

NIETZSCHE ON HISTORY

by Alfredo Lucero-Montaña

Nietzsche's *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980) questions a common belief of his time, that historical knowledge is intrinsically valuable. Nietzsche argues that historical knowledge is valuable only when it has a positive effect on a human being's sense of life. Although he acknowledges that history does provide some benefits in this respect, he also argues that there are damages in which historical knowledge could produce negative effects to those who pursued it.

Nietzsche asserts that history can play three positive roles, which he calls 'monumental,' 'antiquarian' and 'critical.' For Nietzsche, *monumental* history is the genre of history that brings the great achievements of humanity into focus, and it is valuable for contemporary men because it makes them aware of what is possible for human beings to achieve. *Antiquarian* history is motivated primarily out of a spirit of reverence for the past that can be valuable to contemporary individuals by helping them to appreciate their lives and culture — this is the positive effect.

History belongs to the preserving and revering soul — to him who with loyalty and love looks back on his origin; through this reverence he, as it were, gives thanks for his existence. By tending with loving hands what has long survived he intends to preserve the conditions in which he grew up for those who will come after him — and so he serves life. (sec. 3, 19)

Critical history is an effort to judge the past, and provides a counter-balancing effect to the inspired by antiquarian historiography; a balancing effect to the conservative approach of history. By judging the past, men engaged in critical history remain attentive to flaws and failures in the experience of their culture, thereby avoiding slavish blindness in their assessment of it.

Nietzsche's work has cast serious doubts on the value of a certain 'historical' consciousness, stressing the fictitious character of historical knowledge, and challenging history's claims to a place among the sciences.

We are shocked, we fly back: whither is all clarity, all naturalness and purity of that relation between life and history, how confused, how exaggerated, how troubled is this problem which

now surges before our eyes! Is the fault ours, the observers? Or has the constellation of life and history really changed because a powerful, hostile star has come between them? May others show that we have seen falsely: we will say what we believe we see. Such a star has indeed intervened, a bright and glorious star, the constellation is really changed — *through science, through the demand that history be a science.* (sec. 4, 23)

Here Nietzsche starts his polemic against Hegel's philosophy of history and the German historical school (Ranke) for inculcating 'that admiration for the 'power of history' which practically at every moment turns into naked admiration for success and leads to the idolatry of the factual' (sec. 8, 47).

Nietzsche alerts us to the danger that contemporary culture fed from the springs of an antiquarian historiography. And he shows us the dissociation between life and history, knowledge and action:

Knowledge, taken in excess without hunger, even contrary to need, no longer acts as a transforming motive impelling to action and remains hidden in a certain chaotic inner world. [Modern man] has the content and that only the form is lacking; [...] it is no real culture at all, but only a kind of knowledge about culture, it stops at cultured thoughts and cultured feelings but leads to no cultural decisions. (sec. 4, 24)

That is, modern consciousness is pregnant of an excessive historical knowledge, and has lost the 'plastic powers of life' that makes men able to 'interpret the past only from the standpoint of the highest strength of the present.' This 'surfeit of history' is the negative effect of historical knowledge, that is, the *conservative* approach of history.

Nietzsche argued against historical knowledge — when pursued its own sake — because its method was dependent on a false ideal of objectivity, that neutralized the standards necessary for life, and blocked the capacity, 'the strength [to] use it from time to time, to shatter and dissolve something to enable [man] to live [in the present].'

By the same token, Nietzsche points out five dangers to life resulting from that objective approach of history, that it becomes a 'surfeit of history'.

1) Historical knowledge freezes the present, since it makes the present appear as just an external episode: 'the contrast of inside and outside [content and form] is generated and the [historical subject] weakened thereby' (sec. 5, 28).

2) History knowledge inhibits creative activity by convincing those made aware of the vast sweep of historical currents that their present actions are too feeble to change the past they have inherited: 'an age comes to imagine that it possesses the rarest virtue... to a higher degree than any other age' (*loc. cit.*).

3) Historical knowledge encourages the sense that the inner person is disconnected from the outer world by assaulting the psyche with more information than it can absorb and assimilate: 'the instincts of a people are impaired and the maturing of the individual no less than the whole is prevented' (*ibid.*).

4) Historical knowledge encourages a relativism toward reality and present experience, motivated by a sense that because things keep changing present states of affairs do not matter: 'the belief... in the old age of mankind is implanted, the belief of being a latecomer and epigone' (*ibid.*).

5) Historical knowledge inspires irony and cynicism about the contemporary individual's role in the world; the historical subject comes to feel increasingly like an afterthought in the scheme of things, imbued by a sense of belatedness: 'an age acquires the dangerous disposition of irony with regard to itself, and from this the still more dangerous one of cynicism: in this... it ripens even more into clever egoistic practice through which the vital strength is paralyzed and... destroyed' (*ibid.*).

Nietzsche was convinced that the objective — scientific — approach to history was psychologically and ethically devastating to contemporary men:

For it is science which would speak of poisons [...] for it only takes the observation of things to be the true and correct one, that is, to be scientific observation, which everywhere sees what has come to be, the historical, and nowhere being, the eternal.' (sec. 10, 62)

Nietzsche suggests the antidotes to the historical. One antidote is the *unhistorical* that is the ability to forget how overwhelming the deluge of historical information: 'the art and the strength of being able to *forget* and enclose oneself in a limited *horizon*' (*ibid.*). And the antidote of *suprahistorical* that consists in a shift of focus from the ongoing flux of history: 'the powers which guide the eye away from becoming and toward that which gives existence an eternal and

stable character, toward *art* and *religion*' (*ibid.*). In sum, for Nietzsche, 'history *must* itself dissolve the problem of history, knowledge *must* turn its sting against itself' (sec. 8, 45).

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