirmishes of an Untimely Man" 51; EH Preface 4; EH III 1, 4 and "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" 6; letter to Overbeck (received on 11 February 1883), and letter to Knortz, 21 June 1888, in L, pp. 207, 299.

displays enduring and intelligible standards for praising, blaming, and ranking moralities; and that in reconstructing the origins of Christianity in *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche brings to light the rank order of religious beings and religions.

Careful study of *The Birth*, the *Genealogy*, and *The Antichrist*, would, I believe, vindicate the proposition that Nietzsche writes history governed by the assumptions, obligations, and ends that define the task of the genuine historian. But where exactly does the genuine historian belong in the rank order? Where does he stand in relation to the highest type? Are the genuine historian's poeticized histories for the sake of the higher life the highest form of making or creativity that Nietzsche recognizes? To answer these questions it is necessary to view Nietzsche's histories in light of the two explicit accounts that he provides of the supreme type: Zarathustra's superman and *Beyond Good and Evil's* philosopher of the future. First, however, it is necessary to view Nietzsche's histories in their own light.