

On Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1874)

From the Introduction by Peter Preuss (Hackett, 1980):

Man, unlike animal, is self-conscious. He is aware that he is alive and that he must die. And because he is self-conscious he is not only aware of living, but of living well or badly. Life is not wholly something that happens to man; it is also something he engages in according to values he follows. Human existence is a task. . . .

Whatever a person does finally receives its meaning only so far as it is integrated into the total task of existing. If it fails to further this task it is valueless. If it hinders this task it is to be rejected. . . .

The quest for knowledge and truth is also a part of the task of existing and, like every human enterprise, it receives its value from being integrated into the task of which it is a part. . . .

The 19th Century had discovered history and all subsequent inquiry and education bore the stamp of this discovery. This was not simply the discovery of a set of facts about the past but the discovery of the historicity of man: man, unlike animal, is a historical being. Man is not wholly the product of an alien act, either natural or divine, but in part produces his own being. The task of existing is a task precisely because it is not a case of acting according to a permanent nature or essence but rather of producing that nature within the limitations of a situation. History is the record of this self-production; it is the activity of a historical being recovering the past into the present which anticipates the future. With a total absence of this activity man would fall short of humanity: history is necessary.

But what if this activity is perverted? What if, rather than remaining the life-promoting activity of a historical being, history is turned into the objective uncovering of mere facts by the disinterested scholar — facts to be left as they are found, to be contemplated without being assimilated into present being? According to Nietzsche, this perversion has taken place — and history, rather than promoting life, has become deadly. This, then, is the dilemma Nietzsche faced: history is necessary, but as it is practiced it is deadly.

The present work is an attempt to extricate himself, and us, from this dilemma.

From Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1874):

"A person must have the power and from time to time use it to break a past and to dissolve it, in order to be able to live. . . . Here it is not righteousness which sits in the judgment seat or, even less, mercy which announces judgment, but life alone, that dark, driving, insatiable self-desiring force. . . . People or ages serving life in this way, by judging and destroying a past, are always dangerous and in danger. . . . It is an attempt to give oneself, as it were, a past after the fact, out of which we may be descended in opposition to the one from which we are descended. It is always a dangerous attempt, because it is so difficult to find a borderline to the denial of the past and because the second nature usually is weaker than the first."