

Nietzsche on Time and History

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# Nietzsche on Time and History

Edited by  
Manuel Dries

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Walter de Gruyter · Berlin · New York

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-3-11-019009-0

*Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek*

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

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Printed in Germany

Cover design: Martin Zech, Bremen.

Printing and binding: Hubert & Co GmbH & Co KG, Göttingen.

If there is no goal in the whole of history of man's lot, then we must put one in: assuming, on the one hand, that we have need of a goal, and on the other that we've come to see through the illusion of an immanent goal and purpose. And the reason we have need of goals is that we have need of a will—which is the spine of us. 'Will' as the compensation of lost 'belief', i.e., for the idea that there is a divine will, one which has plans for us.

Friedrich Nietzsche, Nachlaß Summer 1886–Spring 1887, KSA 12, 6[9]

We are still growing continually, our sense of time and place, etc., is still developing.

Friedrich Nietzsche, Nachlaß April–June 1885, KSA 11, 34[124]  
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'Timeless' to be rejected. At a particular moment of a force, an absolute conditionality of the redistribution of all forces is given: it cannot stand still. 'Change' is part of the essence, and therefore so is temporality—which, however, just amounts to one more conceptual positing of the necessity of change.

Friedrich Nietzsche, Nachlaß May–July 1885, KSA 11, 35[55]

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## Acknowledgements

The essays in this volume were first presented at the 15<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the Friedrich Nietzsche Society of Great Britain and Ireland, held at Peterhouse, Cambridge, in September 2005. I wish to take this opportunity to thank delegates and all those who participated in this event for the debates and critical discussions that shaped the research presented here.

I would further like to thank the Faculty of Philosophy and the Department of German at Cambridge for providing generous financial support. I am much indebted to Raymond Geuss, Simon Blackburn, Margaret Clare Ryan, and the Executive Committee of the Friedrich Nietzsche Society for their advice during the various stages of the editing of this volume.

Two of the contributions in this book are either drawn from or have appeared in full elsewhere, and this material appears with permission and my thanks. Raymond Geuss' article was previously published in his collection of essays *Outside Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). It is reprinted here with permission of Princeton University Press. Lawrence J. Hatab's article is drawn in parts from the text of his book *Nietzsche's Life Sentence: Coming to Terms with Eternal Recurrence* (New York: Routledge University Press, 2005). I thank Routledge for permission to publish the essay.

The four excerpts of printed music of Wagner, Bizet, and Stravinsky in Jonathan R. Cohen's essay appear here with permission of Dover Publishing, Chester Music Limited (Music Sales) and Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG. Every effort has been made to trace and contact copyright holders. If there are any inadvertent omissions I apologize to those concerned and undertake to include suitable acknowledgements in future editions.

Finally, I would like to thank Walter de Gruyter Publishers for taking on this volume, Gertrud Grünkorn, Christoph Schirmer, and Jana Pokorny for their patient support, and Angela Blackburn for copyediting the final manuscript.

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## Abbreviations and Translations

Friedrich Nietzsche's published and unpublished writings (Nachlaß) are quoted according to the following abbreviations:

- A *The Anti-Christ*, cited by section number.
- AOM 'Assorted Opinions and Maxims' (vol. 2, pt 1, of *Human, All Too Human*), cited by section number.
- BAW *Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe. Werke*, ed. Hans Joachim Mette, 5 vols. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1933–1940), cited by volume and page number.
- BAB *Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe. Briefe*, ed. Hans Joachim Mette, 4 vols. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1933–1940), cited by volume and page number.
- BGE *Beyond Good and Evil*, cited by section number.
- BT *The Birth of Tragedy*, cited by section number and KSA page number.
- CV 'Five Prologues to Five Unwritten Books', cited by number and KSA page number.
- CW *The Case of Wagner*, cited by section number.
- D *Daybreak*, cited by section number.
- EH *Ecce Homo*, cited by section heading and (when applicable) number.
- EI 'On the Future of Our Educational Institutions', cited by section number.
- GM *On the Genealogy of Morality*, cited by essay and section number.
- GS *The Gay Science*, cited by section number.
- HA *Human, All Too Human*, cited by volume and section number.
- CV 'Five Prefaces to Five Unwritten Books', cited by preface number and KSA page number.
- KGB *Briefwechsel. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1975–), cited by volume and page number.
- KGW *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, established by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, ed. Wolfgang Müller-Lauter and Karl Pestalozzi (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1967–), cited by volume, part, and page number.

## XIV

- KSA *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1967–), cited by volume and page number. The Nachlaß is cited by date, KSA volume, notebook section, and fragment number.
- KSB *Sämtliche Briefe. Kritische Studienausgabe Briefe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1986–), cited by volume and page number.
- NCW *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, cited by section heading.
- OTL ‘On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense’, cited by KSA page number.
- PTAG ‘Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks’, cited by section number.
- TI *Twilight of the Idols*, cited by section heading and number.
- UM *Untimely Meditations*, cited by part and section number, and (when applicable) KSA page number.
- Z *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, cited by part, section heading, and (when applicable) number.

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Note on Translations of Nietzsche’s Works

The contributors to this volume have used different translations of Nietzsche’s texts, often modified by the individual contributor. At the end of each essay the reader will find a list of the translations used. Where no such list has been provided the contributor has relied exclusively on his or her own translations. All translations from Nietzsche’s Nachlaß are usually by the individual contributors, although other translations have been consulted whenever possible, notably *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), and *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, ed. Rüdiger Bittner, trans. Kate Sturge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

# The Late Nietzsche's Fundamental Critique of Historical Scholarship

*Thomas H. Brobjer*

There exist a number of misconceptions about Nietzsche's relation to historical scholarship and methods. Most discussions of this theme have been based on his early essay 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' (1873), but I have recently shown that the views he presents there are not representative of the later Nietzsche. Already one or two years after the publication of that essay, he changed his view dramatically.<sup>1</sup> For example, in 1877 he writes: 'I want expressly to inform the readers of my earlier writings [i.e. *The Birth of Tragedy* and the *Untimely Meditations*] that I have abandoned the metaphysical-artistic views that fundamentally govern them: they are pleasant but untenable' (Nachlaß End of 1876–Summer 1877, KSA 8, 23[159]), and in 1883: 'Behind my first period grins the face of Jesuitism: I mean the deliberate holding on to illusion and the forcible annexation of illusion as the foundation of culture' (Nachlaß Autumn 1883, KSA 10, 16[23]). Furthermore, Nietzsche very rarely discusses or praises his essay on history after 1875, in stark contrast to all of his other books, and, after 1874, he never uses the several concepts and expressions such as *monumental*, *antiquarian*, and *critical* history, or *over-historical*, which he coined and used in that book. I have also shown, contrary to most discussions, that Nietzsche was deeply influenced by and approved of the new historical views and methods which grew out of the works of Wolf, Niebuhr, Mommsen and Ranke (see Brobjer 2007). Nietzsche thus approved of historical methods and studies, and frequently used them in his philosophical investigations and critique. He was after all educated as a historian and classical scholar, and was a professor in the latter

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1 In my article 'Nietzsche's View of the Value of Historical Studies and Methods' (Brobjer 2004) I show that not only does Nietzsche have a different view of history and historical scholarship after 1875/76, but also that he on many occasions explicitly rejected the view he proposed in 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life'. In this article and also in 'Nietzsche's Relation to Historical Methods and Nineteenth-Century German Historiography' (Brobjer 2007) I discuss many secondary resources on Nietzsche's relation to history.

field for ten years. Nonetheless, the late Nietzsche also expresses much hostility towards historical scholarship (and, in many ways similar to this, and related to it, towards natural science and scholarship generally). In this paper I will examine the reasons for this later explicit critique and what it entails. This later critique is primarily based on four factors or arguments: relating to objectivity, the idea of progress, the viewing of history as a means, not a goal, and on history as being reactive (like all sciences and scholarship). Thereafter I will discuss the only published text, *On the Genealogy of Morality* III 26, in which the late Nietzsche explicitly discusses modern historical writing.

What the late Nietzsche primarily objected to in regard to history was not the new methods introduced at the early part of the nineteenth century, but that history was placed above philosophy—that history and historical scholarship were seen as a goal or an end in itself rather than as a means. He saw this as a reflection of the nihilism which characterized modernity. More specifically, he objected to a number of aspects regarding history and historical scholarship, but most of this is the *consequence* of having accepted the historical revolution rather than standing in contradiction to it. He was a severe critic of the idea of progress, assumed by almost all major nineteenth-century historians (but not by Burckhardt). He regarded most historians as far too idealistic in their views (and still governed by religious faith) and accused them of lacking adequate knowledge of natural science and medicine. Perhaps even more pronounced is that he regarded most historians (and philosophers) as being much more anachronistic than they were aware of, especially in regard to moral and cultural values—he here thus regards them as bad historians according to their own and his criteria. Related to this, he regarded almost all historians as possessing egalitarian and anti-aristocratic values, and therefore only taking a stand for the suppressed and failed groups (relating to a revaluation of values). He objected to the almost exclusive concern with political history by the leading historians, and much preferred a broader cultural approach. He questioned both the possibility and the desirability of historical objectivity. He regarded history (and science) as by necessity reactive, and he felt that the historians were often indecent, in digging into private worlds or by questioning things greater than their own comprehension. But all these objections, with the possible exception of his view of objectivity, can be and were stated from within the historical turn which had occurred.

Throughout most of Nietzsche's so-called middle period, c. 1875–1880, he seems to have accepted the idea of progress, both generally and



for the case of morality.<sup>2</sup> However, thereafter he strongly attacks it. Today, when we have a more complex and ambivalent view of the idea of progress, this may not seem to be a major point. However, during the nineteenth century, especially after the acceptance of Darwinism, this idea constituted a generally accepted dogma which penetrated into all fields and areas of intellectual activity. It constituted a premise and a major assumption of almost all historical writing. Nietzsche's critique and rejection of it was fundamental enough to suggest that he had a completely different view of history and historical scholarship than most of his contemporaries.

The late Nietzsche expresses his contempt for the idea of progress many times, but here it will be sufficient to quote one example: 'Mankind does not represent a development of the better or the stronger or the higher in the way that is believed today. "Progress" is merely a modern idea, that is to say a false idea. The European of today is of far less value than the European of the Renaissance; onward development is not by any means, by any necessity the same thing as elevation, advance, strengthening' (A 4).<sup>3</sup> The main reason for his rejection is also plainly stated—man is not, and has not become better and more valuable. Instead Nietzsche on several occasions says that we have become 'smaller'. Note that Nietzsche thus uses a different measure of progress than most commentators: Nietzsche asks if men have become, better and more elevated, J. S. Mill and others if they have become happier.

What does Nietzsche's critique of historical objectivity mean and entail? After all, objectivity is the keystone of the scientific and scholarly approach. We can begin by noting that his critique of objectivity in historical scholarship has a direct parallel in his critique of the natural sciences. It has two fundamental parts, one epistemological and one value-oriented.

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- 2 For example, in HA I 236 he writes: 'To us, however, the very existence of the temperate zone of culture counts as progress.' Compare also: 'Wrath and punishment has had its time. —Wrath and punishment is a present to us from the animal world. Man will have come of age only when he returns this birthday gift to the animals. —Here there lies buried one of the greatest ideas mankind can have, the idea of progress to excel all progress. —Let us go forward a few thousand years together, my friends! There is a great deal of joy still reserved for mankind of which men of the present day have not had so much as a scent! And we may promise ourselves this joy, indeed testify that it must necessarily come to us, only provided that the evolution of human reason does not stand still!' (HA III 183). Further examples can be found in HA I 24 and 107; HA II 184 and 185.
- 3 Compare also GM II 12 and his discussions in TI 'Reconnaissance Raids' 37 and 48. See also Nachlaß June–July 1885, KSA 11, 36[48]; and Nachlaß End of 1886–Spring 1887, KSA 12, 7[8]; and Nachlaß Autumn 1887, KSA 12, 9[185].

This critique of objectivity in historical writing is present and important throughout his whole life, beginning already in his early critique of historical writing. He, for example, writes around the time of 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' that 'The so-called objective writing of history is something unthinkable: the objective historians are crushed or smug characters' (Nachlaß Summer–Autumn 1873, KSA 7, 29[137]). When we return to the views of the late Nietzsche, we can observe that in a list of plans for books or lectures to write, from 1883, he states that 'there exists no "objective history"', for 'the appropriation of history is done under the guidance of stimuli and the drives' (Nachlaß Spring–Summer 1883, KSA 10, 7[268]). This is in essence an epistemological claim—that objectivity is impossible—which he repeats frequently. Both as individuals and as human beings, nothing is unaffected by our conscious and subconscious desires and values. When we pretend that to be the case, we falsify reality (and our relation to reality), and thereby fail to give a correct account of reality. Objectivity, he repeats, is merely a mask.

However, Nietzsche has a yet stronger critique of objectivity which is less epistemological and more value-oriented. A natural or 'healthy' relation to reality includes evaluations—we are the evaluative animal—and when we attempt to be objective we are denying ourselves as living organisms, we are being ascetic and nihilistic, and such a desire is an expression of self-rejection and self-contempt.

The 'desire-to-be-objective', e.g. in Flaubert, is a modern misconception ... It is self-contempt ... 'denial' of self. But there exists no 'thing-in-itself', gentlemen! What you attain is science or photography, i.e., description without perspectives ... In fact, there is very much displeasure [*Unlust*] in the modern historical and natural historical mania—one flees from oneself and also from the making of ideals, the making better. (Nachlaß Spring 1884, KSA 11, 25[164])

Shortly thereafter he repeats these two claims, perhaps even more clearly: 'To mock the school of the "objective" and the "positivists". They want to get around the setting of values, and discover and present only the facts' (Nachlaß Summer–Autumn 1884, KSA 11, 26[348]).<sup>4</sup> And he exemplifies with a historian, one that he generally values, to show how dishonest and incorrect this is: 'But one can see, e.g., in Taine: in the background he has preferences: for the strong expressive types, e.g., also for those who enjoy more than for the puritans' (ibid.). But is Nietzsche able to solve the problem of how to combine history with the setting of values, without it merely

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4 Compare Nachlaß End of 1886–Spring 1887, KSA 12, 7[60].

appearing as prejudice? To answer that we need to examine his discussion of different types of historical writing.

### Nietzsche's Explicit Discussion of Modern Historical Scholarship

Only once does the late Nietzsche explicitly discuss at any length modern writing of history, in the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*. He divides it into two main forms, positivistic history and idealistic (or judging and artistic) history. Unfortunately, he does not explicitly tell us what sort of historical scholarship and historians we, in his view, ought to become, but I will argue for an interpretation which is consistent with what he states.

He begins by posing the question of the value of modern historical work, in a manner which resembles that of 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' (but now it is less idealistically founded than in 1873, but still closely entwined with values).

Or does modern historiography perhaps display an attitude more assured of life and ideals? (GM III 26, translated by Kaufmann)<sup>5</sup> WdG 2008

In his response to this question, he describes and discusses the two fundamental ways in which modern history is pursued. He begins with what can be called positivistic history (which attempts to be scientific and objective):

Its noblest claim nowadays is that it is a mirror; it rejects all teleology; it no longer wishes to 'prove' anything; it disdains to play the judge and considers this a sign of good taste—it affirms as little as it denies; it ascertains, it 'describes'... All this is to a high degree ascetic; but at the same time it is to an even higher degree nihilistic, let us not deceive ourselves about that! One observes a sad, stern, but resolute glance ... here nothing will grow or prosper any longer, or at most Petersburg metaphysics and Tolstoian 'pity'. (GM III 26)

This is contrasted by modern idealistic history, where historical scholarship is combined with values and attempts to judge history:

As for the other type of historian, an even more 'modern' type perhaps, a hedonist and voluptuary who flirts both with life and with the ascetic ideal, who employs the word 'artist' as a glove and has today taken sole lease of the praise of contemplation ... I know of nothing that excites such disgust as this kind of 'objective' armchair scholar, this kind of scented voluptuary of history,

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5 Nietzsche is here asking for a 'more assured' than that of the natural sciences, which he had discussed in the previous section.

half parson, half satyr, perfumed by Renan, who betrays immediately with the high falsetto of his applause what he lacks, where he lacks it. (ibid.)

When Nietzsche compares these two types, there is no doubt that he prefers the scientific or positivistic to the idealistic sort:

Oh how these sweetish and clever fellows [the idealistic historians] make one long even for ascetics and winter landscapes! No! the devil take this type of 'contemplative'! I would even prefer to wander through the gloomy grey, cold fog with those historical nihilists! ... The 'contemplatives' are a hundred times worse. (ibid.)<sup>6</sup>

He even goes so far as to praise the former sort of history:

All honour to the ascetic ideal insofar as it is honest! so long as it believes in itself and does not play tricks on us! (ibid.)

In contrast, he goes on to vehemently criticize idealistic history at length. However, at the end of the section he points out that there are advantages with this overproduction of false ideals:

Europe is rich and inventive today above all in means of excitation; it seems to need nothing as much as it needs stimulants and brandy: hence also the tremendous amount of forgery in ideals [and he explicitly mentions 'the Christian-moral ideal'] ... With this overproduction there is obviously a new opening for trade here ... don't let this opportunity slip! Who has the courage for it?—we have in our hands the means to 'idealize' the whole earth! ... But why am I speaking of courage: only one thing is needed here, the hand, an uninhibited, a very uninhibited hand. (ibid.)

The section ends here, and the last two sections of the third essay do not continue this argument. However, it is clear what Nietzsche is referring to at the end of this discussion, namely the idea of eternal recurrence, which, according to Nietzsche, would crush those who have no ideals or false ideals (thus the need for courage), and the idea of the revaluation of all values, which would allow us to "'idealize" the whole earth' (GM III 26).

That Nietzsche is referring to those topics is not only suggested by the fact that he was at this time intensively working on writing a magnum opus in which these two topics were going to be foundation stones,<sup>7</sup> but also by the fact that he, at the beginning of the next section, explicitly states that he

6 Nietzsche, while making this comparison, even hints that he would prefer yet another type of 'historian' or scholar: 'Indeed, if I had to choose I might even opt for some completely unhistorical, anti-historical person' (GM III 26), and exemplifies this by the philosopher Dühring, of whom he normally is highly critical. In the early draft to this section, given in the *Kommentar* (KSA 14, p. 382), he explains why he would prefer this alternative: because Dühring attacks the whole history, we are persuaded to become its 'historian' and last judges.

7 See my 'Nietzsche's *Magnum Opus*' (Brobjer 2006).

will continue this discussion in that work: ‘I shall probe these things more thoroughly and severely in another connection (under the title “On the History of European Nihilism”); it will be contained in a work in progress: **The Will to Power**, Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values)’ (GM III 27).<sup>8</sup> This work was never completed, but among Nietzsche’s notes we have the long, so-called Lenzer Heide-fragment, entitled ‘European Nihilism’, written on 10 June 1887 (KSA 12, 5[71]),<sup>9</sup> i.e., shortly before he wrote *On the Genealogy of Morality*, in which the discussion of nihilism is closely related to the idea of eternal recurrence, which itself is referred to as ‘a hammer’ and a most dangerous idea.<sup>10</sup> When Nietzsche reviews the *Genealogy* in *Ecce homo* he states that the essays constitute three preliminary studies for a revaluation of all values. He further claims, while summarizing the content of the third essay, that ‘a counter-ideal was lacking — *until Zarathustra*’ (EH III GM), meaning his own mature philosophy (in which the revaluation of values constituted a central tenet), as expressed metaphorically in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and which he attempted to develop and express more philosophically in the planned magnum opus.

What can we make of this account, and what does it say about Nietzsche’s view of historical writing and research? We are given two or three ways of writing history, but Nietzsche seems to reject them all. It would be the wrong approach to ask which of these ways Nietzsche approves of, or with which one he shows most sympathy. The question of which *methods* to use for one (for any person) to become a good composer, painter, or historian is never sufficient for Nietzsche. Experience, appropriate values, a healthy view of the world (for example, not being a pessimist or being full of resentment), and personal characteristics are always required. Nietzsche’s general approach is therefore not to approve of specific methods, but to argue that one should copy and learn from great predecessors. Compare, for example, how he recommends his students to become good classical philologists: ‘How does one become a philologist?’, where he answers not by methods but by exemplars: ‘Start from the conception of the great philologists’ (KGW II.3, p. 366).

8 In an earlier version of this section, Nietzsche had written ‘my main work [*Hauptwerk*] which is in progress [*mein in Vorbereitung befindliches Hauptwerk*]’ instead of ‘a work in progress’ (Kommentar, KSA 14, p. 382).

9 KSA 12, 5[71]. In the note immediately before this one, 5[70], Nietzsche also speaks of ‘a history of values’.

10 Compare my discussion in ‘Götzen-Hammer: The Meaning of the Expression “To Philosophize with a Hammer”’ (Brobjer 1999).

What we see is that Nietzsche approves of positivistic or scholarly historical research as a means to understand the world and to avoid illusions and misconceptions. He is, for example, continually critical of those who, like the priests, 'lack all the preconditions of comprehension: who lack the neutrality of the historian' (Nachlaß November 1887–March 1888, KSA 13, 11[302]),<sup>11</sup> and all bad historians (such as most philosophers and those who discuss the history of morals).<sup>12</sup> However, we should realize that this sort of history can never achieve total objectivity, that values and personal preferences can never be fully excluded. More important is that this sort of history—when regarded not as a means but as an end—is and leads to nihilism.

Is a higher sort of historical research and writing possible? It seems as if Nietzsche believed that to be the case—that is what he suggests at the end of this section; a history which is intertwined with values—not the old corrupt and decadent Christian, moral, and modern values, but with re-valued values. He says little about what sort of values these are—since he is still working on that and hopes to present that in his forthcoming magnum opus, entitled precisely 'Revaluation of All Values'—and thus he does not say anything about how that sort of constructive or evaluative history could appear.

However, a hint can be gained from the fact that the late Nietzsche emphasizes the importance of cultural history, and he praises the works of Ritschl, Burckhardt, and Taine, who all were skilful masters of modern historical methodology. Equally important is that his own book, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, shows us a way to be historians of values. Furthermore, Nietzsche explicitly states what sort of history and historian he hopes for, and offers the name of Thucydides, his favourite ancient historian. He calls him the perfect expression of 'realist culture', and continues:

Thucydides: the great sum, the last revelation of that strong, severe, hard factuality which was instinctive with the older Hellenes. In the end it is courage in the face of reality that distinguishes a man like Thucydides from Plato: Plato is a coward before reality—consequently he flees into the ideal; Thucydides has control of himself—consequently he also maintains control of things. (TI 'What I Owe to the Ancients' 2)

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11 This note was written shortly after the *Genealogy*.

12 See my longer discussion of this in 'Nietzsche's View of the Value of Historical Studies and Methods' (Brobjer 2004).

Nietzsche's longest and most detailed discussion of Thucydides occurs in his lectures on Greek literature, which he held twice in 1874/75.<sup>13</sup> He there refers to Thucydides as 'the greatest researcher and thinker among the historians' (KGW II.5, p. 225). Most of this discussion was made by the scholar and philologist Nietzsche, but later he added a long footnote with a more personal touch, in which he describes what sort of historical research and writing he dreams of encountering in the distant future: 'A history developed in the spirit of Thucydides and suffused with a still more profound philosophy than his was, remains my hope' (KGW II.5, p. 258).

According to Nietzsche, life, as well as history and science, are meaningless, unless we create a meaning for them.<sup>14</sup> Once the belief in God gave us and nature meaning, and subsequently truth and morality, but we now risk having only nihilistic approaches left. What we need is to create purpose and meaning, through a reevaluation of all values, and that was the final task which occupied Nietzsche during the last years before his mental collapse. He never finished that work, and thus the question of how a corresponding non-nihilistic, value-affirming writing of history could be constructed also remained unanswered. We are left with the late Nietzsche having affirmed historical methods and approaches for the purpose of understanding the world and of disclosing illusions, as long as these methods and approaches are not made into fundamental goals, but remain merely means and an aid in dealing with and supporting our comprehension of the world.

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13 KGW II.5. Historical literature is discussed on pp. 224–269, Thucydides is mentioned throughout, but specifically on pp. 235–246.

14 Compare Nietzsche's view of nature and cosmos, e.g., in Nachlaß June–July 1885, KSA 11, 38[12] (the final section, 1067, of *The Will to Power*) and Nachlaß Spring 1888, KSA 13, 14[188].

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Part II

**Genealogy, Time,  
Becoming**

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