

# HISTORY AND ONTOLOGY

## A READING OF NIETZSCHE'S SECOND "UNTIMELY MEDITATION"

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### I

In a journal entry of the 1880s, we find among Nietzsche's various drafts and manuscripts this short note: "Being—we have no idea of it apart from the idea of 'living'—how can anything dead 'be'?"<sup>1</sup> For the mature Nietzsche, "being" was always to be understood in terms of "becoming," of "willing," of dionysian "valuing" and "creating." It was ever thought of in metaphorical terms as something dynamic, vital, and active as opposed to something rigid, fixed, or concretized. In abandoning the notion of "being" as a "substance" or "concept," Nietzsche was attempting to overturn or trans-value the whole Western tradition with its understanding of "being" as a metaphysical category. As Nietzsche saw it, being was "an empty fiction" which had tyrannized over a world of fluid forces, relegating to bloodless categories the eternally playful ebb and flow of all energy and innocence.<sup>2</sup> To counteract such weighty metaphysics, Nietzsche offered new values by which to interpret the world of becoming: the overman, the will to power, and the eternal recurrence of the same. These new values offered a critique of traditional Western ontology (with its preference for abstraction, reflection, and scientific forms of thinking) as well as providing the basis for a new dionysian

understanding of being as activity, motion, and creation. With the thought of eternal recurrence, being is no longer understood according to the same temporal categories as, for example, in Plato, Augustine, or Kant. The world of temporal phenomena is not judged or de-valued according to the standards of an eternal, non-changing truth. For in the world of Nietzsche, 6,000 feet above man and time, temporality is not viewed as the antipode to eternity. Rather, Zarathustra's great secret is to finally view eternity not from the perspective of "duration," or to see it merely as a concept or ideal, but to experience it within the horizon of the moment (what Nietzsche in *Vom Gesicht und Rätsel* calls "*der Augenblick*").<sup>3</sup> It is this new ontological vision which animates all of Nietzsche's late work and provides the basis for his overall critique of Western philosophy, science, and religion.

And yet Nietzsche's whole critique of Western ontology did not really begin in the 1880s with the teachings of Zarathustra. It appears in different ways in his early writings before the period of the will to power and the eternal recurrence. In this essay I would like to focus on Nietzsche's early attempts to re-think the problem of "being" within the historical horizon of "time." By analyzing Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation*, I hope to show that

Nietzsche's piece was conceived not solely as a critique of historical knowledge or even as a polemic against specific historical values.<sup>4</sup> Rather, the essay represents a fundamental re-thinking of the problems of knowledge and values in terms of a new understanding of human historicity. In this way, we can come to see how Nietzsche's critique of nineteenth-century historical epistemology led him to rephrase the question of truth from a new ontological perspective: one rooted *in* time, and yet somehow, in Nietzsche's own words, "un-historical." It was precisely this "un-historical" or "supra-historical" element which Nietzsche saw as the great challenge to a science of historical knowledge committed to objectivity, a rigorous method of inquiry and the reality of "facts." Accordingly, as a critique of this dominant cultural sensibility, Nietzsche publishes his essay "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" in 1874.

## II

In the field of history in the years following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, German scholarship had achieved great success in its attempt to become "the new science" in European thought.<sup>5</sup> The achievements of the Prussian School (most notably Treitschke, Droysen, and Sybel) as well as the flourishing of cultural, ecclesiastical, and ancient history in the works of Burckhardt, von Döllinger, and Mommsen all testified to the dominance of the German historical method. Ranke was still training students in his seminars at Berlin and "historical education" or *Bildung* was still something "of which the age was," to quote Nietzsche, "justifiably proud."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, historical *Bildung* was

considered to be the supreme mark of the educated temperament, and in academic circles the historical approach to learning complemented the scientific as the real model of any "ordered inquiry" or *Wissenschaft*. By the latter part of the century, the progressive development of this model of learning had led to an historicization of German life and thought, so that history became the basis for any approach to human life. As the noted historicist Ernst Troeltsch described it: "History was no longer seen as merely one side in a consideration of things or as a partial satisfaction in the thirst for knowledge but rather as the basis of the self-reflection of the species concerning its nature, origins, and hopes."<sup>7</sup> In nineteenth-century German culture, history had ceased to be a specific academic discipline committed to the social, political, or religious problems of a past generation. It had become instead a way to approach and define reality as such. In its applicability to classical philology, music, art, linguistics, legal studies, theology, and philosophy, the historical approach had been transformed from a science of sources ("*die Quellenkritik*") to a science of consciousness.<sup>8</sup> Truth was now understood historically, and the preoccupation with beginnings and origins had captivated the imagination of an epoch bent on reconstructing the past in all its naked detail.

For the young Ordinarius at Basel this hypertrophy of the historical sense, far from being a noble accomplishment of the German mind, was at root "harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living thing were a man, or a people or a culture."<sup>9</sup> Following the Rankean injunction to "immerse oneself in the past" and "to re-create the past as it actually

## PHILOSOPHY TODAY

happened," historians had focused their energy on dust-worn manuscripts, archival documents, diplomatic correspondence, and other related minutiae.<sup>10</sup> In the process, they had sacrificed the vital concerns of their own lives and had succeeded in becoming curators in the museum of the past. In their feverish haste to pursue the antiquarian, they had lost all ability to act and had become passive observers in the great pageant of world history. Nietzsche mockingly christened them "eunuchs in the harem of history."<sup>11</sup> To indulge in the study of the past in such a way represented a form of cultural decline.

Yet despite this critical posture, the young Nietzsche did not categorically reject all forms of historical inquiry as decadent and life-threatening. It was not historical knowledge as such which was so pernicious but its "use" or "abuse" considered in relation to the problem of "life." Life did, unquestionably, need the service of history, argued Nietzsche, but an excess of historical education could render human life petrified and inert. It was as a means of overcoming the life-threatening character of history that Nietzsche offered his "untimely" critique of the German historical mind.

At the onset of his essay, Nietzsche proposed three kinds of relationships between the human species and the past: the antiquarian, the critical, and the monumental. The first genre of history was characterized by its conservation and its piety: it looked to the *past* with reverence and loyalty and saw its true aim as the preservation of a noble tradition. What the antiquarian valued in the past was the ancestral spirit of "his house, his race and his city" which reawakened in him the love for that which no longer was.<sup>12</sup> The second

or "critical" mode of history focused on the *present* by defining the past only insofar as it affected the life of the moment: "if he is to live," Nietzsche writes, "man must possess and from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve a part of the past: he does this by bringing it before the tribunal, scrupulously examining it and finally condemning it."<sup>13</sup> Such an attitude does not do justice to the past "on its own terms" but rather defines it only according to the demands of the moment, thus highlighting the value of the present. The third genre of history, the "monumental," offered to each generation examples of human greatness and nobility which served as a kind of model of individual excellence. Monumental history attempted to inspire its adherents by showing the possibilities of greatness in the past—thus teaching that it might once again be possible in the *future*. This kind of history served as a challenge to the present generation to use the past as a way of envisioning a more noble future.

Each of these three modes of historical knowledge—the antiquarian, the critical, and the monumental—contained within itself the power to inspire genuine growth and creative possibility. And yet, for Nietzsche, the rise of historical consciousness was not an unambiguously positive development. The historicization of life had, in truth, been a great burden to the European spirit. And in various contexts, Nietzsche refers to this growth of historical *Bildung* as an "illness," a "poison," a "malady," and a "disease."<sup>14</sup> Clearly, there has been an excess of historical knowledge and an orgy of antiquarian research—that is Nietzsche's message in his second *Untimely Meditation*. As an anodyne, he offers a critique of historical

## HISTORY AND ONTOLOGY

knowledge which defines the limits and boundaries of such knowledge according to a new "hygiene of life."<sup>15</sup> In so doing he raises a powerful question about nineteenth-century philosophy and challenges the Kantian tradition of epistemic theory. When Nietzsche asks, "is life to dominate knowledge and science or is knowledge to dominate life? Which of these two forces is the higher or more decisive?" he is posing a fundamental question for the whole German philosophical tradition.<sup>16</sup> By opposing "life" vs. "science" or *Leben* vs. *Wissenschaft*, Nietzsche is getting to the core of the historicist dilemma, for in defining history (*Geschichte*) as the science of past-happenings (*Geschehen*), historicism has thereby turned the lived-experiences of a past generation into the historical *Fakta* of scientific scrutiny and research.<sup>17</sup> The actual and genuine "being" of the past has become a mere matter of epistemological verification and reconstruction. And it is here—in reflecting on the ideal of *dead* knowledge riven from its vital context—that Nietzsche's critique of scientific-historical consciousness is at its most powerful.

Life is historical, argues Nietzsche; it has deep roots in time and tradition. And it is precisely this historical character which gives meaning to the present and the future. But any phenomenon of history "known clearly and completely and resolved into a phenomenon of knowledge, is, for him who has perceived it, dead."<sup>18</sup> The most healthy and hygienic approach to history sees it not as a matter of epistemological certitude but as a lived-phenomenon in its own right. At times, this requires the cultivation of forgetfulness and the need to be bounded by an un-

historical horizon (*Horizont*).<sup>19</sup> For in the "unhistorical" and the "supra-historical" Nietzsche sees the purgative for historical excess. From this perspective, the nature of historical "truth" takes on a new meaning. Unlike the Rankean scientists in the laboratory of the past who seek impartiality, objectivity, and exactitude, Nietzsche conceives a new form of truth grounded in experience and limited by the horizon of human life within the realms of past, present, and future. "Knowledge presupposes life," Nietzsche affirms, and hence the outcome of any conflict between knowledge and life or *Wissenschaft* and *Leben* can never be in doubt: "life is the higher, the dominating force," Nietzsche writes, "for knowledge which annihilated life would have annihilated itself with it."<sup>20</sup> Hence any science of history which loses sight of the actual "lived-ness" (*Lebendigkeit*) of human experience is deadening and without value. It is in this spirit that Nietzsche challenges the pure Rankean historicist, for he demands: "if you are to venture to *interpret* the past you can do so only out of the fullest exertion of the vigour of the present."<sup>21</sup> Such an attitude requires the ability to judge, to evaluate, to interpret, and to act—for nothing less is acceptable from within the horizon of one's lived-experience.

Historical science, or as Nietzsche calls it, "*die Historie*," aims at reconstructing the past according to a philological method ("*die Quellenkritik*") which undermines all processes of judgement and action. By stressing such empirical qualities as "detachment," "impartiality," "objectivity," and a transmission of "the facts," this mode of investigation commits itself to a truth achievable only through *method*—the method of Niebuhr, Ranke, Droysen, and

## PHILOSOPHY TODAY

Mommsen. But Nietzsche protested that method alone did not exhaust the truth-value of history. The genuine criterion of historical truth lay not in its character as historical science or scholarship (*die Historie*) but in its relation to the values and interests of the living human person. With this shift in perspective from a consideration of historical truth as "knowledge" to one of "lived-experience," Nietzsche achieves a radical redefinition of a basic nineteenth-century *Fragestellung* of historical consciousness.<sup>22</sup> The Neo-Kantian question—"how is history as science possible?"—is now rethought and rephrased as: "what is the value of history for life?" The whole Kantian emphasis on epistemology as the key to truth is challenged, and the nineteenth-century vision of science as the highest form of knowledge is criticized and denied.

The young Nietzsche here defines knowledge in terms of interest and attempts to show that there is no disinterested knowledge for the subject, no pure objectivity. All knowledge is understood from within a particular historical "horizon," or what the later Nietzsche would call a "perspective." "There is no presuppositionless science," Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science*, "science too rests on a belief."<sup>23</sup> For the later Nietzsche, the critique of science is tied to his critique of morality, religion, and power, but here, in the *Historie-Schrift*, it is largely confined to a treatment of education, *Bildung*, and culture.

It would be easy to compartmentalize this early piece of Nietzsche's by seeing it as a prime example of nineteenth-century *Lebensphilosophie*.<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche's critique of historicism, scientism, and neo-Kantian epistemology, for example, can certainly

be understood as part of a vitalist concern with values, experience, life, health, and vigor. Clearly these themes are prominent in much of Nietzsche's early work, including his two essays, "We Philologists" and "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense."<sup>25</sup> And yet, I would argue, there is more to Nietzsche's second *Untimely Meditation* than can be explained by a reference to value-philosophy or the new philosophy of *Leben*.

Nietzsche's essay is a meditation on the meaning of historical truth conceived not as epistemology or even as axiology but from the ontological ground of human life. Historical consciousness has, Nietzsche maintains, relativized all other "truth"-claims as being "merely" historical and has reduced their ordinary power to a simple formulaic search for sources and beginnings. But the truth of history does not reside in origins from a hidden past; it consists in the creative actuality of lived human experience. What the human being must do is to interpret the past not "as it actually happened" but as it actually has a meaning and value from within the horizon of the present and against the unfolding of a future. Of course, such an interpretation might be thought of as subjective, relative, or value-laden. But here Nietzsche disclaims all such objections as being epistemologically obsolete; that is, without "use" (or "advantage") for life. The past is not an object which stands "there-for-me" to restore; indeed, there is no past *an sich* or "in itself." On the contrary, history yields a complex phenomenon of lived relations which (to use the language of modern philosophy) demands "thoughtful mediation with contemporary life."<sup>26</sup> As lived-phenomenon rather than as known-object, the historical past can never be un-

## HISTORY AND ONTOLOGY

derstood as "science," for "history become pure sovereign science would be for mankind a sort of conclusion of life and a settling of accounts with it."<sup>27</sup> Historical study requires then not mere knowledge of the past but interpretation. Scientific knowledge implies a truth-model grounded in objectivity, rationality, and certitude, and as such, has all the markings of a Cartesian theory of consciousness. Yet Nietzsche clearly rejects this model of epistemological certitude. At the very end of his *Historie-Schrift* he alludes to the Cartesian "cogito" as an "un-living and yet uncannily active concept—and word-factory." He writes: "Perhaps I still have the right to say of myself, *cogito, ergo sum*, but not *vivo, ergo cogito*. Empty 'being' (*Sein*) is granted me but not full and green 'life' (*Leben*); the feeling that tells me I exist warrants to one only that I am a thinking creature, not that I am a living one, not that I am an *animal* but at most a *cogital*—only give me life then I will create a culture for you!"<sup>28</sup>

For Nietzsche, the Cartesian *cogito* serves as a lifeless abstraction, an empty and reified category useful for scientific expression but deadly for lived experience.<sup>29</sup> Consciousness is not a "thing" or a "substance," as Descartes would have it, he argues; indeed, the whole idea of a "subject" which serves as the epistemological ground of truth appears to Nietzsche as deceptive and fraudulent. "Truth" is not something identical with scientific knowledge. Nor is it simply tied to the Cartesian model of epistemological certitude. "What then is the truth?" asks the young Nietzsche in his essay of 1873, "On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense"; in ludic fashion he defines it as:

a moral host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors which have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.<sup>30</sup>

In these early essays, Nietzsche circumscribes truth within a linguistic context, for in language the metaphysical certainties of Cartesian science are revealed as spectral and illusory. Ever the philologist, Nietzsche wishes to interpret things from within their own context; he offers a kind of hermeneutics of limits, an awareness that all truth is interpretation and that all interpretation is bounded by human interests—be they theological, political, aesthetic, historical, or scientific. The Cartesian philosophy of consciousness calcifies the self and reduces it to a mere abstract *cogito* without accounting for the ever-changing conflicts and interests of human beings in their historical life-situations. In so doing, it makes of scientific and historical knowledge something certain and secure. But the ultimate criterion of historical-scientific truth is not its certainty, argues Nietzsche, but its value for life.<sup>31</sup> Since truth is a form of linguistic interpretation (what Nietzsche would call a "perspective") it is tied to a

## PHILOSOPHY TODAY

temporal context: the context of historical life. But life is not an interpretation-free *Faktum*. On the contrary, interpretation is the essence of human life—for only through such interpretation does human life take on value. Life without history is a Cartesian nightmare; history without life, an antiquarian science for castrati.

Interpretation for Nietzsche implies that all knowledge is interest-bound, perspectivist, limited, and relative. It means that we can never have any value-free, trans-historical or trans-cultural perch from which to view any phenomenon. For all phenomena are knowable only as interpretation and all interpretation is possible only within the horizon of human life in time. Hence interpretation becomes a function of lived temporality. In this sense, history can be approached only from within the horizon of one's own lived-historical-experience. It can never be "known" in a Cartesian manner but only interpreted in terms of its "use or disadvantage for life." As a known and given "past," history stands as a burden on the individual which is heavy and intransigent; for if one cannot change the past, says Nietzsche, one becomes its prisoner in the present. In such a way, the future becomes an already anticipated process rather than something open and incalculable. It is this objectivist vision of historical time as an organic development out of the past into the present and future which Nietzsche bitterly rejects. Scientific history calcifies time and makes it into an object of knowledge. What Nietzsche seeks to do is re-think the whole problem of historical time not as scientific "duration" but as lived temporality. And here he is at his untimeiest, for in rejecting the prevalent nineteenth-century theory of

historical knowledge, he is re-defining the very *Fragestellung* of historical discourse. What makes historical science possible, says Nietzsche, is not its structure, its object, its sources, or its method but the very historicity of human being in time. What one selects from amidst the endless possibilities of the past is colored by one's own life-needs in the present in the process of creating a future. This is the essential meaning of the three modes of historical interpretation: the antiquarian who is inspired by the past; the critical historian whose fundamental aim is to live in the present; and the monumentalist whose heroic attitude is directed toward the future. These three modes of lived temporality enable historians to reinterpret the past not as a universally valid or objective entity but from within the historicity of their own life. As lived being and not as dead knowledge does Nietzsche thus define the essential meaning of history.

But there are dangers in rejecting the Cartesian model of truth as applied to history. Can one simply dispense with the notion of objectivity and hope to achieve a measure of historical truth? Historians such as Ranke and Droysen had serious reservations about moving away from the early modern philosophy of consciousness represented in the work of Descartes and Kant. Indeed, Droysen's *Historik* (1868) is an attempt to wed Kantian epistemology to the problems of historical interpretation. But Nietzsche was not an historian. Interpretation always involved, for him, a critique of epistemology, inasmuch as knowledge was more a product of linguistic invention than a secure and certain realm of imperishable truth. Nietzsche's idea of interpretation demanded that history be subordinated to

## HISTORY AND ONTOLOGY

the service of life, that the facts of the historical past be revalued according to the needs of the present. And this led Nietzsche into perilous waters, for as he admits in "The Uses and Disadvantages" essay, the attempt to revalue the past in the present "is always a dangerous attempt because it is so hard to know the limit to denial of the past."<sup>32</sup> But where does one draw the limits to historical interpretation such that one's own values do not devour the past? For if all past happenings (*Geschehen*) are valued and re-valued according to the demands of the moment, then does history (*Geschichte*) not merely become the mirror for Narcissus' ardent gaze? Here Nietzsche arrives at an impasse in his thinking. And yet it is an impasse with fruitful consequences, for it forces Nietzsche to reconsider the very notion of truth apart from the question of objective verification and subjective bias.

### III

In offering a critique of nineteenth-century historical science, with its idolatry of facts and its cult of objectivity, Nietzsche focused attention on the impotence of scholarship in the face of action and decision. Historical archivists merely registered those actions which they themselves were incapable of reenacting. As a curative for this historical malady Nietzsche offered an aesthetic interpretation of history. "History," he argued, was:

the antithesis of art: and only if history can endure to be transformed into a work of art will it perhaps be able to preserve instincts or even evoke them. Such

a historiography would, however, be altogether contrary to the analytical and inartistic tendencies of our time, which would indeed declare it false.<sup>33</sup>

Historical science was tied to a philological ideal which stressed the values of objectivity, accuracy, detail, and connoisseurship. It determined as "false" any attempts to deny its epistemological goals. But from the very first, in his own interpretations of Greek history and culture, Nietzsche attempted to overcome this fascination with technical minutiae and to engage the Greeks in terms of their meaning for life in the present. Indeed, *The Birth of Tragedy* and his early essays on Homer and the Pre-Socratics were all attempts to interpret the Greek world from within the horizon of a new Wagnerian aesthetic. Such boldness inevitably led to severe criticism from professional scholars like Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, who shared a notion of scientific truth grounded in the rigors of scholarly method. Wilamowitz wrote a blistering review of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* mockingly entitled "Philology of the Future."<sup>34</sup> In it, Wilamowitz contended that Nietzsche had betrayed the tenets of historical scholarship, for the only proper procedure for studying the past was to "comprehend each historical event solely in terms of the assumptions of the times in which it developed."<sup>35</sup> As far as "aesthetic evaluation" was concerned, it was, Wilamowitz protested, possible "only in terms of the attitudes of the times."<sup>36</sup> Yet Wilamowitz's distinction between objective truth in the past and subjective evaluation in the present touched the precise point which Nietzsche was trying to overcome.

## PHILOSOPHY TODAY



There were certainly dangers in rejecting the canons of scholarly accuracy and certitude, and Nietzsche was well aware of them. His essay on history was, however, not merely a peevish rejection of all historical labor and scholarship. History itself—and historical scholarship—were not fundamentally at odds with human health and culture, Nietzsche believed; rather, it was their “use” or “abuse” conceived within the horizon of human life which determined their value.†To the extent that history promoted “an ever more intense feeling of life,” it could serve as a positive force; to the extent that it promoted armchair detachment and connoisseurship, it needed to be exposed as “impotent tartuffery.”<sup>37</sup> The determining factor in the value of history was always its relationship to life. But nineteenth-century historicism had functioned as a kind of “disguised theology,” argued Nietzsche, for it had sacrificed life to a higher tribunal. As the medieval *memento mori* had shifted attention away from present existence to one’s last hour on earth, modern historical consciousness had denied contemporary life for the idolatry of the past. Nietzsche’s remedy for this disease was not to reject history altogether but, ironically, to understand the origin of historical consciousness historically. “This origin,” Nietzsche wrote, “*must* itself be known historically, history *must* itself resolve the problem of history, knowledge *must* turn its sting against itself—this threefold *must* is the imperative of the ‘new age’ supposing this age really does contain anything new, powerful, original and promising more life.”<sup>38</sup>

By understanding historical consciousness as itself an historical phenomenon rather than as the ultimate

arbiter for interpreting human experience, Nietzsche exposed the contradictions within historicism. In its contextual reading of past human cultures, historicism had rejected the notion of absolute value in history, “but it retained its own absolute—namely, the historical process itself, in terms of which all particular values were to be understood and judged.”<sup>39</sup> Yet Nietzsche spurned the Cartesian notion of consciousness as applied to history and redefined historical knowledge not as scientific truth but as a form of interpretation. Historical science had its roots in lived historical experience, or what a later generation of German thinkers would term “historicity.”<sup>40</sup> As Heidegger put it in *Being and Time*: “the possibility that history can either be of ‘use’ or ‘disadvantage’ ‘for life’ is grounded in the fact that one’s life is historical to the roots of its being, and that therefore, as factually existing, one has in each case made one’s decision for authentic or inauthentic historicity.”<sup>41</sup> In raising historical being to a science of historical knowledge, historicism had alienated human being from its own historicity. But Nietzsche demanded that the science of history be reinterpreted not as a form of Cartesian knowledge but from within the horizon of lived historical experience. This new horizon would circumscribe history within the limits of language and, in so doing, would recast historical truth in a new form—as interpretation rather than as verification. To communicate this new vision of history’s role in European culture, Nietzsche went back to the historical origins of the Greek world and found in the metaphor of the Delphic oracle his challenge to nineteenth-century historicism.

## HISTORY AND ONTOLOGY

"The language of the past is oracular," Nietzsche boldly declared. "He who has not experienced greater and more exalted things than others will not know how to interpret the great and exalted things of the past . . . Only if you are an architect of the future and know the present will you understand it."<sup>42</sup> "The god of Delphi cries to you his oracle: 'Know yourself.' It is a hard saying: for that god 'who conceals nothing and says nothing but merely indicates,' as Heraclitus has said. What does he indicate to you?"<sup>43</sup> Like an oracular utterance, the past stands before us as a riddle in need of interpretation. The "meaning" of the riddle is never something clear and established; its significance can only be determined within the horizon of our own possibilities. In the ancient world, Heraclitus, Herodotus, and Sophocles all attested to the enigmatic and inscrutable character of oracular pronouncement. As their modern counterpart, Nietzsche presents in the second *Untimely Meditation* a reading of history in the language of enigma. History is oracular in that it has meaning for life only when we are forced to interpret it. Neither an antiquarian bequest, nor a station on the path to progress, history is time itself understood within the horizon of human limits and possibilities.

In essence, Nietzsche offers in his essay a hermeneutics of the oracular: an interpretation of history which requires not so much knowledge of the past as knowledge of oneself. He demands to know: "What does history indicate to you?" "What are its uses and disadvantages from within the horizon of your own life?" Specifically, he asks of historians that they abandon their profession as taxidermists of *Geist* and see historical knowledge as an expression of their own historicity. In doing so, he rejects

the Cartesian-Kantian notion of epistemology for the lived-experience of historical being. But he also repudiates the "human-scientific" (*geisteswissenschaftlich*) approach found in Ranke, Droysen, and romantic hermeneutics. Unlike these historicists, Nietzsche sees the problem of history neither as a question of historical method nor as one of overcoming subjective valuations. Rather, for Nietzsche, history itself demands interpretation, and it is only in the self-conscious awareness of our position in history, of our historicity, that history has any meaning whatsoever.

For history to be of value or use for life, we must be constantly aware of our own historical limits. Hence, to overcome the deleterious effects of an excess of historical learning, Nietzsche offers as "medicine and balsam against the malady of history," an "antidote": "the unhistorical and the supra-historical."<sup>44</sup> By rethinking the value of history in terms of the unhistorical and supra-historical, Nietzsche tenders a challenge to his self-satisfied colleagues at the University of Basel and elsewhere. He frames his challenge in the language of a parable; in the final paragraph of his second *Untimely Meditation*, Nietzsche writes: "This is a parable for each one of us: he must organize the chaos within him by thinking back to his real needs."<sup>45</sup> What those "real needs" are, Nietzsche cannot say, for historical meaning can never be established as "science"; it takes on meaning only from within the needs and limits of our temporal existence. The value of historical *Bildung* lies in helping us to establish a horizon from which we can meaningfully interpret life itself. Here, in his most oracular moment, Nietzsche attempts to reconsider the very

## PHILOSOPHY TODAY

meaning of nineteenth-century historical consciousness. Whereas nineteenth-century historicism interprets being within the horizon of time, Nietzsche wishes to reverse this structure and see time (past-present-future) from within the horizon of being (lived-experience). In his later writings, after the period of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's critique of historical time is transformed by his thought of eternal return. In the notebooks of the 1880s, this ontological emphasis becomes clearer and more explicit, but even in 1873 the young Nietzsche was well aware of the ontological aspects of historical interpretation. Indeed, his emphasis on "full and green life" provided him with a way to redefine history in terms of "being" rather than simply in terms of "knowledge."<sup>46</sup> And it was this critique of historical *Bildung* that so influenced the young Heidegger when he attempted to offer an ontological interpretation of historicity.

#### IV

Nietzsche's essay is not without its own problems, however. In rejecting the wooden scholarship of academic history because of its inability to reflect the needs of human life, Nietzsche's notion of history encounters its own danger. If, as Nietzsche warrants, "history" is allowed to collapse into "life," then would the historical past simply be there for us alone? Would not our values thereby determine the meaning of the past? And would this not lead to the inevitable consequence that in looking at the past we would see nothing but the present? In such a world all history would become, in a sense, autobiography. For if we "used" the past only as a means to

foster our own life, we would never confront an "other" in the past, but only find ourselves. Difference would then collapse into identity. Surely there is a kind of irony here, for though Nietzsche holds that historicism turns history into an absolute, it can likewise be argued that Nietzsche himself turns life in the present into his absolute. Indeed, the very notion of "life" which Nietzsche employs in this essay is vague and problematical. Life itself may be grounded in historicity, or the historical "moment," but Nietzsche's concept of life is not.

What Nietzsche attempts to reveal in his essay is a new way of conceiving history from within the horizon of historical being—or historicity. But he is still grappling with the whole problem of understanding such being within the context of chronologically determined time. The antiquarian, critical, and monumental modes of historical knowledge—which correspond to the temporal modes of past, present, future—still function as the horizon of historical being. Yet, as Nietzsche so perceptively sees, to interpret being solely from within the horizon of time is to render it inert and lifeless. What Nietzsche seeks to do, rather, is to interpret time from within the horizon of being, though in the period before the "thought of eternal return," his ambitious project is laden with contradiction. Nietzsche still thinks of time here as a horizon in itself; history is for him "past" time. Later, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, as time itself collapses into the moment, all historical interpretation loses its tie to knowledge and becomes a form of power. But while this early essay alludes to the "power" of human life in history, Nietzsche clearly has other

#### HISTORY AND ONTOLOGY

intentions in mind.<sup>47</sup> Though still cryptic and at times perplexing, Nietzsche initiates in this piece a critique of historicism that moves away from questions of verification and method and focuses instead on problems of language, interpretation, lived-experience, and historical being. In the oracular discourse of a later generation, such concerns would be redefined in the language of hermeneutics, ontology, and historicity.

This early focus on hermeneutics and ontology has, I would argue, important consequences for an interpretation of Nietzsche's entire corpus. If one grants to the young Nietzsche a concern for and redefinition of historical being, then the

interpretation of his later writings must also be altered. One cannot simply define Nietzsche as a philosopher of *Kulturkritik*, concerned primarily with such questions of truth and value as nihilism, the death of God, the will to power or the critique of Pauline and Platonic morality. We must take Nietzsche seriously, not only in his critique of epistemology and axiology, but also in regard to his historical ontology, which understands human being in terms of time and human time in terms of being. For history, as Nietzsche would have it, is not the tranquil province of the scientific historian, but a vital realm which offers a horizon for human action and interpretation.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 312.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1968), p. 36; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1966), pp. 155 ff.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1966), pp. 155 ff. For a fuller discussion of the concept of *Augenblick* in Nietzsche, cf. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. II, *The Eternal Recurrence of the Same* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), and Joan Stambaugh, *Nietzsche's Thought of the Eternal Return* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972).
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 57-123. Hereafter cited as *UTM*.
5. For an excellent discussion of the mood of nineteenth-century German historical thinking, cf. Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968).
6. *UTM*, p. 60.
7. Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Absolutheit des Christentums und die Religionsgeschichte* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1902), p. 4.
8. Cf. Hellmut Flasher and Karlfried Grunder, eds., *Philologie und Hermeneutik im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeckh and Ruprecht, 1979).
9. *UTM*, p. 62.
10. Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, eds. George Iggers and Konrad von Moltke (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), p. 137.
11. *UTM*, p. 84.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 120-21.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. One of the central issues in historicist thinking is the distinction between the totality of events in the past, viz., *Geschehen* and the account or report of those events, viz., *Geschichte*. Droysen, for example, argues that history is not the totality of past events but a knowledge of those events. In other words, events do not exist ontologically but are, rather, known epistemologically. Much as Kant argues that "time" and "space" do not "exist" empirically but are forms of knowledge, Droysen contends that history is an ordering of phenomena according to time, while nature is an ordering of phenomena according to space. As Droysen puts it in *The Outline of the Principles of History* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1893), p. 103: "No material thing presents itself to us as 'true' but we 'take it as true' and make it certain by means of our knowledge." And again: "the human spirit apprehends spatial manifestations as Nature and temporal occurrences as History; not because they are so and so distinguished objectively, but in order to be able to grasp and think

#### PHILOSOPHY TODAY

- them" (p. 73). Droysen concludes that the key to understanding history lies in an epistemology based on the distinction between *Geschehen* and *Geschichte*. Nietzsche rejects this approach for its one-sided focus on "knowledge" at the expense of "being."
18. *UTM*, p. 67.
19. The notion of "horizon" or *Horizont* is extremely important in the early work of Nietzsche. In the "Uses and Disadvantages" essay he contends "And this is a universal law: a living thing can be healthy, strong, and fruitful only when bounded by a horizon; if it is incapable of drawing a horizon around itself . . . it will pine away slowly or hasten to its timely end" (*UTM*, p. 63). By horizon Nietzsche means the ability to draw limits and boundaries to one's world; to be able to both in- and ex-clude that which defines one's essential nature. Without a horizon, all is chaos; there can be no healthy life except within a horizon. It is what characterizes our perspective. For a fuller treatment of this idea, cf. Hartmut Schröter, *Historische Theorie und geschichtliches Handeln: Zur Wissenschaftskritik Nietzsches* (Mittenwald: Maander, 1982) and Dieter Jähnig, "Der Nachteil und der Nutzen der modernen Historie nach Nietzsche" in *Welt-geschichte: Kunst-geschichte* (Köln: Dumont, 1975), pp. 68-111.
20. *UTM*, p. 121.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
22. One translates *Fragestellung* literally as "the posing or placing of the question." But it involves much more. It is a philosophic term used often in German scholarship, and it means "the way one approaches the question," "the way one structures the inquiry," "the paradigm one employs," etc. Of course, the way one asks a question often determines the way one answers it. Hence when I speak of the historicist *Fragestellung*, I mean the whole way of thinking, the whole set of (sometimes unspoken) generational assumptions which unite the historicist tradition. Oftentimes thinkers with quite different sets of ideas share the same basic *Fragestellung*; for example, Ranke and Hegel.
23. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 281. I have altered the translation here cf. sec. 344, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (Stuttgart:Kröner,1930).
24. There have been no definitive studies on nineteenth-century German *Lebensphilosophie* in English. One of the most basic introductions to the whole movement (which included thinkers as diverse as Spengler, Bergson, Ortega y Gasset, Nietzsche, Dilthey, and Klages) was written by Otto Friedrich Bollnow: *Die Lebensphilosophie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1958). Traditional interpretations of *Lebensphilosophie* see it as an irrational rebellion against reason, science, law, and "civilization." Herbert Schnädelbach, in his study *Philosophy in Germany, 1831-1933* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 141 f., argues that "Life-philosophy makes life into a principle . . . it is a philosophical position which makes into the foundation and criterion of everything something which essentially stands opposed to rationality, reason, concepts, or the Idea—life as something irrational. Life-philosophy can thus be described as a 'metaphysics of the irrational' and so as irrationalism in a value-free sense." For a critical study, one can read Georg Lukacs' *The Destruction of Reason* (New Jersey: Humanities Press,1981).
25. Both essays are included in the same German edition of Nietzsche's work: *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1930). For English translations, cf. *Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964) and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy and Truth*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979).
26. Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975), ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming.
27. *UTM*, p. 67.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
29. For Nietzsche's later thoughts on Cartesian philosophy in a similar vein, cf. *Die Unschuld des Werdens*, II (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1930), p. 65 and *The Will to Power*, p. 268.
30. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy and Truth*, p. 84.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
32. *UTM*, p. 76.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.
34. For a complete textual account of the controversy between Wilamowitz and Nietzsche, cf. Karlfried Grönder ed. *Der Streit um Nietzsches "Geburt der Tragödie"* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1969).
35. The quotations from Wilamowitz are cited in M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 96.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *UTM*, p. 121 and Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 158.
38. *UTM*, p. 103.
39. Alan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 296.
40. "Historicity," or *Geschichtlichkeit* is a term which develops in the nineteenth century out of the philosophy of Hegel but does not become prominent until the writings of Dilthey and later, Heidegger. Graf Yorck von Wartenburg writes to Dilthey in January of 1888: "Not that the whole psycho-physical actuality 'is' but 'lives'—that is the key point of historicity," *Briefwechsel zwischen Dilthey und Graf Yorck* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1923), p. 71. Both Dilthey and Yorck agreed that "historicity" and "temporality" were categories of "life" and not of abstract metaphysics, cf. *Briefwechsel* p. 91 and Wilhelm Dilthey, *Die Geistige Welt: Einleitung in die Philosophie des Lebens*, ed. Georg Misch (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1958), p. 314. By "historicity" Dilthey meant not only that all things were historically determined but that human being itself was historically determined. Nietzsche does not explicitly use the term, but his writings have been interpreted by Heidegger and Gadamer within this tradition. For the meaning of *Geschichtlichkeit*, cf. Hans Georg Gadamer "Geschichtlichkeit" in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1954), pp. 1496-98 and Gerhard Bauer, *Geschichtlichkeit* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963).

## HISTORY AND ONTOLOGY

41. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 448. I have revised this translation slightly to attain a fuller measure of clarity and consistency. For the original German text, cf. *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1976), p. 396.
42. *UTM*, p. 94.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

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PHILOSOPHY TODAY

272