

History in the Service of Life: Nietzsche's *Genealogy*

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*We need history, certainly . . . for the sake of life and action, not so as to turn comfortably away from life and action . . . We want to serve history only to the extent that history serves life . . .*¹

—Nietzsche “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life”

Undoubtedly, one of the central exegetical issues for the student of Nietzsche is how we are to understand his assertion that history, or historiography, must be in the service of life. For instance, are we to understand Nietzsche's attack on the teleology of the secular progressive conception of history, a mode of historiography he claims is inimical to life and action, as philosophical or therapeutic in form?² Is Nietzsche's work complete when we realize that we are suffering from a “consuming fever of history” and we are freed from, in this case, the predilection for a teleological form of historiography? (Nietzsche 1997, 60). The central ambition of this essay is to offer some preliminary answers to questions such as these by teasing out the methodological ramifications of Nietzsche's rather gnomic pronouncement, in the hopes that such an analysis may shed further light on Nietzsche's contribution to the tradition of life-philosophy.³

The first part of this essay aims to shape the boundary within which the claim that we need history in the service of life transverses by presenting an inimical account of historiography: history in the service of the ascetic ideal. The second part explores the philosophical function of the correct practice of history that is in the service of life, as evidenced most strikingly in Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*. I conclude by suggesting that the therapeutic ambition of Nietzsche's project takes shape when we appreciate the philosophical import and methodological shape of Nietzsche's historiography.

Historiography in the service of the ascetic ideal

The third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, as Nietzsche informs us in *Ecce Homo*, seeks to offer an “answer to the question whence the ascetic ideal . . . derives its tremendous *power* although it is the *harmful* ideal *par excellence* . . .” (Nietzsche 1969, 312). To tease out the meaning of the ascetic ideal it may be useful to note it is one thing to engage in ascetic procedures, modes of self-sacrifice, or self-denial, and quite another to be fettered by the ascetic ideal (Ridley 1998a, 59). The ascetic ideal represents the “idealization of asceticism as a way of life that is committed to treating living, existence itself, as an ascetic procedure whereby the end to which this procedure is directed is necessarily not immanent to existence (as with ascetic practices) but transcends it” (Owen 2007, 114). In other words, one may engage in a set of ascetic practices and for instance restrict one’s food and drink without, at the same time, positing the meaning or the purpose of the practice as a systematic retreat from this world. The ascetic ideal severs the immanent value of human existence and posits a transcendent value as the goal or ultimate meaning of human existence (Ridley 1998a, 59). And, it is the interpretation of the meaning of human existence offered by the ascetic ideal which Nietzsche locates as the “only meaning offered thus far” (Nietzsche 1967, 162).

The ascetic ideal derives its tremendous power by providing a solution to the problem of the meaninglessness of human suffering. The explanation of suffering it offers, Nietzsche contends, is “. . . so universal that all the other interests of human existence seem, when compared with it, petty and narrow . . .” namely, it posits this “life counts as a bridge to that other mode of existence” (Nietzsche 1969, 117). According to the interpretation offered by the ascetic ideal the meaning of human existence is to be found in “all those aspirations to the beyond” (Nietzsche 1969, 95), which find expression in commitments such as the belief in “the unconditional will to truth . . . [which] is the faith in a *metaphysical* value, the absolute value of truth . . .” (Nietzsche 1969, 151). In retaining this expression of the ascetic ideal for a moment, Nietzsche tells us: “The truthful man, in the audacious sense presupposed by science, *thereby affirms another world* than that of life, nature, and history; and insofar as he affirms this ‘other world,’ does this not mean to deny its antithesis, this world, *our world?*” (Nietzsche 1969, 152). Life, accordingly, is juxtaposed “(along with what pertains to it: ‘nature,’ ‘world,’ the whole sphere of becoming and transitoriness) with a quite different mode of existence which it opposes.” And, through such a comparison “life,” as well as the corollary concepts,

“nature,” and “world,” are treated as “a wrong road” or “as a mistake” (Nietzsche 1969, 117). Through the ascetic ideal, Nietzsche argues, “suffering was *interpreted*”; the tremendous void seemed to have been filled; the door was closed to any kind of suicidal nihilism” (Nietzsche 1969, 162). Thus, the ascetic ideal provides an answer to the problem of unexplained suffering, to turn human existence, as such, into an ascetic practice. This move wards off the threat of suicidal nihilism by providing human existence with a transcendent goal. In providing an account of the ultimate meaning of human suffering and in offering a particular explanation of the meaning of human existence the ascetic ideal “slander[s] the world” in its devaluation of “this world, *our world*” (Nietzsche 1969, 95).

It is Nietzsche’s contention in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, at least, that modern historiography does not stand nearly as opposed to the ascetic ideal as it appears. Modern historiography, Nietzsche claims, does not represent an alternative to the ascetic ideal but rather is beholden to the ultimate meaning of human existence afforded by the ideal. I shall, in what follows, attempt to substantiate Nietzsche’s claim that modern historiography fosters and perpetuates the ascetic ideal by exploring the work of Nietzsche’s two self-described antipodes: Paul Rée and Ernest Renan.⁴

Nietzsche contends that Rée’s work, *The Origin of the Moral Sensations*, typifies a “perverse species of genealogical hypothesis,” which harbors “that power of attraction which everything contrary, everything antipodal possesses” (Nietzsche 1969, 17). Nietzsche finds Rée’s formulation of the origins of morality both historically inaccurate and psychologically untenable (Nietzsche 1969, 24–8). With respect to the latter, Nietzsche’s critique may be glossed as follows: Rée contends the social utility of the concept of “good” has been forgotten. Yet, for Nietzsche, such utility would have been confirmed by “experience at all times” (Nietzsche 1969, 27). Hence such utility instead of being forgotten would be “impressed on the consciousness more and more clearly” (Nietzsche 1969, 27). To illuminate the former charge Nietzsche argues that Rée’s hypothesis “regarding the origin of the value judgment ‘good’” (namely the concept good originates in those in whom “goodness,” understood as unegoistic or altruistic actions, is shown), is historically untenable (Nietzsche 1969, 24–8). An accurate account of the origins of the concept “good” suggests that the concept originates in “‘the good’ themselves, that is to say, the noble, powerful, high-stationed . . .” (Nietzsche 1969, 28). This lends itself readily to the corollary methodological point, one that is Nietzsche’s “major point of historical method:” “the cause of the origin of a thing” and the present purposes to which a concept is employed “lie worlds apart” (Nietzsche 1969, 77). Hence, by virtue of his methodologically

misguided and therefore historically inaccurate account of the origins of morality, Rée's account of the history of morality is tethered to the ascetic ideal.

David Owen offers the following rather tidy assessment of the manner in which Rée's mode of historiography is in the service of the ascetic ideal:

. . . even the "English genealogists" (i.e. Paul Rée), who represent the latest and most honest form of history in the service of the ascetic ideal, entirely obscure the event in question in virtue of their (mis)understanding of the origins of morality. (Owen 2007, 142)

Rée commits the methodological error of suggesting that the present purpose to which a concept is made to serve may shed light upon the origins of that particular concept. Rée obscures the historical event, the slave revolt in morals, and hence conceals the actual history of morality. Accordingly, in obscuring the event in question, Rée's historiography is in the service of the ascetic ideal. It is this same kind of error which irreparably entangles Renan's historiography with the ascetic ideal. Nietzsche finds Renan's account both "psychologically thoughtless" and methodologically misguided.

Amidst a discussion concerning the meaning of ascetic ideals, in the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche writes that Renan's work represents a profound corruption in historiography (Nietzsche 1969, 157). In a moment of great polemical incisiveness, even by Nietzsche's rather high standards, he thunders:

I know of nothing that excites such disgust as this kind of "objective" armchair scholar, this kind of scented voluptuary of history, half person, half satyr, perfume by Renan, who betrays immediately with high falsetto of his applause what he lacks, *where* he lacks it . . . (Nietzsche 1969, 158)

Nietzsche critiques Renan's procedural commitment to "objective" historiography and, I shall argue, to his psychologically implausible and methodologically flawed account of Jesus.

In the Preface of his *Life of Jesus* Renan indeed claims, "I have written my book with the cold candor of a historian, with the single aim of discovering the finest and most exact shades of truth . . . History, like chemistry or geology, is a science . . ." (Renan 1888, v). Despite such a methodological proclamation Renan, as is well documented, took stylistic allowances such that his account of the life of Jesus is perfumed with sentimentality.⁵ Gary Shapiro writes,

Renan . . . repressed religion. His later works, no matter how positivistic their official ideology, disclosed a return to the repressed. He allowed his readers to

believe themselves scientific and even a bit skeptical, while still allowing them to indulge in religious sentiments. . . . (Shapiro 1982, 215)

Consider the following rather lengthy pronouncement as one such representative example of Shapiro's critique:

Whatever transformations dogma may undergo, Jesus will still be the author of pure sentiment in religion. The Sermon on the Mount will not be superseded. We will even say that facts are of small moment here; biography is of secondary interest; the idea in such a matter is everything. . . . No discovery, no system will prevent us from attaching ourselves, as religious men, to the grand intellectual and moral line, at whose head shines rightly or wrongly the name of Jesus. In this sense we are Christians, even though separated at nearly every point from the Christian tradition which has preceded us. (Renan 1864, 353)

Renan concedes Christian dogma may undergo vast changes. Nevertheless, "as religious men" we are beholden to the grand intellectual and moral line (Renan 1864, 353). Hence, insofar as we value "the name of Jesus," not necessarily the facts or the biographical minutiae, we "are Christians" (Renan 1864, 353). However, the account Renan offers of Jesus, Nietzsche claims, rests upon "an execrable psychological frivolity—Monsieur Renan, that buffoon in *psychologics*, has appropriated for his explanation of the type Jesus the two *most inapplicable* concepts possible in this case: the concept of the *genius* and the concept of the hero" (Nietzsche 1990, 153). In considering the latter concept first, Nietzsche claims, the hero is one who seeks out and confronts resistance, whereas Jesus is one who, according to Nietzsche, possesses an "incapacity for resistance," as evidenced in the "profoundest saying of the Gospel, 'resist not evil!'" (Nietzsche 1990, 153). Nietzsche claims that the concept of "genius," "a worse misunderstanding" than the concept of hero, is inappropriate because it is historically misguided insofar as "our whole concept . . . has no meaning whatever in the world Jesus lived in" (Nietzsche 1990, 153).

Accordingly, Nietzsche charges Renan with reading the needs of the present back onto his account of Jesus. Hence, for Nietzsche, Renan's formulation does not account for the manner in which "the type of the redeemer has been preserved to us only in a very distorted form" (Nietzsche 1990, 154). In touching on a point of great methodological import Nietzsche continues:

That this distortion should have occurred is in itself very probable: there are several reasons why such a type could not remain pure, whole, free of assertions. The milieu in which this strange figure moved must have left its mark upon

him, as must even more the history, the *fate* of the first Christian community: from this the type was retrospectively enriched with traits which become comprehensible only in reference with warfare and the aims of propaganda. (Nietzsche 1990, 154)

This methodological error is precisely the charge Nietzsche brings against Rée, namely claiming present purposes shed evidential light upon the origins of the concept. Coquetry of the sort exemplified in the work of Renan is tantamount, Nietzsche claims, to “lascivious historical eunuchism” (Nietzsche 1969, 158). Undoubtedly, the metaphor of the eunuch is revealing. Renan produces a sterile form of historiography due to both the psychological thoughtlessness of his rendering of the Jesus type as well as the methodological error of failing to recognize “the type was retrospectively enriched with traits” such that one must investigate the many systems of purposes to which the type was made to serve, rather than attempting to uncover an unadulterated type (Nietzsche 1990, 154).

In light of the foregoing, we can begin to see why Nietzsche informs us history written in the service of the ascetic ideal “... offends my taste; also my patience: ... such a sight arouses my ire, such ‘spectators’ dispose me against the ‘spectacle’ more than the spectacle itself (the spectacle of history, you understand) . . . ” (Nietzsche 1969, 158). The scare-quotes Nietzsche places around the concepts “spectators” and “spectacle” are instructive. First, the concept of the “spectators,” when understood in a derogatory sense, captures Nietzsche’s other choice labels for the authors of this mode of historiography: the “cowardly contemplatives” or the “‘objective’ armchair scholars,” those historians who “wrap themselves in wisdom and look ‘objective’” (Nietzsche 1969, 158). The concept denotes the particularly insidious feigned demeanor of the passive observer. Second, the “spectacle,” the picture of history such authors present, is an unseemly one: they, in other words, make a “spectacle” of historiography in presenting an account that is “*by nature* unhistorical:” it is both psychologically questionable and historically mistaken (Nietzsche 1969, 25). In light of the foregoing, the contours of historiography in the service of the ascetic ideal can be generalized along the following lines: (1) “the actual *history of morality*,” the “so well hidden land of morality—of morality that has actually existed, actually been lived” is further concealed by (2) a “spectacle” of historical insight and understanding (Nietzsche 1969, 21). These two points are evidenced, for instance, in Renan’s continued flirtation with the ascetic ideal and in Rée’s lack of “*historical spirit*” which results in an account of the history of morality that is “*by nature* unhistorical” (Nietzsche 1969, 25). Such “spectacles” of historical appreciation

and understanding serve to (3) seduce their audiences into a life-denying system of purposes. Nietzsche's critique exposes Rée and Renan as thinkers subjugated by the ascetic ideal and as practitioners of historiography who serve a system of purposes inimical to life.

Yet, as Nietzsche makes clear in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, these sorts of methodologically misguided investigations should not ill dispose us toward the spectacle of history itself. So, in contrast to historiography written in the service of the ascetic ideal, Nietzsche presents an account of historiography in the service of life. A form of historiography, in other words, which seeks to destabilize our commitment to a particular system of purposes, namely the slave mode of moral reasoning. It is in this way, as I shall argue in the following section, we should view Nietzsche's thoughts on history in the service of life.

Historiography in the service of life

An adequate account of what it means for historiography to be in the service of life needs to involve the following dimensions of Nietzsche's thought. It should tease out the methodological component of his philosophical project and illustrate the strategic elements of what he labels in *Human, All Too Human*, "historical philosophy" (Nietzsche 1983, 12) in order to reveal the currently obscured "actual history of morality" (Nietzsche 1969, 21). This feature, following David Owen's analysis, involves two methodological constraints: "first of being true to the object of enquiry (i.e. the history of 'morality'); secondly, that of being true to the purpose of the enquiry (i.e. the re-evaluation of morality)" (Owen 2007, 143).⁶ In what follows, I will focus upon Nietzsche's meditation on the value of history before turning to address the manner in which a cogent account of history written in the service of life should render intelligible the manner in which that history has the potential to serve therapeutic ends, which may include freeing us from our commitments to particularly pernicious systems of purposes. To put the point another way, a satisfactory account should chart the manner in which such a history can enjoin us to embark upon a reevaluation of our evaluative frameworks. To lend credence to this particular aspect of historiography in the service of life, I want to isolate a representative example of historiography from Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* in order to make clear both the philosophic and therapeutic dimensions of Nietzsche's thought.

As is well known, Nietzsche in his meditation on the uses and disadvantages of history presents three modes of historiography: monumental history,

antiquarian history, and critical history. Each of which serves a decisively distinct function and each may be employed in the service of life. Put briefly, monumental historiography highlights exemplary achievements to demonstrate that greatness “was in any event once *possible* and may thus be possible again” (Nietzsche 1997, 73). Antiquarian history encourages one to preserve and revere an aspect of the past by tending to it with a particular kind of piety, while critical history serves to mitigate the totalitarian effects of the other modes of historiography by providing the critical apparatus to view entrenched narratives scrupulously. In accordance with the tripartite purposes of history, we can begin to distinguish history written in the service of life from a form of historiography that serves life-negating forces. In terms of further demarcating this distinction, Nietzsche claims:

These are the services history is capable of performing for life; every man and every nation requires, in accordance with its goals, energies and needs, a certain kind of knowledge of the past, now in the form of monumental, now of antiquarian, now of critical history; but it does not require it as a host of pure thinkers who only look on at life, of knowledge-thirsty individuals whom knowledge alone will satisfy and to whom the accumulation of knowledge is itself the goal, but always and only for ends of life and thus also under the domination and supreme direction of these ends. (Nietzsche 1997, 77)

Historiography in the service of life, Nietzsche writes, must be animated and directed by a set of purposes. Historiography operating under the epistemological demand of pure knowledge itself, not ostensibly bound by a system of purposes, is inimical to life. The epistemological objective of pure knowledge of the past is itself motivated by purposes, such as the desire for clarity or breadth of historical understanding or for certainty, though such purposes are ostensibly denied.⁷ To tease out this point we may do well to reconsider Renan who seemed to claim his historiography was guided by pure objectivity and, so understood, “knowledge is itself the goal” of the inquiry (Nietzsche 1997, 77). Yet, if Nietzsche’s analysis is correct, Renan’s supposed “objective historiography” is motivated by and in the service of another set of purposes, namely the ascetic ideal. History in the service of life, by contrast, avoids this error by acknowledging the purposes for which it operates, methodologically bound by the need for a particular kind of knowledge of the past, where the kind of knowledge, Nietzsche suggests, is “evoked by hunger, [and] regulated by the extent of its need” (Nietzsche 1997, 77). History, so written, is constrained by procedural restrictions and, as such, maps the purposes of the investigation onto the object of inquiry. History ceases

to serve life when a mode of historiography is employed to serve purposes to which it is ill suited.

In light of the foregoing, I shall suggest that Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* may be viewed as a representative example of historiography in the service of life. Consider the first essay in which Nietzsche, operating within the critical mode of historiography, seeks to break up the dominant mode of moral reasoning, the slave morality. In other words, in the essay on "Good and Evil," "Good and Bad," as David Owen puts the point:

. . . by presenting "morality" as slave morality, as a counter-movement to, and re-evaluation of, noble morality, [Nietzsche] immediately and dramatically problematizes the presumption of his audience that "morality" is the only possible ethical perspective in making viable another mode of ethical reasoning and rhetorically situating the reader within the struggle between them, while also indicating that the enterprise of re-evaluation to which he enjoins his readers is not a novel phenomenon. (Owen 2007, 131–2)

That is, in the first essay, Nietzsche seeks to break up a piece of the past by demonstrating that the picture of morality we assume is universally binding and a-historic, the slave mode of morality, is the product of a reevaluation of another mode of moral reasoning, noble morality. By offering this formed picture of the history of morality, Nietzsche seeks to dissolve the hold that the slave mode of morality has upon us, as he attempts to point out reevaluations of our moral frameworks are indeed possible. Or, to put the point schematically: (1) Nietzsche takes as his object of inquiry the "actual *history of morality*" in order to bring to light the slave revolt in morality (Nietzsche 1969, 21). In attempting to reveal "something that required two thousand years to achieve victory . . . [given that] . . . all *protracted* things are hard to see, to see whole . . . [the slave revolt in morals] however, is what has happened . . ." (Nietzsche 1969, 34). Nietzsche, at the same time, discloses (2) the purposes of the investigation: to deliver us from our commitment to the victorious mode of evaluation, the slave mode of moral reasoning. Here in the first essay, historiography in the service of life is on display.

If this reading of the first essay is persuasive, then it readily lends itself to the consolation afforded by the critical mode of historiography elucidated by Nietzsche in his meditation on the value of history: "knowing [that] this first nature was once a second nature and that every victorious second nature will become a first" (Nietzsche 1997, 77). When placed in the context of the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, the first nature is, of course, the slave form

of moral reasoning, the now victorious mode of evaluation. Yet, as Nietzsche attempts to stress in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, this first nature was once a second nature, and it can be understood as a response to the noble mode of evaluation. The salient point here, as Nietzsche puts it, in an often-cited section of *Beyond Good and Evil*, is: “Morality in Europe today is herd animal morality—in other words, as we understand it, merely one *type* of human morality beside which, before which, and after which other types, above all *higher* moralities, are, or ought to be, possible” (Nietzsche 1987, 115). If Nietzsche’s account of the victory of one mode of evaluation over another is sufficiently persuasive, then the conceptual space is opened for yet another reevaluation of our evaluative frameworks. Commenting on the critical mode of history in the second of the *Untimely Mediations*, Nietzsche makes clear: “The best we can do is to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away” (Nietzsche 1997, 76). Historiography in the service of life, as evidenced in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, at least, is precisely this sort of undertaking insofar as it maps the object of inquiry, the actual history of morality, onto the purpose, that of addressing our real needs, such as, for instance, “deflating our prejudices and freeing us from the snares of metaphysics” (Ridley 1998b, 235). Hence, Nietzsche attempts to enjoin us to take up the arduous task of reevaluation, such that we can, perhaps, begin to implant “a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature” (Nietzsche 1997, 76).

Conclusion

At the opening of this essay, I suggested Nietzsche’s thoughts on history in the service of life might aid us in unpacking both the philosophic and therapeutic dimensions of his project. A word, in the hopes of adding further clarity to this point, as well as a consideration broaching the vexed question concerning the manner in which Nietzsche’s idea—that history is valuable only insofar as it serves life—relates to the tradition of life-philosophy, are certainly in order. The philosophical dimensions of Nietzsche’s project are evidenced in the methodological restrictions he places on historiography, in the strategic manner in which he accounts for the origins of morality, and in the way in which he problematizes our commitment to a particularly pernicious mode of moral reasoning. The therapeutic aspects are contained in the emancipatory potential

such accounts may harbor. If Nietzsche's account of the history of morality is sufficiently persuasive, then it has the potential to produce the therapeutic effects of exposing and breaking down our allegiances to particularly pernicious modes of framing ourselves.

Nietzsche begins his meditation on the value of history with the following quotation from Goethe: "In any case, I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my behavior" (Nietzsche 1997, 59). Accordingly, historiography in the hands of Nietzsche should, at least, have the potential to strengthen our resolve, to remind us, in other words, "why instruction without invigoration, why knowledge not attended to by action, why history as a costly superfluity and luxury, must be . . . hated by us—hated because we still lack even the things we need and the superfluous is the enemy of the necessary" (Nietzsche 1997, 59). History in the service of the ascetic ideal is one such example of instruction without invigoration. History in the service of life is bound by methodological restrictions, and, accordingly, can be seen to serve life only if the purposes, the "things we need" from the inquiry, are accurately mapped onto the objects of the inquiry (Nietzsche 1997, 59). If the tradition of life-philosophy can quite generally be understood as a rigorous examination of the manner in which we make sense of ourselves in "this world, *our* world," then Nietzsche's contribution, at least in the second of his *Untimely Meditations*, to this philosophical tradition is transparent: history, or historiography, is valuable only insofar as it is in the service of life, only insofar as it attends to our real needs, and only insofar as it may directly augment and invigorate our activity.

Notes

- 1 Copyright ©1997 Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.
- 2 For instance, the therapeutic dimension of Nietzsche's thought is emphasized in the following works: Danto (1994), Hutter (2006), and Ure (2008).
- 3 For instance Thomas Hart identifies this impetus as singularly crucial: "[Nietzsche's] philosophy, above all else, is a philosophy of life and living" (2009, 117).
- 4 Nietzsche reveals Ernest Renan as his antipode in §48 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, whereas Nietzsche informs us, in the Preface of the *Genealogy*, Paul Rée's *The Origin of the Moral Sensations*, has "that power of attraction which everything contrary, everything antipodal possesses . . ." (1969, 17).
- 5 See, for example, Schweitzer (1998).

- 6 Owen adds a third restriction, namely: “that of being expressively adequate to its rhetorical task of persuasion” (2007, 143).
- 7 This point is a result of Nietzsche’s “perspectivism,” which finds its most cogent articulation in the third essay of the *Genealogy* (GM III 12). For an excellent discussion of this particular issue see: Ridley (2000).

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