

On the proper uses and improper abuses of history for the existing individual



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Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* reads as a polemic against German historicism, the prevailing attitude of his time with respect to the value of history. Originally published as the second of four *Untimely Meditations*, this work offers a cultural critique that is in tension with what Nietzsche sees as the prevailing self-congratulatory spirit of an age paralyzed by its quest for a certain kind of knowledge and truth. From the failure of reason's promise to deliver knowledge, the nineteenth century emerges with a view of historical knowledge as valuable in-and-for itself. Nietzsche's criticism of the nineteenth century's approach to history is derived from his belief that an objective, scientific approach to history is psychologically and ethically devastating to contemporary men. He objects to the metaphysical claim of historicism, so defined, for its tendency to alienate existing individuals from themselves. Echoing Kierkegaard's characterization of objective truth as unsuitable for existing individuals – belittling such a total picture of reality as “ a system – for God; but [not] for any existing spirit” – Nietzsche diagnoses the destructive effects of such an approach. Like religion, historicism places faith in something outside of ourselves and the here-and-now. Nietzsche accuses his contemporaries of having fallen into an indoctrinated approach to history that is passive and retrospective, irrelevant to the actual state of affairs. Such an approach to history as the science of what is or has been gives us no creative power to determine what we ought to do. Thus, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* asserts alternative ways of orienting ourselves towards history that will contribute to society's health and ability to be great.

Nietzsche argues for an understanding of the past from a self-conscious

perspective, rooted in contemporary existence, and serving the interests of
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life. The fundamental principle of life, that we exist, must motivate all quests for knowledge, and serve the existing individual in his quest to overcome the alienation of historicism's fixation on the past. Nietzsche diagnoses the historical malady present in his time as the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, which in its passive retrospection shatters man's ability to live in the present. He accuses his contemporaries of having erred in their search for truth by placing their quest for knowledge above their nature as existing individuals. Arguing for the primacy of the fact of our existence, Nietzsche questions "which of these two authorities [life or knowledge] is the higher and decisive one? No one will doubt: life is higher, the ruling authority, for any knowledge which destroys life would also have destroyed itself," (ADHL, p. 65). It is the primacy of our particular existence which has fallen prey to historicism's backwards orientation. While, according to Nietzsche's estimation, knowledge is only to be rightfully pursued in service to affirming life, modern man appears ill from the effects of an overindulgence in the historical past: "Now life is no longer the sole ruler and master of knowledge of the past: rather all boundary markers are overthrown and everything which once was rushes in upon man," (ADHL, p. 23). Living our lives in service of the past has led men to lose their foothold in the present. In searching the past for objective truths, modern man drags "an immense amount of indigestible knowledge stones around with him... knowledge which, taken in excess without hunger, even contrary to need, no longer acts as a transforming motive impelling to action..." (ADHL, p. 24). Suffering from a sort of intellectual paralysis, modern culture is "no real culture at all, but only a kind of knowledge about culture," (ADHL, p. 24). This is because of its dependence on a false ideal of objectivity, the end of historical knowledge

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pursued for its own sake. Behind a veil of universality, historicism conceals a dogmatic relationship to historical practice that prevents even historians, themselves, from subjecting their discipline to historical scrutiny. Nietzsche believes that the practice of history as a science, and its demand for the impossible ideal of objectivity, only serves to conceal the particular prejudices and presuppositions that a historian has by virtue of existing in historical time and space. In their obsession with the past, his nineteenth century contemporaries have lost sight of their own historical nature. Each existing individual is a link in the chain of historical existence, and “ however far and fast he runs, the chain runs with him,” (ADHL, p. 8). We each exist as a product of a particular, unique history, which engenders our own subjectivity and concerns as a human being. A search for objectivity is thus fundamentally misguided, an “ erroneous article of faith” from which truth emerges “ as the weakest form of knowledge,” (GS, §110). This knowledge is “ weak” precisely because its truth is independent of any actual concern for our lives. It is useless and misleading to conduct an inquiry, such as historicism has, that seeks to supercede this state of affairs. Such an inquiry results in “ lonely knowledge,” lacking “ that higher unity in the nature and soul of a people” because the knowledge those people hold dear is alienated from their very essence, (ADHL, p. 27). Nietzsche declares that the remedy for the “ historical malady” consists of applying historicism’s method of inquiry into the past to the existing state of affairs. In the midst of objectively valid knowledge, the individual “ becomes timid and unsure and may no longer believe in himself: he sinks into himself, into his inner being, which here only means: into the heaped up chaos of knowledge which fails to have an external effect, of teaching which does not become life,” (ADHL, p. 29).

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Surrounded by knowledge irrelevant to his being, the individual still possesses the tools to rescue himself, to reassert his existence with the very same tools he is accustomed to using to dissect the historical past. This is because the present is still a historical moment, even though it stands before us: we existing individuals remain historical beings. If we apply the “origin of historical education,” which leads us to place so much faith in knowledge extracted from times past, Nietzsche believes we might overcome the miserly modern spirit, (ADHL, p. 45). That same spirit which led historicists to place such value in the past can be applied to the existing situation in the present: thus “the origin of historical education...must itself in turn be historically understood, history must itself dissolve the problem of history,” (ADHL, p. 45). Without this purposeful reassertion of inquiry into the present, nineteenth century individuals “must in all higher matters of culture always only be ‘descendants’ because this is all we could be,” (ADHL, p. 45). As historical beings – by which is meant people who exist in a particular time and place – historians must subject their own discipline to the same scrutiny they are accustomed to applying only to epochs of the past. Nietzsche’s vision of proper, useful history requires the historian to take on a somewhat creative role. Strict allegiance to historical inquiry for its own sake will otherwise “uproot the future because it destroys illusions and robs existing things of their atmosphere in which alone they can live,” (ADHL, p. 38). With this emphasis on the necessity for originality in quests for knowledge, Nietzsche’s remedy for the “historical malady” requires of man that he be the artist of his own existence. He must craft a balance between living in complete ignorance, and living in the manner of someone unable even to lift a finger because, remembering everything, he sees only becoming in things, <https://assignbuster.com/on-the-proper-uses-and-improper-abuses-of-history-for-the-existing-individual/>

only the transitory nature of events. Knowledge has caused the nineteenth century man to annihilate and lose his instinct. In order to recover that instinct, and ground our inwardness in the here-and-now, a certain kind of forgetting — for the sake of “ faith in the future” — is required, (ADHL, p. 10). Otherwise, we lose a sense of ourselves in blind pursuit of knowledge that denies our existence as individuals, and remain spectators rather than directors of our own existence. In moments when that knowledge fails to be instructive, we have nowhere to turn – since our inwardness is devoid of content. If Nietzsche’s prescription in *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* is to be understood as a derision of historicism’s method for approaching the task of human existence, it is also an utter rejection of Hegelianism’s logically-necessitated account of history. The proposition of *geist* as the force that propels the course of history toward an ever-increasing actualization of its ultimate end – freedom – seems to Nietzsche to deny the existing individual’s ability to make any meaningful contribution. “ If every success contains within itself a rational necessity, if every event is a victory of the logical or of the ‘ idea’ – then quickly down on your knees...” (ADHL, p. 47). Protesting the slavishness induced by the religious force of Hegelianism’s historical power, Nietzsche wants to reaffirm the value of a creative approach to life. Great epochs, and great men, are characterized by their unique, constructive contribution to the course of human history. It is that which leads us to admire them in the first place. To sacrifice life for the sake of truth is a misguided effort, and if we truly believe in the power of knowledge, then Nietzsche believes we must be bold enough to seek to know ourselves. If we don’t, we will certainly never achieve Nietzsche’s self of liberation: “ no longer being ashamed in front of oneself,” (GS, §275)

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AbbreviationsADHLNietzsche, Friedrich. On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life. Trans. Peter Preuss. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1980. GSNietzsche, Friedrich. The Gay Science. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House, Inc., 1974.