

The Use of History and the Unhistorical Sense in Will to Power

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In Nietzsche's *Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Nietzsche makes the point that history is something that is only beneficial if used in the right manner and in the right proportion. If misused or used excessively, history becomes not only counter-productive, but physically dangerous. He writes *Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* because he believes that German culture at the time of his authorship to be one that suffers from an excess of history. In particular he seems to have targeted several different specific cultural phenomena for his criticism. These primary targets of the work were: the treatment of history as a science, the popularity of Hegel, and a broader phenomenon, the involvement of history with Christianity. What he seemed to observe in these phenomenon was neither the tendency toward the encouragement of will to power in individuals nor the encouragement of right actions. In fact, not only does the misuse demonstrated in these phenomena not encourage right action, but instead often weakens the involved individual's ability to act in any way. This is the explanation for his beginning quote of Goethe. "In any case, I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity."

A significant way history can be used or misused is in the proportions of different types of history to each other. Nietzsche makes a distinction between three types of history, each needing to be balanced with the other two. In the following, I will lay out these varying type of history in order to specify Nietzsche's rhetoric of the use and abuse

of history. Nietzsche aims at an attunement or acknowledgement of these three types of history in order to apprehend that which we are – our existence.

The first type of history is monumental history. This type of history, is History, which serves life in that in its proper amount, it inspires or encourages the striving of individuals to better themselves. It is a type of history in which excess causes the individual involved to become overzealous and unreasonable.

Another type of history is antiquarian history. Antiquarian history, as I understand it, acts as a preservative of society. It offers examples of what was, so that what *is* will hopefully not sink beyond the flaws of what was and be carried forward in part by monumental history. An excess of antiquarian history causes an excess of novelty and an overemphasis on all historical information. Perhaps with respect to religious history, excess causes an emphasis on ritual centered around less important aspects of the religion, where the true significance of religion is lost amongst superfluous emphasis.

The third type of history is critical history, which is destructive. Not in the sense of it being universally undesirable, more in the sense that it breaks down the wrong and the unnecessary. It paves the way for that which is truly important to be emphasized and valued. The problem of its excess is that it tears down too much. It also destroys that which is significant or helpful.

Nietzsche says that there are five main dangers of history as a whole being in excess. These five dangers seem to result from the unbalance of the three types of history and perhaps also from a lack of what he termed the unhistorical, which I will cover later. He says that the first of the five dangers is that the excess leads to a contrast between inner self and the outer self, which leads to a weakened personality. This weakened

personality seems to be the result of an over criticism of that which is built into the individual's personality for the sake of an overvaluation of being that which the person truly has no desire to be. In other words, it leads the involved individual to value being a particular way, not because the person has an honest commitment to change for the sake of being a better person, as in monumental history's proper usage, but instead to pursue something so that they may be valued for their merit in the same way in which the historical is valued, inappropriately by the antiquarian and perhaps monumental history types.

The second danger of excessive history is that it leads the individual to the mistake of believing that he has the virtue of being just, which is possibly very destructive. According to Nietzsche few human beings have the ability to be just, which requires a combination of the rarest traits. As I understand it, justice requires that the individual judge be extremely accurate, perhaps always precisely correct in his judgments. It also requires that each judgment be given with the utmost unwavering confidence and coldness. He must be impervious to appeals to pity, threats, and any sort of influence of popular opinion. This combination of coldness and strength in one individual should make that person appear monstrous to people, and is almost universally hated.

I think that part of the reason that he conceives justice in this manner is the product of his conception of the basis of the vitality of all things, will to power, and his belief that pity weakens both the person who pities and the pitied. It is also important to distinguish the difference between pitying someone and trying to help them out of compassion. Compassion encourages one person to help another become stronger, it

encourages vitality. Pity on the other hand, encourages one person to sustain another so that rather than encourage that person to be strong it rewards them for having a weakness and encourages them not to change their weakness. It also burdens the *pitier* with the weight of the *pitied*, and prevents the *pitied* from striving and growing to be better. Pity can often be a difficult thing to overcome, as a lack of it is often seen as a lack of compassion. This creates immediate popular resistance to the person who has a lack of pity and that person must strive to become strong enough to move through life without the help of those who would normally assist him if he had pity. Thus the bearer of justice must be strong enough to be just and must have an understanding of what judgments are right and what judgments are wrong.

Furthermore, Nietzsche says that great harm can be done by those who falsely believe that they have the ability to act justly. It seems that often if a person critically examines enough history, that person may be lead to believe they can discern the just actions from the unjust in history. It is very easy for a person to go from this interpretation of history to a belief that they can judge between right and wrong in day to day life situations. When a person does try to judge without having the strength to be just, that person ends up merely tolerating the situation or adding to whatever problem is already existent. This is similar to the way in which pity can worsen an already present problem.

The third danger of an excess of history is that it can impair the instincts and hinder the maturation of individuals or groups. It does this both by drawing conceptions from a criticism of history, which undermines the illusions which allow a person to feel emotions towards things. When a thing is seen in a purely 'objective' way it becomes

difficult to then feel emotions, such as love, for something that simply is. Nietzsche also says that this undermining of illusion and consequently emotion also undermines vitality. Again, I think his reasoning for this ties in to his understanding of will to power as that which is *being*. For something to undermine emotions, such as love, is for something to undermine the emotional supports for the will to live, which for living things could in some ways be considered the will to power, or at least a significant part of it.

Also, this particular effect of the excess of historical thinking is one which exposes people to an overabundance of historical information, which does not necessarily contribute to their day to day living. Instead, in a sort of antiquarian excess, it presents an array of trivial facts and information as valuable, so that the learner becomes disgusted with the uselessness of the learning and begins to see all the historical information, including the pertinent and useful, as worthless. In this way also does the excess of history interfere with the instincts and maturation of the involved individual.

The fourth danger of an excess of history is that it suggests that man is nearing his historical end. What this means is that certain varieties of history suggest a developmental process, in which we are approaching the end. This sort of concept is found in Hegel's historical-philosophical system. What it basically amounts to is that the whole process of history has a purpose to it and that purpose is found in the right-now or the shortly coming. In Hegel's case, though he did not realize it at the time, it was that Hegel himself had existed and thereby God had realized himself. This manner of thinking, that the purpose of all history is nearing or at its end lends itself, and perhaps inevitably leads to the manner of thinking that everyone who has come into being at this point or later cannot possibly contribute to the meaning of history. It lends itself to the

idea that nothing else great can be done, and that anything attempted now would surely pale before the significance of what has come before. In other words this is a sort of waning of the monumental in the face of the antiquarian.

The fifth and last mentioned major sort of danger presented by an excess of the historical sense is that it leads one to view oneself in the moods of irony and cynicism. It ties in closely with the fourth danger in that the mood of cynicism is one that is created by the sense that the historical process is inescapable, and that anything meaningful will be achieved by that historical process and not by the works of an individual who strives to do great things. The mood of irony is similar, but lacks the conviction that this is the case. Instead, it is more the fear that nothing that is accomplished now will last into the future.

These various results are the products of different sorts of history in excess. The manner in which the historical sense may be checked, and thereby the aforementioned five dangers may be avoided is through the balancing of the historical and the unhistorical. The unhistorical is a sort of forgetting, a change of focus from what has been done to what must be done. Nietzsche says that only by the unhistorical, with its focus on doing, can a creature live. If a creature could not live un-historically at all it would die, and yet if it could not think historically, that is to say if it could not remember, it would end up much like an animal. It would end up living the most simple of lives, which is not particularly desirable either. This unhistorical sense allows us only to focus on what must be done. However, it allows us to forget, which then helps us heal from the damage done to our illusions, our emotions, and thereby go on living.

The balance of the historical and unhistorical is necessary in order to live a life which is one in which we can learn, but learn in such a way that we are not harmed by that learning. Historical sense gives that learning, if appropriately, in such a way that we can draw from the past that which will help us become better, preserve the beneficial and destroy harmful historical acquisitions from the past. Thus the appropriate use of history, and balance of the historical and unhistorical sense becomes a significant part in the effort to become “stronger”.

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