

Blinding Wisdom – Nietzsche’s Superhistorical Gaze

Hans Ruin

In §76 of *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger analyzes the origin of history on the basis of the historicity of Dasein. The point which he stresses here, and which also structures the argument of the book as a whole, is that history, along with our different ways of understanding, studying and relating to history, is rooted in the fact that our existence itself is historical. It is with reference to this existential-ontological fact that a new attempt to raise the ancient question of the meaning of being cannot avoid the confrontation with, and destruction of, its own history, i.e., the history of the formation of ontological concepts and positions. The argument is spelled out very forcefully as early as §6:

If the question of being is to have its own history made transparent, then this hardened tradition must be loosened up, and the concealments which it has brought about must be dissolved. We understand this task as one in which by *taking the question of being as our clue*, we are to *destroy* the traditional content of ancient ontology until we arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of being – the ways which have guided us ever since.¹

In the next passage he emphasizes that this does not amount to relativizing or simply negating previous positions, for its aim is *positive*, as it

¹ *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1927/1979), in English trans. *Being and Time*, by Macquarrie & Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 22 (German original): “Soll für die Seinsfrage selbst die Durchsichtigkeit ihrer eigenen Geschichte gewonnen werden, dann bedarf es der Auflockerung der verhärteten Tradition und Ablösung der durch sie gezeitigten Verdeckungen. Diese Aufgabe verstehen wir als die am Leitfaden der Seinsfrage sich vollziehende Destruktion des überlieferten Bestandes der antiken Ontologie auf die ursprünglichen Erfahrungen, in denen die ersten und fortan leitenden Bestimmungen des Seins gewonnen wurden.”

directs itself toward the present, toward the *today*, and its ways of approaching the history of ontology. This agonistic orientation vis-à-vis tradition, and more precisely with regard to how the tradition lives and is manifested in the present, will henceforth guide the steps by which the analysis spirals itself toward the foundational level of Dasein's being, culminating in the description of ecstatic temporality.

If we move forward in the book again, to §76, as well as §74, we can also note how Heidegger draws the distinction between different ways of living the originary historical condition of existence. There is an authentic, and an inauthentic way of enacting our historical predicament. The distinction hinges on the ability to live oriented towards the present and the future, and only from this position take over the past which one already is, in Heidegger's words, to take over—in the moment, the *Augenblick*—one's own thrownness (p. 385). To do so is what makes authentic historicity, or by another name, "destiny," possible. The last section (§77) of chapter 5 deals entirely with the historicity of Dasein and it contains a rather detailed account of and quotations from Dilthey and Count Yorck von Wartenburg, whose work, and in particular whose correspondence, was an important source of inspiration for Heidegger in working out his existential account of historicity.

But before referring to this important source material, Heidegger also makes a brief digression at the end of §76 to Nietzsche, and the latter's 1874 *Second Untimely Meditation, On The Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life (Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben)*. In this brief discussion he notes that Nietzsche has reached the heart of the matter concerning the use and abuse of history, and he also recounts his three famous kinds of historical writing, *monumental*, *antiquarian*, and *critical*. But he also reproaches him for not stating the necessity of this particular tripartite division, and for not demonstrating their "inner unity." Only on the basis of a theory of historicity, along the lines presented by Heidegger himself, is this division and its unity said to be fully understandable. He ends the brief account with the claim that Nietzsche's division is not incidental, for the beginning of his considerations indicates, Heidegger remarks somewhat enigmatically, that Nietzsche "knew more than he revealed" (p. 396).

What was this knowledge that Nietzsche possessed, but did not reveal? What is the deeper truth of the *Second Untimely Meditation* from the perspective of existential ontology? And is there perhaps also a

hidden truth concerning the full importance of this text for Heidegger's own analysis? Heidegger never returns again in his published work to the *Second Untimely Meditation*, but in the winter semester of 1938/39 he devotes an entire lecture course to this particular text, *Zur Auslegung von Nietzsches II. Unzeitgemässer Betrachtung*, published within the *Gesamtausgabe* in 2003, as GA 46. For readers waiting for a more thorough development of his appreciation of Nietzsche as a thinker of historicity, this volume is somewhat of a philosophical disappointment. Heidegger's own lecture notes do not provide a full and readable text, but rather contain mostly sketches. From the detailed student lecture notes added in an appendix, we get a better sense of the actual development of the argument presented in the course. But the course is also a disappointment in its reading of Nietzsche's essay in the sense that it is guided by the increasingly critical assessment of Nietzsche in which Heidegger, step by step, distances himself from his predecessor, as can also be seen later in his *Nietzsche I-II* from 1961, which collects together material from 1935 and onward.

Much of the commentary in the 1938/9 course is devoted to Nietzsche's understanding of life and animality, and the philosophically unsatisfying way in which the concept of a self-affirming life is presented. Since Nietzsche's overall purpose in this text, Heidegger writes at one point, is dominated by the will to "renew German Culture," it fails to question its own understanding of life, which remains the unquestioned horizon of the whole treatise.² He even goes so far in his critical distance that he asks if the return to the "needs of life" called for in this text is not an escape from reflection (*Besinnung*), an escape into the animal and life's own sense of righteousness, in the sense of a beast of prey (*Raubtier*).³ The seminal question issuing from Nietzsche's text is in the end said to be not really about the use or abuse of history at all, but about the legitimacy of positing "life" as a fundamental reality in the sense of a *Kulturbiologie*.⁴ From this short summary it is clear then, that by this time Heidegger is no longer following Nietzsche as a thinker of historicity in his own right. Instead, he reads the essay on history rather as a symptom of a more general philosophical inability to think the truth of being and man's place in this

² *Zur Auslegung von Nietzsches II. Unzeitgemässer Betrachtung* (Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 2003), GA 46, p. 212.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 213.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 255. This is the last entry of the scattered lecture manuscript, apart from the appendices.

event, an inability which issues from Nietzsche's form of "subjectivism."

Ten years after SZ, Nietzsche thus no longer holds out a promise for a knowledge yet to be articulated. In order to understand the rationale of this quite drastic reorientation on Heidegger's part with regard to Nietzsche as a thinker of history, one would have to analyze the complex issue of how his thinking develops in general during the thirties. That is not my task at this particular point. Instead, I would like to take another route, namely to propose a reading of the *Second Untimely Meditation* which complements and advances Heidegger's own analysis of historicity in SZ, not in order to criticize Heidegger's later assessment of Nietzsche, but in order to bring what I take to be the prevailing *matter* of this seminal essay into sharper relief than we find in Heidegger's later commentary.

I

To write on Nietzsche's *Second Untimely Meditation* from the perspective of Heidegger's account of historicity does not require much interpretative violence, since the two accounts are already intricately intertwined. What I hope to do through such a reading is, first, to come to a more thorough understanding of Nietzsche's concern in this text with the dangers of historical consciousness, and to show how this problem can be said to provide a key to his subsequent historical philosophical critique. But in addition, it is from the perspective of Heidegger's ontological concerns that we can fully grasp the extent to which Nietzsche diagnoses as it were a certain necessary, and thus in a sense tragic blindness concerning the possibility of existential-ontological understanding of historicity. What he measures, in the end, is the essential limit of philosophical theoretical reflection, in the sense of theoretical contemplative wisdom, with regard to the historical predicament of thought. But here I anticipate my conclusion.

First of all, let me briefly rehearse the general argument of this text. The text was written during the fall of 1873 and published in 1874, as the second of four completed so-called *Untimely Meditations*.⁵ Its stated problem is the danger of an excess of historical consciousness (*historische Sinn*), something which Nietzsche diagnoses as a sickness

⁵ In *Kritische Studienausgabe* (KSA), Vol. 1 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), pp. 243-334.

peculiar to his time. As such it belongs to the series of critical assessments of his own philological environment of this period. Its argument is that through an excess of memory, and the scientific ideal of an unlimited gathering of knowledge of the past, an age can become so burdened by its own knowledge that it loses its creative potential. In this sense an exaggerated historical preoccupation can become a danger to life itself, which thereby loses its natural instincts and ability to act in the present. Contrary to the present ethos of historical science, according to which historical knowledge and historical awareness constitute a virtue, Nietzsche, in a jesting mode, turns the scales around and suggest that an excess of history can in fact turn into a vice and a sickness, and that life also needs forgetfulness in order to prosper and create. In the course of the analysis, Nietzsche introduces five categories, first the *unhistorical* and the *superhistorical* (*unhistorische* and *überhistorische*) and secondly the threefold distinction between the *monumental*, the *antiquarian*, and the *critical*. The first pair of concepts is presented as two different remedies against an excess of historical consciousness. The *unhistorical* marks an attitude of active or spontaneous neglect of knowledge of the past, akin to the natural forgetfulness of the animal, whereas the *superhistorical* is the virtue of the supreme historian who is able to view the past as a resting perspectival totality of every possible form of life. The three different attitudes to history designate three different ways in which history can become useful for life, the *monumental* as an incentive for heroic action with the past as a model, the *antiquarian* as a preservation of one's own community, and finally, the *critical* as a way of criticizing the present in order to replace it with something new. While they can all serve life, they can also—when abused—become a danger to life in different ways: the monumental as a stifling classicism, the antiquarian as a motive for relentless and undiscerning gathering of everything whatsoever, and finally the critical as a kind of purposeless destruction.

II

Before analyzing these concepts and the overall argument of this text in greater detail, a few words are needed concerning its position within Nietzsche's work as a whole and also in the secondary literature. The text was considered by many commentators, in particular during the

first half of the twentieth century, as one of Nietzsche's most important works, alongside the *Genealogy* and the *Birth of Tragedy*. Its argument against the historicism of its age had a massive influence, far beyond Nietzsche commentaries and scholarship. The general idea of a danger inherent in a culture too much obsessed with memorizing the past, and therefore incapable of creative work in and on the present, can be followed like a shadow of many aspects of our aesthetic and political modernism, preoccupied as it has been with the looming weakness, decadence, and decline of Western and European culture. Even though the interest in this particular text diminished in later decades, several recent monographs have nonetheless stressed its particular importance.⁶ At the same time the argument has been voiced that the essay, on the contrary, does not constitute an important step in the development of Nietzsche's thought, since its essentially anti-historicist message clashes with his subsequent historical analysis of morality in particular.⁷ Such an argument can also find support in what appears to be Nietzsche's surprisingly low esteem for this particular text. In striking contrast to the importance accredited to it by its readers, Nietzsche later did not pay much attention to it. When asked by correspondents, e.g., Brandes, to recommend his most important writings, he would never refer to this essay. And while republishing most of his earlier writings with new prefaces in 1886, he did not bother to reedit any of the *Untimely Meditations*. In the brief review of the text in his autobiography *Ecce Homo* (composed in 1888), he describes it as the first attempt to view the "historical consciousness" (*historische Sinn*) as a sickness and a sign of decay, and also how contemporary science poisons life, and makes it "barbaric." Thus he connects it to his general critique of science and the theoretical activity, but he makes no connections to his own subsequent practice of historical, genealogical critique.

Nietzsche's silence with regard to this specific essay in the years that followed, and the indications that he was displeased with it, motivated Jörg Salaquarda to recreate, in a very detailed essay from 1984,

⁶ Two such recent works are Ludwig Geijsen, *Geschichte und Gerechtigkeit* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), and also Christian Lipperheide, *Nietzsches Geschichtsstrategien* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1999).

⁷ Cf. Thomas Brobjer's "Nietzsche's View of the Value of Historical Studies and Methods," in *J. History of Ideas* (forthcoming).

its genesis using Nietzsche's working notes and correspondence.⁸ Salaquarda's conclusion was that one reason for Nietzsche's later apparent dissatisfaction with the text probably had to do with an experienced crisis as a writer during the time of its composition, following critique from his close friends, especially Rohde. Indeed, it is not difficult to criticize this essay, both on stylistic and thematic grounds. The prevailing nationalistic and romantic tendency, in the sense given to this term in Nietzsche's own later critique of his contemporary study *The Birth of Tragedy*, with its Wagnerian hopes for and appeals to a new generation of dragon-slaying German youths, would most likely have provoked his subsequent dismay.

In this connection it is also important, however, to note the self-criticism implied in the essay already at the time of its composition. In the last section Nietzsche notes that the text itself demonstrates the traits of that with which it is trying to come to terms: "...precisely this treatise, as I will not conceal, shows its modern character, the character of weak personality, in the excess of criticism, in the immaturity of its humanity, in the frequent transition from irony to cynicism, from pride to skepticism."⁹ There is a sense in which the writer, in the very act of composing his critical treatise, becomes painfully aware of what is perhaps the inner impossibility of properly communicating his message. Or perhaps, that the very need to communicate it cannot avoid exemplifying the very problem with which it is trying to come to terms. The awareness of being overburdened with historical awareness and reflection cannot be presented and analyzed without continuing to manifest this very condition. On one level it can only be overcome by means of the *deed*.

At the root of this discourse we can thus discern an almost desperate and perhaps also embarrassing awareness of the limit of reflective consciousness with regard to the problem of an excess of historical knowledge as also an excess of self-reflection. One legacy of the text may therefore also be a *necessitated silence* precisely with regard to the

⁸ "Studien zur zweiten unzeitgemässen Betrachtung," *Nietzsche-Studien* 13 (1984):1-45.

⁹ KSA 1: 324: "...gerade diese Abhandlung zeigt, wie ich mir nicht verbergen will, in der Unmässigkeit ihrer Kritik, in der Unreife ihrer Menschlichkeit, in dem häufigen Uebergang von Ironie zum Cynismus, von Stolz zur Skepsis, ihren modernen Charakter, den Charakter der schwachen Persönlichkeit." In English translation by Peter Preuss, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (Indianapolis: Hackett 1980), p. 58.

problem which it has detected, a silence concerning the *what* of history, in favor of a movement into the *how* of history, as that which in the end has to be enacted or lived.

Frequently, Nietzsche's essay is read simply as a statement against historical awareness and historical studies in general. From such a standpoint it clashes abruptly with the oft quoted remark at the outset of *Human, All Too Human*, written only a few years later. In the second section of this book we read about the "hereditary defect" of philosophers, which is precisely their lack of historical sense (*historische Sinn*), manifested in the often repeated tendency to interpret man from the standpoint of the present, in total neglect of the dimension of change and becoming. But since there are no eternal facts, what is needed at this point, Nietzsche argues, is on the contrary a "historical philosophizing."¹⁰ Later on, in *Beyond Good and Evil* (§204) he even celebrates the *historical sense* as a specifically German virtue, and as something that Schopenhauer, through his "unintelligent criticism" of Hegel, has damaged. And in a similar spirit he writes at the beginning of the *Genealogy*, of the contemporary philosophers that they—even in their attempts to compose a history of morality—all lack "historical spirit" (*historische Geist*) and they think essentially "unhistorically" (*wesentlich unhistorisch*), which in this case also means that they think from the perspective of the present.¹¹ In other words, there is on the one hand a fierce criticism of historical consciousness as the sickness of an age, and on the other hand the call for an increased historical consciousness as the necessary remedy against the defects of contemporary philosophizing. And this tension is not only acted out over the course of his later writings, but is even contained in the first text itself. For at one of its most vertiginous moments, Nietzsche even admits that the problem of modernity's excessive historical consciousness can only be dissolved through its own means, i.e., through historical knowledge: "history must itself dissolve the problem of history, knowledge must turn its sting against itself."¹²

How should we view these apparently divergent statements? Do these different positions constitute yet another of the "contradictions" that we are accustomed to ascribe to Nietzsche? Or are they a sign of a

¹⁰ KSA 2: 24-25.

¹¹ KSA 5: 258.

¹² KSA 1: 306: "...die Historie *muss* das Problem der Historie selbst auflösen, das Wissen *muss* seinen Stachel gegen sich selbst kehren." in English transl., p. 45.

drastic shift in his orientation, a proof that there is a Nietzsche I and a Nietzsche II, if not indeed a Nietzsche III? Or are they, indeed, two sides of the same philosophical position, a position which can then not be understood properly unless we can manage to unite these two apparent extremes in a more fundamental consideration of the problem? Without denying the drastic changes, both in style and content, of Nietzsche's thought from the time of the *Birth of Tragedy* to the last writings from the mid-eighties onward, in my reading of it the *Second Untimely Meditation* remains, despite its obvious shortcomings, an absolutely seminal text for Nietzsche's understanding of the problems of history, of historical consciousness and of historicism in general. And since he never again returns explicitly at any significant length to these issues in the later writings, besides the brief remarks just quoted, its status and importance as a programmatic statement increases. Indeed, I would argue, when read properly, this essay can give us an important key to the nature of his subsequent work on the whole. And the fact of his later silence or negligence about the essay should not automatically lead us toward the conclusion that it contains an abandoned or untenable position. In this respect the remark from the preface to the second part of *Human, All Too Human* is highly significant, since he says with respect to his earlier writing: "what I have said of the 'historical sickness,' I have said as someone who learned, slowly and with difficulty, to recover from it, and who was by no means prepared to relinquish 'history' in the future just because he had suffered from it."¹³ History, we can read from this quotation, is not an entity with regard to which Nietzsche adopts differing theoretical positions, but rather a basic predicament, which can be a source of both sickness and health, depending on how it is lived and enacted.

When seen from this perspective, the essay can also be seen to anticipate the problem encountered and addressed by Heidegger fifty years later in regard to the possibility of something like an authentic historicity. In this analysis, Heidegger is also concerned with the damaging effects of historicism on philosophical work in the present. But his remedy is not an anti-historical attitude to philosophical problems, but a confrontation with the historical situatedness of thinking as such.

¹³ KSA 2:371: "...und was ich gegen die 'historische Krankheit' gesagt habe, das sagte ich als Einer, der von ihr langsam, mühsam genesen lernte und ganz und gar nicht Willens war, fürderhin auf 'Historie' zu verzichten, weil er einstmals an ihr gelitten hatte."

And the authenticity held out as an evasive promise is in the end an affirmation of the inescapable finitude of the human gaze in the moment of decision. The genuine historical existence cannot constitute a fullness, but must be understood as tension, as exposure, an ability to occupy the rift of time. This is what both Heidegger and Nietzsche, in their different ways are indicating. In order to bring this out, however, we have to read the text, not only on its manifest level, but also against itself. Only by confronting Nietzsche with his own vain hopes for a fulfilled historical personality can the most radical implications of his analysis be brought to the fore.

III

The *Second Untimely Meditation* begins with a reflection on the animal, in the image of the cows grazing in the field. The animal is here a name for that which presumably lives without a sense of time or history. It is the unhistorical creature, for it is said to have no memory. In contrast to this invented "other" of man (the legitimacy of which we need not address at this point, even though it warrants a discussion in its own right), we humans are presented as the ones who live openly towards the possibility of that which is not present. Man is surrounded by traces of life which has been, and therefore also to the possibility of his own coming to pass. The awareness of the past, of words and deeds, is also the inescapable awareness of a future which comprises his own death. His life appears before him as this stretch of time, in which he has to model his life according to his own choice. Nietzsche does not speak of freedom in this context, but of memory. But the contrast to the animal without memory called forth here is in actuality also the condition of freedom. Man stands open toward that which is possible, and the anxiety of this situation is not only actualized in regard to the future, but also, and inversely, to the past. For the being who is free to shape his future is also someone exposed to the past, a past on which he not only rests, but which also threatens to pronounce judgment on him and his actions.

An existence without memory, one which lives only in and through the moment, can therefore, from the perspective of this difficult human freedom, only shine forth as a possibility of bliss and happiness. Nietzsche speaks of an experience in which we are temporarily deliv-

ered from the experience of time as the experience of standing on “the threshold of the moment,” *Schwelle des Augenblicks* (KSA 1:250), suggesting that this is indeed a moment of “experiencing unhistorically” in the way that animal nature exists. And yet the promised paradise of blissful unawareness of time is not available to man. For man is a historical creature.

The threat confronting the creature with a memory, in Nietzsche’s account, is the expansion of this memory to a point where it overburdens him. As he becomes filled with the awareness of what has been his whole existence is diluted and becomes awash in the flood of becoming and passing away. No action in the present becomes possible or meaningful. Here, he likens the man overburdened by memory to a creature suffering from insomnia, or indigestion. The two metaphors recur in the text almost interchangeably, though they do not quite converge. On the one hand there is too much seeing, too much wakefulness, which must be countered by a closing of the eye—of a necessary blindness—on the other hand there is the inability to digest, to incorporate, to make the other into oneself. What unites them is the image of a body exposed to what it cannot handle, and which becomes an excessive burden. The staring gaze and the deficient stomach are here the two sides of a historical sense which in its ultimate and excessive form damages life.

Life is potentially threatened by its historical sense. This is the key thought throughout this meditation. Life is harmed by an excess of memory of the past. But what is life, in that it can be harmed? And is that which harms life not also life? Can it be something different from life? Are history and the historical sense something which comes to life from the outside? These questions are of decisive importance for understanding Nietzsche’s whole philosophical orientation. We cannot hope to address the full scope of these questions here, but only to indicate a few lines of inquiry. Throughout this text Nietzsche will return to a notion of force, of *Kraft*, by means of which life can and must maintain itself in relation to the past. Sometimes this force is credited with male powers, with potency, more explicitly masculinity, *Männlichkeit*. This force is also what secures for itself a *health*, which is sometimes equated to a natural, and at times a more specifically human, feature. The ability to experience unhistorically, in other words to close one’s eyes to history and to live and act in the moment, is at one point said to enable something “right, healthy and great, something

truly human” (KSA 1: 252). In several of these epithets a promise is held out of a restored natural humanity in which the threats and dangers of a degenerated form of life are overcome. At times it can indeed seem as if Nietzsche is portraying history and historical consciousness as such as something unnatural, while life stands for that which is healthy and sound nature. Life would then be separated from historical awareness. But in most passages it becomes clear that this force is not something which life mobilizes against history, but is instead a particular historical force within life itself. He speaks of the “plastic force” (251) by means of which a people and a culture can integrate and transform the foreign and the past. He speaks of what life “masters” (*bezwingt*, 251) and of the force needed to use (*gebrauchen*) the past in order to make (*machen*) for itself a future (253). The general principle for this domination and mastery is that everything living needs a “horizon” (*Horizont*), in other words a limit. It has to contain itself within a sphere that can be surveyed.

In all of these remarks life is the agent choosing and establishing its own limits of awareness and action, handling what is external to itself. Yet, from Nietzsche’s own account it becomes clear that we must see the danger as something which comes from within life itself. The historicity of life is given from the start. It marks an unsurpassable predicament. Nietzsche does not express it in exactly these terms, but it is a way of interpreting the meaning of the *horizon*. Life is a being with a horizon: it occupies a finite openness, what Heidegger would later call a disclosure, an *Erschlossenheit*. And it is within this space, this open space that it must learn to act. The threat of excessive historical awareness is not external to this life; it is part of the unstable horizon which constitutes its being. The truth of this horizon is that it can collapse or disintegrate. The point then is not that there is a natural, healthy life, somehow beyond and independent of history and memory, but rather that there is, in principle, a means of occupying this openness which constitutes our being in a way that could be described as “natural,” alternately as “healthy,” or simply “human.” At this point we can begin to see how closely the argument anticipates Heidegger’s subsequent exposition of how *Dasein* can live its own historicity in either an inauthentic or an authentic form.

In order to motivate the distinction suggested by Nietzsche between a healthy and an unhealthy historicity, one would need first to specify the general conditions under which history is manifested in the course

of life. In this respect as well, Nietzsche's analysis can be read as a forerunner to Heidegger, as it takes the everydayness of historical existence as its theme, in its description of the "use" of history. For beyond its utilitarian, and somewhat subjectivist, vocabulary, we could read it as the phenomenological description of the neutral space in which history becomes manifest in the course of ordinary life.

In sections 2 and 3 of the essay Nietzsche presents the famous triad of the monumental, the antiquarian and the critical. These are connected to three modes of life, as acting and striving (the monumental), as preserving and admiring (antiquarian), and as suffering and being in need of liberation (critical). I need not rehearse the content of this analysis, to which I also referred briefly above, since it is surely the most well known aspect of the text. But a few general remarks on the significance of this analysis is in order. The ambition behind it is not to judge or evaluate these forms of historiography relative to one other, but to set up a typology of attitudes, which summarizes how history becomes activated and cultivated by individuals, and within cultures as a whole. Primarily it is a neutral structural description of how the historicity of life brings itself to a more and less conceptual and articulate level. On the face of it this neutrality is also a neutrality with regard to truth and falsity. Nietzsche's point is that life *will* create for itself the past as a monument, as an ideal, in order to act, or rather as a part of its action; that it *will* create for itself the past as something in need of preservation, in the course of loyally maintaining its current form; and that when its conditions become unbearable and it turns against the powers of the present to create a change, this *will* go hand in hand with a critical account and evaluation of how the history of this present situation has been written up till now. The past is received, oriented, and indeed even manifested as such, from the future in which life opens itself to that which it can take over. This is also, we will recall, how the ecstatic unity of temporality and historicity is formulated by Heidegger in *SZ*, in an analysis which by other and somewhat more formalized conceptual means continues in the direction of Nietzsche's account.

In a recent essay on the *Second Meditation*, Mats Persson has argued that we should see what Nietzsche is doing here as an attempt to replace the modern conception of history as science with the ancient model where history was primarily seen as a *magistra vitae*, as a

source of examples for life to orient itself according to.¹⁴ This is true as a general remark on Nietzsche as a philosopher of history. But it fails to recognize the specificity of the reflective position with regard to the problem of history as such which Nietzsche, in an unprecedented manner, establishes. Whereas it is true that Nietzsche, long before Gadamer, sees the limits of the modern historical consciousness and the presumption that there could be a purely scientific attitude to the past, and also that there is a necessary *applicative* element in all historiography, his solution is not simply to try to replace one mode of historical study with another, and to return us to an ancient practice of historiography. His genuine, and in a sense unsurpassed contribution, consists instead in having raised the question of the historical as such, what it means for man to have a history, and the forms in which a historical horizon is constituted. If we read him as wanting primarily to establish once again the role of history as useful example for the present, we reduce him to one of the typological figures which he himself has established, namely as a representative of a specifically “monumental” history.

Instead we must take in clearly the insight and originality of this typology, as both a description of a general space of historiography, but also and secondly as an attempt to specify what we with Heidegger could speak of as fallen or inauthentic varieties of these three general practices, which in Nietzsche’s terms constitute forms of abuse, or disadvantage, *Nachteil*. Heidegger would not speak of this distinction in terms of use or abuse. Instead he would interpret it in terms of ways of relating to time, and to the future. But this too is anticipated in Nietzsche’s analysis, for the futural horizon is what defines action and a self-affirming life. All of the three modes have their deficient modes. Whereas the monumental can be of service to a life when it is seen as a motivating example, it can become a stifling classicism when held up as a stable measure and judgment of the present, by someone who does not create, and who simply rejects what is created in the present. When the antiquarian tendency deteriorates it leads to an endless gathering of everything. Finally, when the critical attitude loses its future-oriented purpose, it becomes instead a purely destructive enterprise. For it is impossible to specify the legitimate limit for a criticism of the past.

¹⁴ “Nietzsche and the Historical Revolution,” in J. Kurunmäki & K. Palonen eds., *Zeit, Geschichte und Politik*, Jyväskylä Studies in Education, Psychology and Social Research 223 (Jyväskylä, 2003), p. 135-156.

What is the place of modern historical consciousness, and historical studies, in this existential economy? It would be tempting to see it as an extension of the antiquarian impulse, the indistinguishable gathering of the past, as an unquestioned premise for human activity. But Nietzsche himself does not make that connection explicitly. Instead he points to the modern scientific project of historiography as an abnormality hitherto unknown in the form of a “new star” which changes the entire constellation with the demand that history become a *science* (271/23). The effect of this new enterprise is the creation of individuals in which the urge to gather the past has lost all contact with the creation of a “personality,” a being who drags along so much material from the past which it cannot digest, which makes it into an interior being, in neglect of its exterior. It chews and chews on that which it cannot integrate, and thus develops a new form of “barbarism.”

Who are these people? On one level we can perhaps say that we “know” what Nietzsche is referring to here, namely the young scholars grown old too early from too much undigested knowledge, the spirit of gravity which he had already met many examples of during his stay in the houses of learning. Weak personalities and characters, crippled by the burden of wanting to know, being expected to know, but with no guidance where to take it, the victims of a romantic humanism and its ideal of *Bildung* transformed into decadent duty and obligation. Here Nietzsche is speaking of his own world, the world of academia, its sacrifices and its tolls. But he is also speaking of a more general predicament, a transformation in the relation between man and his world, whereby the natural environment of his being, the finite horizon of his thinking and acting becomes somehow externalized, and made into the object of a distanced concern. Heidegger would speak of it as a forgetfulness of being. For Nietzsche, it is turned into a problem of balance and measure. The urge for knowledge is an excess, an *Übermaass*, without hunger, without need, in other words, a calling without a direction. A culture which has placed itself under this new constellation, this new scientific worldview—or which has fallen into it, for there is a sense of an inscrutable fatality at work here—has taken upon itself a new task which therefore also constitutes a danger. There are a number such dangers, listed by Nietzsche (279/28): the weakening of personality through an imbalance between inner and outer (in other words an excessive interiorization). Through this excess an epoch is led to the misguided conception of its own justness, a kind of self-righteousness

which is furthermore said to destroy the natural instincts of individuals, preventing them from reaching “maturity.” Also it leads to a sense of being a latecomer and an epigone, which invites an ironic and ultimately cynical attitude.

These enumerated dangers constitute a general predicament. But they should be seen not as equally valid for everyone. On the contrary, the historical age makes it clear that the pressure of knowledge is something that must and can be mastered by the individual to different degrees. The excess to which he is referring is not measured by a common standard. For the point at which the excess of historical knowledge produces its effects is entirely dependent on a certain “strength” of the individual. As one of the principles set forth by the text we find the ominous statement: “only strong personalities can endure history, the weak are completely extinguished by it” (283/30). The latter are said to lack the ability to make themselves the measure of the past. Later on he will add to this that “it is only from the highest strength of the present that we may interpret the past” (293-4/37). This notion of strength, as a capacity to hold one’s position, to judge, and also to digest and internalize, could be pursued throughout Nietzsche’s remaining writings. Much of what he will say in the texts from the eighties concerning the notion of rank (*Rang*) can be referred back to this sense of holding sway in the encounter with the past. Reinterpreted in Heidegger’s terms, and in the terms of a hermeneutical phenomenology, this is the point made frequently concerning the condition of any hermeneutical situation: that it is only in conjunction with working out the matter of a question in and for the present, that the past can become available to us. Without a clear sense of the *Sache*, of that which we have before us, all attempts to gain access to the past will fall short of their original thrust, and become instead unknowingly epigonic.¹⁵

The way Nietzsche phrases this problem produces a tension in his whole argument, which is never fully brought up to the surface, but which the comparison to a destructive hermeneutics can make explicit. If the challenge to the present is described in the terms of manifesting force and insistence on the establishing of oneself as the measure, then

¹⁵ This point is made forcefully already in the early text on Aristotle, which outlines the whole existential analytic, so to speak, *in nuce*, “Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles. Anzeige der hermeneutischen Situation,” *Dilthey Jahrbuch* 6 (1989), p. 237-269.

it becomes difficult to see how this differs from the aforementioned danger of the historical age, namely the presumption that we are justified in taking ourselves as the standard in regard to the past. The same point could be made even more clearly in regard to Nietzsche's assessment of Hegel. If we follow him in the statement that the capacity to prevail in a creative mode in history requires strength, force, and the ability to digest, in short, if it requires a good stomach, should we then not see precisely the Hegelian account of history as the ultimate triumph of a Nietzschean pedagogy? Who could possibly have a stronger stomach than Hegel, who was able to incorporate and digest the entire movement of known history, and indeed to make himself the supreme judge of the past? And yet Hegel and Hegelianism is to Nietzsche at this stage the very metonymy for the German cultural disaster. To be sure, his reaction to Hegel, and also his knowledge of Hegel, was more visceral than analytic, mediated through his early reading of Schopenhauer. Still his criticisms of Hegel, or rather of the effect of a certain Hegelianism—which at certain points approaches that of Marx and some of the left Hegelians—is an important part of his whole account. For Nietzsche, Hegel becomes the philosopher of the end, of that last stage. Hegel teaches us that we are latecomers having arrived after history has passed, while at the same time raising these latecomers to the status of the meaning of history. The attempt to lay the facticity of history to rest within an account of the lawfulness and power of history is also to bow to an authority. In this way, Nietzsche sees the effect of Hegelianism as the cultivation of a presumptuous, self-satisfied, and conservative climate in which nothing new is created.

It is interesting to note the example he chooses in order to display the vanity of the rationalization of historical facticity that he wants to challenge, namely the premature death of the artist Rafael. From the "apologetics of the factual," he says, we hear that he had already articulated what was in him (310/48). In other words, that his death was in line with the natural movement of history. It is this rationalization of the brute loss of something promising and beautiful that he wants to contest. So from this example it becomes clear that the force called for to maintain oneself as the judge and measure of history is not the force to reshape history into an image suitable to the preferences of the present, but rather the force to counter and receive it in its facticity, its brutality, its senselessness, and to hold it before oneself in the maximum width of its horror. The predicament of modernity is that it is

both weighed down by an enormous and ever growing memory, which it believes itself to master, and that it fails to see that history can never be justified, and that all its losses can never be absolved or cancelled.

What then is the remedy to the overdose of memory? The question brings us back to the two concepts that were introduced initially, and to something like a conclusion. It brings us back to the *unhistorical* and the *superhistorical*. In the concluding pages of the essay Nietzsche repeatedly states that these two are the natural antidotes to the historical sickness of our age. But what are these antidotes? Here we need to push his own question and terminology a bit further than the text might admit. Health and disease, by dint of their metaphoric use in the text, appear as two substances that can be ordained and consumed, for the benefit of life. But their apparent simplicity should not fool us into thinking about them as if life had the possibility of escaping its historicity, from under or above, as if its historicity were a contingent condition. We have already seen how the unhistorical marks a process of limiting of historical consciousness. Yet, it should not be taken as a claim that man can cease to have a memory, that he could somehow become again solid nature, mending the rift within which his experience of the past is constituted. Instead it seems to mark the possibility to lay reflection and memory, temporarily, to rest, to bend away as it were from knowledge and to engage in action.

But what about the superhistorical attitude? What is this superhistorical gaze? When Nietzsche first introduces the concept, he refers to a statement by Niebuhr, the great contemporary German historian of antiquity, who used it to designate the position to which one would be elevated when seeing fully the contingent nature of the perspective from within which great historical events arise. What the superhistorical standpoint would have seen, from its superior point of observation, is the lack of rationality, reflection, and knowledge that has contributed to making the past as we know it. He would have seen the “blindness and injustice in the soul” of those who actually make history (254/12). Such a person, who can reflect freely on the facticity of the historical process, will no longer, Nietzsche says, aspire to contribute to history. He has become instead an impassionate eye. The superhistorical men, he writes, see the past and the present as essentially the same, as varieties of stable types, as “a static structure of unchanged value and eternally the same meaning” (256/13). He will not understand history as development, as change towards that which is better, as reconciliation

or redemption. He will hold history before himself as a turning crystal, to recall an image we find later in Ernst Jünger.

Who and what is this position, of only eye and vision, and no participation? In Nietzsche's account it is both tempting and frightening – tempting, because it holds out the promise of a higher wisdom; frightening, because its consequence is nausea, and ultimately death. For a phenomenon fully explained, Nietzsche writes, laid out in all its causes and aspects, ceases to be a phenomenon that awakens any interest, it is for “him who has understood it dead” (257/14). From the superhistorical perspective action therefore becomes meaningless, for every action has already been constituted in the past. The vision of the superhistorical man thus comes near that of the Spinozist God, who has no interest, no investment, no particular hopes or aspirations in what it scrutinizes. For this reason his wisdom can not be lived and enacted, and in a finite body it will eventually only produce disgust and lethargy. “History as pure science and having become sovereign, would constitute a kind of final closing out of the accounts of life for mankind” (257/14).

Here philosophy stands at a crossroads: it has to split itself in two – literally, we could say, since Nietzsche suggests that the superhistorical perspective contains more wisdom, whereas we, *wir* he says, have more life, more passion, more *will*. Here *sophia* and *philia* fall apart. There is a *sophia*, which knows life so profoundly that it ceases to will life, and there is a *philia* which must accept its own relative blindness. Let us instead, Nietzsche writes, rejoice in our “unwisdom” from the bottom of our hearts. This rhetorical self-blinding, this strange castration in favor of life, holds a paradoxical position in the text. At the point where Nietzsche claims to shift from death-bound wisdom to living blindness, he moves instead to the discourse on the different forms in which history can be useful to life that was discussed above. But must we not conclude that this very analysis, this description of the various modes in which history is constituted from within the finite horizon of an acting, loving and hating, human being, is itself a piece of precisely such a wisdom? For the very attempt to address history, not as a specific history, but as the historical as such, as historicity and its types, is to place oneself for a moment above the fleeting, conflictual appropriations of the past. It is to place oneself at the supreme outpost, overlooking the very construction of the historical and its experience.

If we follow this reading we can say that in developing his analysis, Nietzsche has not turned his back on the superhistorical man, instead he has, in his own way, fulfilled his aspirations. But following his own analysis he has also anticipated the necessary destruction of that very gaze. For the philosophical attempt to grasp the historical as such is doomed to suffocate from its own nausea, it can only survive by closing its eye, and by stepping into the movement of its own happening, as a struggle with its specific, concrete past. Perhaps we could say that in this essay, for which he later had such a cold eye, he has also experienced the necessity of becoming the active interpreter of the past through the present and vice versa. And in affirming this need to enact and make history he has also stated, through his own example, that the truth of life is that it must affirm itself as living, and as living it can not have a full truth of itself.

We can recall here the remarkable scene in *Zarathustra*, when standing on the threshold of the “moment,” overlooking history as one long repetitive stretch, the spirit of gravity echoes Zarathustra’s own words of the eternal recurrence.¹⁶ At this point he becomes ill with nausea and he falls to the ground. Later on, when he sees a little shepherd into whose mouth a snake has crawled, he finds himself screaming—as if from afar—“bite,” and the head of the snake is spit out, followed by Zarathustra’s laughter. At this point he is cured from his own nausea, having become one who has acted. This could be read as an allegory for the meaning of historicity as fate. For a human being to live is to have to exist, in the sense of having to act, to create passionately the space within which history becomes present as a limited horizon. It can aspire to a knowledge of this history as well as of the conditions of the historical as such. It can even aspire to rise to the position from which this whole spectacle of history appears before its eyes as one eternally resting circular figure. But at this point it also approaches a point where knowledge becomes dangerous to life itself. To live is to find a measure. Where is this measure? We can not know, and yet we must create it, constantly, seeing and closing our eyes, acting, in passion.

¹⁶ KSA 4: 200.