

## What did Nietzsche think that it was possible to learn from the past?

The central theme to much of Nietzsche's writings was the rejection of most of the ideas and values which had sustained European history. It is therefore surprising to find that Nietzsche went into so much detail in his works about the treatment of history itself. His thoughts will be examined with both traditional terminology and the words which Nietzsche himself used to describe different perspectives on history. This can be extended to a discussion of his views on politics and religion in an historical context.

Traditional explanations for the study of history largely fall into three categories; the monumental, the antiquarian and the transindividual. Nietzsche explained which particular aspects of these categories he approved of, and exposed some of the dangers involved in too much reliance on any one form of historical study. The defining belief which runs right through Nietzsche's work is that each approach to history, if divorced from the other approaches and more widely from a total conception of 'life', history would serve only to stifle action and encourage mysticism, passivity and meaninglessness.

The monumental approach to history is defined by a concentration on the heroes of the past. This is in order to give comfort and inspiration to those who are studying the lives of 'great men' or 'great nations'. Nietzsche saw this approach as demonstrating human potential. However, such a view includes no conceptions of causality, necessity, contingency or continuity, and can be seen to promote events at the expense of the causes of those events. Nietzsche talked of 'a collection of effects in themselves', suggesting he realised that the monumental approach would not stand up on its own.

The antiquarian view is that the past becomes an object of respect simply by virtue of its age. Nietzsche claimed that this view appealed to a self-reflective sense of identity – that individuals and societies would define themselves in terms of their predecessors. When combined with the monumental view, this was seen to provide a good view of history from the perspective of the agent. Even together though, these two modes of historical study are incapable of relating knowledge of the contingencies of action to action itself.

The transindividual approach portrays historians as fair judges, passing sentence on events with the benefit of hindsight. Nietzsche saw this positivism as entirely unrealistic in its detachment – no historian could be totally objective – and furthermore, by making history seem separate from and superior to the present, people who relied on this form of understanding could be led into passivity and paralysis in the face of their own knowledge.

In response to these concerns, Nietzsche developed a new method of historical understanding, which Mark Warren describes as the 'critical approach'. This, according to Warren, transformed the determinacy of history into a resource for the future. For this approach to be possible, the historian would have to accept nihilism – a situation where humanity's highest values have devalued themselves – as Nietzsche claimed that all apparent objectivity had been subject to the Christian-moral world view. He wished to achieve for himself a 'position *outside* morality, some point beyond good and evil.' However worthy it was to attempt to reach this position, Nietzsche believed that the ultimate realisation of such a stance could not come about, due to 'countless things that humanity acquired in earlier stages, but so feebly and embryonically that nobody could perceive their acquisition.' Nevertheless, this perspective was considered to contain useful insights, such as the 'virtue of modesty' in questions of knowledge. For too long historians had been pursuing knowledge not 'for the sake of life', as Nietzsche claimed for himself, but in the interest of the established moral order – and to compound the problem, they refused to admit their bias. Nietzsche was concerned with the concept of truth, suggesting that much of what we considered to be truth was in fact a collection of empty and hollow ideas. This was known as the 'perspective theory of the affects' – the way in which the definition of a concept depended upon the perspective of the person involved, which was without any doubt affected by the views of society. For Nietzsche, human history was principally about the 'will to power' – the attempted domination of one group by another. The empty ideas themselves were considered to be a product of this 'will to power', and Nietzsche proposed that humankind should cast away its empty morality and recognise the fundamental struggle within. This was described by Nietzsche not as 'truth' – itself an empty concept – but 'truthfulness', that is being true to oneself about the real nature of the world.

Because Nietzsche's philosophy of history does not easily fit into the categories defined above, we must also try to understand his views in terms of the historical, the unhistorical and the supra-historical. He saw the tendency of man to dwell on history

as a principal cause of our unhappiness, and claimed that we need to 'know how to forget at the right time as well as how to remember'. Socrates' belief that knowledge is virtue was rejected outright by Nietzsche, who claimed that the more we knew about reality the more frightening it became. If man was unable to forget, that is if we were 'totally historical', we would be incapacitated for life as creativity and pro-activeness would not exist. This was extended to society in general: 'The unhistorical and the historical are equally needed for the health of an individual, a people and a culture.' Nietzsche bemoaned the 'excess of history' and the 'hypertrophy of the historical sense in our time'.

Nietzsche found the concept of the 'supra-historical' more difficult to deal with. The supra-historical nature, as initially defined by him, was the belief that 'the meaning of existence will come to light progressively in the course of its process.' While historical man had an unquestioning faith in the predictable future, those who thought in a supra-historical way were those 'for whom the world is finished in every single moment and its end attained'. Moral values were clearly not supra-historical, as they varied greatly across the generations. On the other hand aesthetic values may well have been – Nietzsche talked of how his culture still had the same concept of beauty as the Greeks and Romans. This led on to one of Nietzsche's most interesting and challenging revelations about history. His 'hope' for history was that its value would be 'to circumscribe...an everyday melody...to elevate it, to intensify it into a comprehensive symbol' – history itself defined as a work of art. There is a suggestion within such passages that the historical and the supra-historical can be integrated: what, for example, could another two millennia bring to light which we could not find in more deeply contemplating the great philosophers (intensified into *symbols*) of the past two millennia? Just as we judge artists by their masterpieces, 'the goal of humanity cannot lie in the end but only in its higher specimens'. This philosophy was explosive, as it rejected the Christian notion of the infinite worth of every human soul.

Indeed Christianity itself, the motor of European history for almost two thousand years, was seen as yet another product of the 'will to power'. It was seen as an outlet for those who had initially been repressed – a 'slave morality' to constrain the will of naturally dominant groups by castigating decadence, a privilege of the powerful. Nietzsche analysed Judaism in a similar way – the Jews' relationship to their god, and the messianic principle in particular, were to result in the overthrow of Judaism itself. As science progressed more quickly than ever before, and Darwin's theories convinced many intellectuals to abandon belief in a divine being altogether,

Nietzsche predicted the same ironic demise for Christianity. It was the Christian intent on exploring to its furthest recesses the glory of God's world which would eventually lead to its domination by science.

It was not only the religious sphere that was in a state of confusion. While with the benefit of hindsight we are able to see that the capitalist system has survived the 20<sup>th</sup> century and now dominates the world, to the minds of philosophers of Nietzsche's time it must have seemed far from a likely outcome. Communists, nationalists and other extremist political groups were increasing in popularity, and this produced a sense of nervous tension, no one really knowing which side would win. This can be reconciled well with Nietzsche's political philosophy. In his rejection of the empty concepts which had sustained European history, he added to a sense of urgency and a desperation to act. Constraints on the will to power had been lifted, and Nietzsche's philosophy was later used (inappropriately) to justify both Nazism and Bolshevism. A familiar distorted concept was Mussolini's statement that a war was necessary every twenty years for a nation to stay moral – Nietzsche claimed that nations at war were far more 'truthful' in Nietzschean terms than those at peace, as the loss of life was simply an expression of the recurring will to power. This was seen as a lesson of history.

Nietzsche's belief on what history could become is perhaps most succinctly summarised in 'Thus Spake Zarathustra'. His model human, or 'Superman', is able to convert every 'thus it happened' into a 'thus I willed it'. This removes from history any concept of external factors – the responsibility for any event lies solely with the protagonist. Nietzsche is then able to work without facts – which are seen as another empty concept – and can deal solely in values.

Nietzsche's philosophical contribution to the study of history was astounding. No longer would history be 'interpreted as divine reason', no longer a 'constant testimonial to an ethical world order and ethical ultimate purpose'. Instead history would come to be interpreted as a constant struggle for survival and domination – as Nietzsche claimed, 'no cruelty, no feast: that is what the oldest and longest period in our history teaches us'.

**Bibliography:**

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