

INTRODUCTION

Man, unlike the 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. In the past two centuries or so of European philosophizing there have been a number of attempts to clarify this task: the Hegelian elevation of individual finitude into infinity in the Absolute; the Kierkegaardian life of inwardness; and the Heideggerian authentic life of preparation for the self-revelation of Being, among others.

Nietzsche, too, understands human existence to be a task. He calls it simply the task of living. As with any genuine philosophy of this kind, his attempt to clarify philosophically the task of human existence is itself always a part of that task. It is not written from an assumed standpoint outside of human existence, merely viewing that existence dispassionately and objectively, but is written from the standpoint of a human being engaged in this task, fully aware that he is so engaged.

Not only is Nietzsche aware that philosophizing is part of the task of existence; he also insists that every human enterprise is a part of the 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 topic of the present work is the relation between life and historical knowledge. 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. But what if some knowledge, some truth, should prove deadly? What if, with respect to some knowledge, we are faced with the alternative: know the truth and die or live and remain in error? According to Nietzsche we are faced with this alternative. But given the choice between life and knowledge, he argues, there is no question about which we ought to choose. Any knowledge which destroys life destroys itself, for knowledge presupposes life.

The nineteenth 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 the 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 a 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.

For Nietzsche, as for almost every post-Kantian European philosopher, philosophizing is part of the task of existing. That it is such a part shows up in different ways: as dialectical philosophizing in Hegel; as irony and multiple pseudonyms in Kierkegaard; as revolutionary pamphleteering in Marx; as prophetic paths of thinking in Heidegger. In Nietzsche it shows up in the experimental character of his philosophizing. His chief concern with a philosophical position is not so much its intellectual cogency as its ability to stand the test of living by it. This is why, by quoting Nietzsche selectively, one can make a case for the most divergent sorts of positions. For example, the present work is a fine example of Nietzsche's early period (*The Birth of Tragedy*, the four *Untimely Observations* of which the present work is the second). Here he condemns objective scholarship as detrimental to human life which must flourish, if need be, in an atmosphere of error and illusion. But his middle period (*Human, All Too Human*; *Dawn of Day*; *The Gay Science*) commences with a radical shift in favour of objective science and the exposing of all illusion. It ends, however, with the tragic realization that God has been killed in the process (*The Gay Science* #125). Having experimented with these two antithetical positions, he understands that neither is tenable. Only a product of their reconciliation can be tenable, and he attempts to achieve this in his late period (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; *Beyond Good and Evil*; *The Genealogy of Morals*; *The Antichrist*; *Twilight of the Idols*). It is because the reconciliation of the late period appears to favour the position of the early period that Nietzsche's middle period has been unduly neglected in favour of the other two. This is unfortunate. But just as unfortunate is the recent about-face in Germany of elevating his middle period to the status of the authentic Nietzschean philosophy and downgrading the rest as either the product of youthful exuberance or tottering reason. Only the total Nietzsche is the total Nietzsche.

On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life is an excellent point of entry into the philosophy of Nietzsche. Not only does it sound many of the main points of the whole, but is a clear statement of the pro-

foundest concerns which animate the whole. If it is understood for what it is it can, better than any other work, provide the foundation for an appropriating study of this powerful thinker.

The University of Lethbridge

PETER PREUSS