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The problem of history in Nietzsche's essay *On the Utility and Liability of History for Life*

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Nietzsche's concerns over the study of history in his essay *On the Utility and Liability of History for Life*. In this essay, Nietzsche attempts to show that an excessive scientific historicising poses a danger to the vitality of the present and argues that history must be used in a way that supports and enhances life. Nietzsche's concerns regarding the study of history operate over several interconnected levels that range from the cultural and existential to the epistemological. In this paper, the author argues that Nietzsche's concerns are well founded, grounded in a novel conceptualisation of the temporal structure and the historical nature of human existence. These insights allow Nietzsche to reconstruct the problem of history as an issue of the proper way of relating to one's own historical condition, and to recognise the dangers of self-alienation due to an excessive scientific historicising.

Keywords: Nietzsche ■ early writings ■ cultural and historical analysis
■ critique of scientific historicism ■ temporality ■ historicity

I. INTRODUCTION

The focus of this paper is Nietzsche's concerns over the study of history in his essay *On the Utility and Liability of History for Life*. The essay is a part of a series of four writings called *Untimely Meditations* (also translated as *Unfashionable Observations*), which were published between 1873 and 1876.^[1] They include the following writings: *David Strauss: The Confessor and the Writer*, *On the Utility and Liability of History for Life*, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, and *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*. Along with his book *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), these works belong to what scholars call Nietzsche's early writings, which focus primarily on historical and cultural analysis.^[2]

[1] Nietzsche, 1995, 1.

[2] Kaufmann, 1997, 9.

The original aim of the *Untimely Meditations* was to provide a critique of contemporary German culture and intellectual life.^[3] Beyond this more narrow aim, however, it shows a profound engagement regarding the origins of Western civilization, the nature of art, morality and culture.^[4] In this book Nietzsche criticizes contemporary German culture and its obsession with rationality, arguing that it was leading to a decline in artistic and cultural creativity.^[5] He advocates for a return to the ideals of ancient Greece, which he believed embodied a more holistic and vital approach to life.^[6] Overall, the writings represent a crucial period in the development of Nietzsche's thought. In particular, they foreshadow many of the themes that he would explore in his later works, including the importance of creativity, vitality, and individualism, as well as his critique of the limits of rationality and science.^[7]

It must be noted that while the *Untimely Meditations* are a series and should be read as such to provide a complete picture of Nietzsche's early thought, the essay *On The Utility and Liability of History for Life* stands out as a study that merits a close reading on its own. It is in this work that Nietzsche outlines his views on the temporal structure and the historical nature of existence, which provide one of the core foundations for the entire historical and cultural analysis that characterises his early period. Moreover, the structures that Nietzsche uncovers provide the groundwork for many key ideas that he develops later in his career, such as the eternal recurrence, and the will to power.^[8]

In the essay, Nietzsche attempts to show that an excessive scientific historicising study of history poses a danger to the vitality of the present, and argues that history must be used in a way that supports and enhances life. Nietzsche concerns regarding the study of history operate over several interconnected levels in his essay that range from the cultural and existential to the epistemological. In what follows, I shall argue that Nietzsche's concerns are well founded, grounded in a novel conceptualisation of the temporal structure and the historical nature of existence. These insights allow Nietzsche to reconstruct the problem of history as an issue of the proper way of relating to one's own historical condition, and to recognise the dangers of self-alienation due to an excessive scientific historicising.

[3] Schacht, 1992, 28-29.

[4] Safranski, 2003, 162-166.

[5] Heller, 1972, 313.

[6] Nietzsche, 1999, 139-140.

[7] Kaufmann, 1974, 143-144.

[8] Nietzsche, 2001, 22.

II. THE PROBLEM OF HISTORY FOR LIFE AND CULTURE AND THE CRITIQUE OF SCIENTIFIC HISTORICISM

The first of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations, David Strauss: the Confessor and the Writer*, establishes the concern that, despite popular opinion, the Germans have no genuine culture.^[9] For Nietzsche, this is symptomatic of a deeper malaise that plagues his contemporaries, which he reveals in his observations *On the Utility and Liability of History for Life*. In that essay, Nietzsche says that his age is suffering from a „historical fever“.^[10] The illness of excessive historical sensibility, he claims, has „attacked“ the vital forces of life:^[11] the condition of the possibility of genuine culture.^[12] Nietzsche identifies the source of this malady in an education system built around historical cultivation. He argues that a cultivated knowledge of the past provides insufficient stimulation for life, action and culture.^[13] Instead of breeding a living culture, it exhausts itself in a sterile knowledge about culture, and as such is the very antithesis of genuine culture.^[14] We shall examine later what grounds these observations. But to understand the ways and the extent to which historical cultivation amounts to an attack on life, it is first necessary to discuss its nature in more detail.

Historical cultivation originated in 19th century German scientific historicism.^[15] In its quest for objectivity, scientific historicism turned the study of the past into a matter of empirical research, concerned with the accumulation and disinterested analysis of historical sources.^[16] Hence, it triumphed an approach aimed at the factual representation of history, untainted by the interests and needs (‘biases’) of the living subject. Nietzsche criticizes this approach as it amounts to an over-valorisation of history where life is subordinated to the epistemic requirements of the scientific study of the past.^[17] As he writes:

„[W]e honor history more than we do life. Indeed, we rejoice in the fact that ‘science has begun to take control over life.’“^[18]

Nietzsche's main concern is that an excessive study of history has a paralyzing effect on life, suffocating its vital and creative forces necessary for its growth and activity. Nietzsche expresses the problem as follows: *„There is a degree of*

[9] Nietzsche, 1995, 10.

[10] Nietzsche, 1995, 86.

[11] Nietzsche, 1995, 163.

[12] Nietzsche, 1995, 159.

[13] Nietzsche, 1995, 162.

[14] Nietzsche, 1995, 6.

[15] Bambach, 1990, 260.

[16] Sigurdson, 2004, 62.

[17] Nietzsche, 1995, 105.

[18] Nietzsche, 1995, 134.

(...) historical sensibility that (...) ultimately destroys (...) a human being, a people, or a culture."^[19] An excess of history is dangerous to life, Nietzsche claims, and it is so in multiple respects as I discuss in a later section. Indeed, as we shall see, Nietzsche has reasonable grounds for his worries.

And yet, despite these dangers, Nietzsche expresses in the foreword that „we need history”.^[20] It is indispensable for life insofar as it provides guidance for the present, instructing activity against the unfolding of the future. But the conditions under which history can serve life need to be uncovered. Hence, rather than rejecting history, Nietzsche investigates deeper into its essence and its dangers and values for life.

III. THE TEMPORAL STRUCTURE OF EXISTENCE AND THE HISTORICITY OF HUMAN CONDITION

We have seen that Nietzsche's concerns over the study of history are multi-levelled. They are, in part, epistemological and cultural. Ultimately, these are founded on the existential level of analysis which concerns the way in which the relation between history and life is to be conceptualised.

In the first section, Nietzsche notes that the temporal structure of human existence is very different to that of other animals. While other animals live in a constant state of forgetfulness in the present ('ahistorically'), the human being is perpetually dissimulated into the temporal threefold of the past, present and future.^[21] As a result, for humans, being is more than what is immediately present. It extends to a stream of becoming (i.e., history) that unfolds and resonates through these three dimensions. On one level, history is primarily connected to past events. However, these dimensions are conceived by Nietzsche in a more circular and intertwined fashion, rather than a linear one. He is indicating this by referring to how the past keeps returning in the future,^[22] just like possibilities of life that once existed may return in history.^[23] In virtue of these three temporal dimensions, humans are beings of time and live historically.

Consequently, for Nietzsche the past and what Bambach calls historicity are structurally constitutive of human reality.^[24] Nietzsche says that existence is an imperfect tense, „an uninterrupted having-been”.^[25] He attributes this to the fact

[19] Nietzsche, 1995, 89.

[20] Nietzsche, 1995, 85.

[21] Nietzsche, 1995, 88.

[22] Nietzsche, 1995, 87.

[23] Nietzsche, 1995, 98.

[24] Bambach, 1990, 260.

[25] Nietzsche, 1995, 88.

that, unlike other animals, humans have a memory.^[26] He says the past runs with a man like a chain that „he is unable to learn to forget“.^[27] Yet, Nietzsche thinks this does not and should not mean that humans constantly ruminate over the past. The human also has the capacity to feel ahistorical and forget the past.^[28] This could be interpreted as a contradiction of what has been said about memory. But, as Lemm rightly notes, the historical (the powers of memory) and the ahistorical (the powers of forgetfulness) are not opposites in Nietzsche’s thought.^[29] Rather, Nietzsche argues that proper use of the past for the health of an individual, a people, or a culture, demands their joint operation.^[30] This is because the utilisation of the past for life requires it to be bounded by a horizon (limit) which can only be drawn – and re-drawn (transcended) – by the ahistorical.^[31]

By giving a horizon from which action can unfold, the ahistorical does not ignore the past. Rather, it sheds a light (and darkness) on it in a way that is coloured by one’s needs in the present. It is a forgetting that enables the recollection of what is instructive and exemplary for that moment. Nietzsche ties the capacity for selective memory to the plastic powers of life.^[32] The powerful or strong personality knows exactly how to assimilate the past as well as how to forget it completely when required. The ahistorical and the historical are thus integral to each other. This is what motivates Nietzsche when he talks of the need to understand the historical in its ahistoricity: an insight granted by the suprahistorical viewpoint (see below).^[33]

Lemm also rightly notes that Nietzsche designates the ahistorical as more primordial than the historical.^[34] As Nietzsche says: the historical must be put „in the service of an ahistorical power“.^[35] This is because the primary locus of existence is the present: „Only from the highest power of the present can you interpret the past.“^[36] Where Lemm’s interpretation falls short, however, is in failing to appreciate the integrated use of the suprahistorical in giving access to these highest dimensions of the present. What the suprahistorical reveals is that – on the ground of existence – the past and present are the same, and the world reaches completion at every instant.^[37] While Nietzsche worries this would engender a disgust with existence, discouraging one to participate in life,

[26] Nietzsche, 1995, 89.

[27] Nietzsche, 1995, 87.

[28] Nietzsche, 1995, 87.

[29] Lemm, 2009, 94.

[30] Nietzsche, 1995, 90.

[31] Nietzsche, 1995, 163.

[32] Nietzsche, 1995, 108.

[33] Nietzsche, 1995, 92.

[34] Lemm, 2009, 94.

[35] Nietzsche, 1995, 94.

[36] Nietzsche, 1995, 128.

[37] Nietzsche, 1995, 94.

he treats the suprahistorical more positively in the final section. To understand the shift in Nietzsche's position, I think Ansell-Pearson is right when he claims that one needs to appreciate the complementary uses of the ahistorical and the suprahistorical.^[38] Nietzsche ponders that – when integrated with the ahistorical – the suprahistorical insight can be fortifying as it shows that the world is always ready for action that creates seemingly eternal value.^[39] He thinks this is a vital illusion that both art and religion possesses. I believe this integrated use is crucial to understand one of the metaphors Nietzsche uses about human action: an ahistorical action may amount to a 'clap of thunder' in the moment, but when done from the point of view of the peak of existence, where all temporal dimensions come together, it may initiate a rolling thunder that simultaneously resonates (echoes) across all these dimensions, sweeping across the past, changing our perception of it, and in return, changing our future possibilities of life. For him, a healthy use of history needs all these perspectives as each offers a remedy for the others.

Rethinking history and time on the ground of existence has allowed Nietzsche to recognise the inherent historicity of life.^[40] Once this is established, the problem of history becomes immanent to life. It is transformed into a self-reflective question of how one relates to one's own historicity and what value history can have for life. This is the meaning of the three modes of history which, as Ricoeur rightly notes, are offered by Nietzsche not as epistemic categories but as existential ones.^[41] Each of them emerges from a certain existential need and utilise the past accordingly. While the antiquarian wants to ground his existence in something greater than himself (the history of his city, people etc.), the critical strives for a self-determining existence (capable of giving himself a 'new nature'). Thirdly, the monumental (Nietzsche's preferred type) seeks the peaks and sublimities of existence that echo throughout history.

IV. EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONCERNS OVER THE STUDY OF HISTORY: THE PROBLEMATIC RELATION BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND LIFE

For Nietzsche, the existential problem of history translates to the following epistemological concerns. Firstly, as human life is historical in the existentially relevant sense, Nietzsche thinks that the past simply cannot be treated as an object of pure knowledge. The past, as we have seen, is not an 'object' independent of the subject which it could possibly 'know' in a disinterested and value-free fashion. This is because the past acquires meaning only from the needs and the

[38] Ansell, 2014, 245.

[39] Nietzsche, 1995, 163.

[40] Bambach, 1990, 269.

[41] Ricoeur, 2006, 289.

horizon given by the present, and it has no meaning outside this relation.^[42] Its perspectival nature makes the study of history an inherently interpretive enterprise, in which the same past events can have multiple meanings at different moments. This is what Nietzsche refers to when he says: „The voice of the past is always the voice of an oracle.“^[43]

Nietzsche recognises, however, the dangers of reducing history to a subjective interpretation.^[44] He entertains a mode of objectivity that is void of egoism but retains the subjective element (the power of judgement).^[45] The alternative mode of objectivity that Nietzsche proposes is the monumental history. This approach to history emphasizes the importance of preserving the memory of great historical achievements and events as a way of providing inspiration and guidance for future generations.^[46]

Nietzsche argues that this approach to history requires a certain degree of detachment from our own subjective biases and beliefs, as well as a willingness to critically evaluate the past based on its ability to inspire and guide us in the present. This alternative mode of objectivity thus retains the capacity to judge, but does so from a more detached and objective perspective that is not limited by subjective biases or preconceptions. The key to this approach is the cultivation of a critical perspective that is able to judge the relative value of different historical events and achievements based on their ability to inspire and guide.

Secondly, Nietzsche thinks that treating history in an impartial and value-free manner is not only impossible but also undesirable. This is because the cognitive requirements of science subordinate the vital needs of life. When history becomes an object abstracted away from its existential ground, life's vital forces are drained in the process and history (existence) is emptied of its meaning. Nietzsche invokes this nihilistic spectre as follows:

„I perhaps am still justified in saying cogito, ergo sum, but not vivo, ergo cogito. I am granted empty »being«, but not full, green »life«.“^[47]

This is a life-threatening scenario insofar as life is the very enabling condition of knowledge and thought itself.^[48] As such, the study of the past in this manner is self-destructive.

Nietzsche is concerned that the objectification of history is dangerous insofar as placing it outside the context of life leads to an alienation from one's own be-

[42] Bambach, 1990, 265.

[43] Nietzsche, 1995, 130.

[44] Nietzsche, 1995, 107.

[45] Nietzsche, 1995, 122-123., 126.

[46] Nietzsche, 1995, 68.

[47] Nietzsche, 1995, 162.

[48] Nietzsche, 1995, 164.

ing. As he writes: „only with the power to utilise the past for life does the human become human”.^[49] Losing this power is tantamount to falling out of touch with human existence itself.^[50] Against this tendency, Nietzsche evokes the admonishments of the Delphic Oracle: „Know Thyself.”^[51] Lack of self-knowledge is one of Nietzsche’s primary concern with an excessive study of history. It provides the foundation – and for us, the interpretive key – for his account of the dangers of historical cultivation.

V. THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF ALIENATION FROM ONE’S HISTORICITY

By treating an aspect of life as an object of pure knowledge, scientific historicising introduced a subject-object, an interior-exterior dualism inside the subject, who becomes utterly self-alienated as a result.^[52] Factual representation, Nietzsche says, turned history into „alien and disconnected facts.”^[53] This breeds a „cult of inwardness” in which the subject sinks into its interior, endlessly accumulating historical knowledge.^[54] Unlike for the strong personality, however, history is never assimilated into one’s life: it is only studied but never truly learnt from. As Nietzsche says, to an „all-digestible stomach” corresponds inexhaustible, indigestible sources of knowledge.^[55] The genuine cultivation of personality by the plastic powers of life is replaced by a restless and unselective – an aimless and nihilistic – fact-gathering that consumes one’s personality and vital instincts.^[56] The final products of historical cultivation, Nietzsche claims, are „machines”,^[57] the scholar who is „outside life”,^[58] and the „cultivated philistine” without a culture.^[59] Their common denominator is the fact they are self-alienated to the point where they are incapable of self-reflection. (see Schopenhauer as educator).^[60]

Lack of knowledge of life directly founds another danger: namely, that the historically cultivated person is in the illusion that objectivity grants his age

[49] Nietzsche, 1995, 92.

[50] See also Heidegger, 1962, 448.

[51] Nietzsche, 1995, 166.

[52] Nietzsche, 1995, 155.

[53] Nietzsche, 1995, 109.

[54] Nietzsche, 1995, 117.

[55] Nietzsche, 1995, 109.

[56] Nietzsche, 1995, 110.

[57] Nietzsche, 1995, 119.

[58] Nietzsche, 1995, 159.

[59] Nietzsche, 1995, 160.

[60] Nietzsche, 1995, 211.

justice to a higher degree compared to previous ages.^[61] He does not recognise, Nietzsche indicates, the inherently transient, perspectival, and therefore unjust and unjustified nature of all life.^[62] As noted earlier, Nietzsche himself celebrates the power to judge, but not when it is exercised on pseudo-objective epistemic grounds.^[63]

The reason for this alienation from life is that for the weak personality, the interior and exterior radically diverge: the internally cultivated philistine is an „outward barbarian.“^[64] Historical cultivation thus makes genuine culture impossible, which, Nietzsche says, requires a unity of the inner and outer in all expressions of life. Instead of leading to an ‘improved physis’,^[65] historical cultivation is an attack on physis, capable of engendering only degenerate forms of life.^[66]

Furthermore, when history is reified outside the context of life, it loses its horizontal (i.e., ahistorical) nature. It is reconstructed as a limitless world process above human life. Without a horizon, there is nothing that engenders life and action.^[67] Personality is surrendered to a deterministic universal becoming in which life has no freedom or efficacy.^[68] Man becomes a passive dupe without agency: a mass ‘subject’ without subjectivity.

Finally, when man does not take human existence to be the ground (the beginning and the end) of history, one always feels as an epigone who is constantly situated at the twilight of a process when all significant events with historical resonance (‘rolling thunders’) have already happened.^[69] These suppositions foster the dangerous moods of self-irony and cynicism, where one is not invested in life anymore. Such moods reinforce and complete the self-alienating process instigated by an excessive historicising.

VI. CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Nietzsche’s concerns over scientific historicising are not without a foundation but are well grounded in his insights into the tempo-historical structures of existence. One might argue, like Heidegger does, that

[61] Nietzsche, 1995, 115.

[62] Nietzsche, 1995, 106.

[63] Nietzsche, 1995, 122.

[64] Nietzsche, 1995, 110.

[65] Nietzsche, 1995, 167.

[66] Nietzsche, 1995, 109.

[67] Nietzsche, 1995, 157.

[68] Nietzsche, 1995, 117.

[69] Nietzsche, 1995, 140.

these structures require elucidation from an ontological perspective.^[70] But the worries that history should not be reduced to factual knowledge and doing so amounts to an excess that poses the danger of self-alienation, are well placed.

As noted earlier, Nietzsche rightly recognises on the same ground the other extreme of collapsing history into subjectivism. He ponders an alternative mode of objectivity which retains the capacity to judge. Consequently, his concern that using the past for life requires a selective and self-reflective plasticity to avoid dangerous extremes (also in the employment of the three modes of history) is well conceived.

Nietzsche contemplates whether the healthy way of treating history is an artistic one,^[71] governed by an aesthetic taste and the eternalising powers of art.^[72] This idea echoes what Nietzsche writes in *The Birth of Tragedy*: „It is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified.”^[73] To this end he urges the development of a ‘new hygiene of life’ – rooted in the plastic powers of life (youth) – which would incorporate the ahistorical and suprahistorical perspectives.^[74] As ambitious as it sounds, it has to be noted that there is a potential danger in Nietzsche’s idea of creating new values and traditions without a genuine understanding of their origins and meaning, as such a project could lead to arbitrary and superficial imposition of values.^[75] Likewise, Nietzsche’s emphasis on the individual in this process neglects the social and communal dimensions of human existence and the ways in which individuals are embedded in broader historical, cultural and political contexts.^[76] Yet despite these criticisms, Nietzsche’s project was well-founded, as I tried to suggest, and it continued to figure prominently in his later writings.

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[70] Heidegger, 1962, 277.

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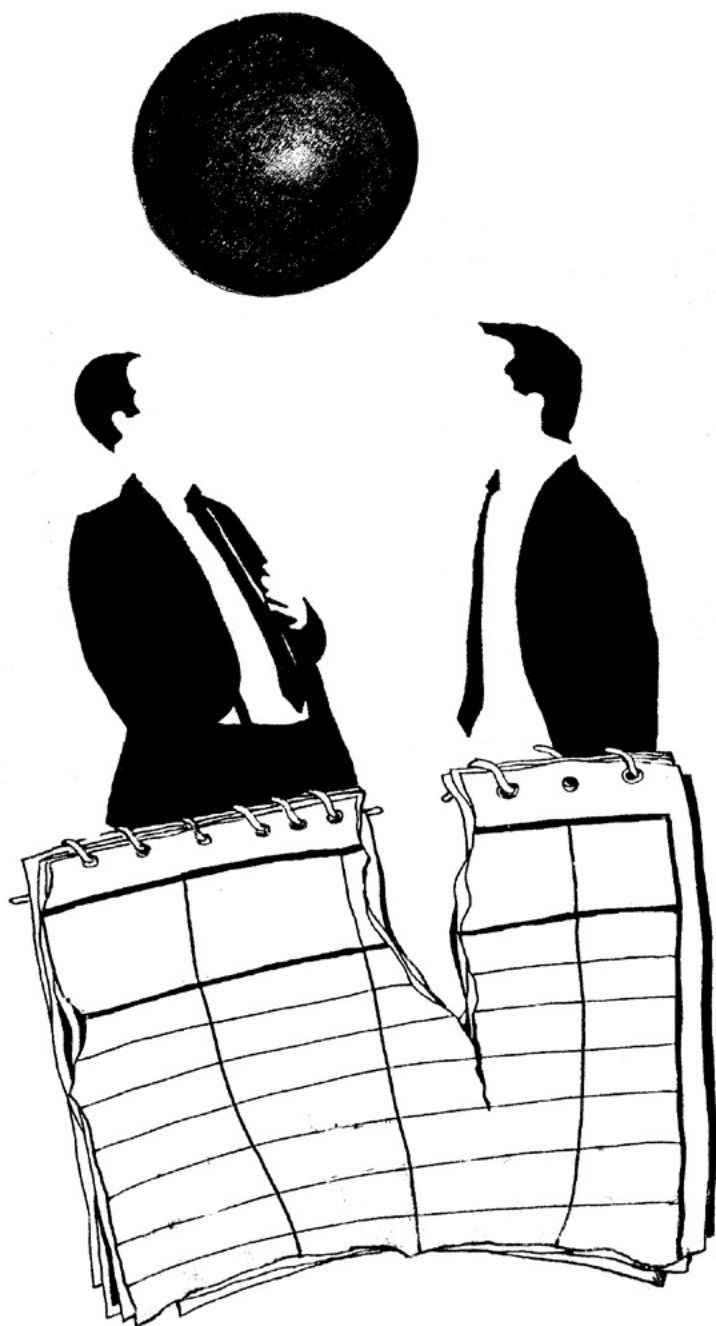
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