

From Aestheticism to Naturalism: A Reassessment of Nietzsche's 'postmodernist'  
Philosophy of History

by

Joshua Travis Johnston  
B.A., University of the Fraser Valley, 2007

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**Supervisory Committee**

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## **Abstract**

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Since the 1960's it has been common for many historians to treat Friedrich Nietzsche as a proto-postmodernist. Nietzsche's scepticism and apparent embrace of aestheticism have fueled the belief among historians that Nietzsche's philosophy anticipated a postmodern understanding of history. This project seeks to challenge the proto-postmodernist reading of Nietzsche's philosophy of history by arguing that Nietzsche's thought underwent a significant change after the termination of his friendship with the German composer Richard Wagner. Utilizing Nietzsche's personal correspondence, material from his many notebooks, records of the books he read and owned, as well as the works he published, this thesis attempts to unravel the proto-postmodern reading of Nietzsche's philosophy in favour of a naturalist interpretation of his thought. It will then attempt to outline what the consequences of Nietzsche's naturalism are for his philosophy of history. This thesis concludes by suggesting that Nietzsche's historiography has much more in common with the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt and the Ancient Greek historian Thucydides than 'postmodern' thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1 - Interpretations of the Postmodern Nietzsche.....</b>	<b>5</b>
Hayden White.....	7
Michel Foucault.....	12
Allan Megill.....	17
<b>Chapter 2 - The “Birth” of the Aesthetic Nietzsche.....</b>	<b>29</b>
Introduction.....	30
The Aesthetic Nietzsche.....	30
<b>Chapter 3 – “Beyond” Wagner - The Emergence of the Naturalist Nietzsche.....</b>	<b>59</b>
Introduction.....	60
Into the Abyss.....	61
Conclusion.....	87
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>105</b>

## Introduction

Since the 1960's it has been common for many historians to treat Friedrich Nietzsche as a proto-postmodernist. Nietzsche's scepticism and apparent embrace of aestheticism have fueled the belief among historians that Nietzsche's philosophy anticipated a postmodern understanding of history. This widespread assumption has led many historians to cite Nietzsche's essay, "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life" as representative of his entire philosophy of history. While other disciplines have explicitly grappled with issues related to classifying Nietzsche's thought, historians took part in this process in the context of their own unique "theory wars". Historians seeking to challenge or defend the epistemological status quo in the framework of these hotly contested debates utilized Nietzsche's name as a buzz word for the relativist position. By placing Nietzsche firmly on the side of what was called the "postmodern left", these debates failed to subject his philosophy to the re-evaluation it experienced elsewhere. Whereas scholars in philosophy began to revise their understanding of Nietzsche's philosophy during the early 1990's, many historians continue to embrace a postmodernist reading of his thought.

History's "theory wars" saw historians become increasingly apocalyptic about the entire enterprise of history. As the debate unfolded, it was Nietzsche who began to be given center stage as the biggest radical of all. In 1985 David Lowenthal, for example recognized him as the philosopher who, "...disparaged 'factual' explanation in favour of mythic insight from drama and fable."<sup>1</sup> By 1987 Thomas Haskell could plead, alongside his colleague David Hollinger, that he sought to defend a moderate relativism against the

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<sup>1</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 212.

“Nietzschean epistemological left”.<sup>2</sup> In his article, “Objectivity is not Neutrality: Rhetoric vs. Practice in Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream*,” Haskell singled Nietzsche out as the philosopher historians must get beyond if they are to escape the instability of epistemological relativism.<sup>3</sup>

The question that must be addressed is which interpretation of Nietzsche’s work was informing the historical community at this moment. Why was this late nineteenth century German philosopher such a polarizing figure for intellectual historians in the late twentieth century? What did historians perceive in Nietzsche that made him such a central and explosive figure within recent historiographical discourse? Finally, can Nietzsche legitimately be seen as the father of postmodernism that historians have taken him to be?

This thesis attempts to answer those questions by tracing the three interpretations of Nietzsche’s thought that have influenced the historical community the most. While differing in many ways, the readings of Nietzsche provided by Hayden White, Michel Foucault, and Allan Megill have produced enough similarities for the greater historical community to brand Nietzsche a postmodernist. The first chapter of this thesis provides an overview of those three dominant interpretations of Nietzsche’s philosophy and show how they have penetrated the historical community at large. It then asks whether this “postmodern” reading of Nietzsche’s philosophical project actually holds up. Have historians blindly taken White, Foucault, and Megill’s readings without critically historicizing the German philosopher’s views?

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 627.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Haskell, “Objectivity is not Neutrality: Rhetoric vs. Practice in Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream*,” *History and Theory* 29 ( May, 1990): 131-136.

Chapter two seeks to historicize Nietzsche's early intellectual life up until his break with the German composer Richard Wagner. Utilizing his personal correspondence and reading materials along with his published works, I hope to show the predominance of aestheticism in Nietzsche's early thought. This aestheticism has been the overarching theme that historians have ascribed to Nietzsche's entire intellectual career. I show the origins of this aestheticism in the thought of the youthful Nietzsche's two biggest influences, Arthur Schopenhauer and Richard Wagner, in order to better understand the importance of Wagner's friendship and how throughout his life the ideas of those close to Nietzsche had the tendency to shape his thought. While the historical theorists have depicted Nietzsche's aestheticism as characterizing his thought through to the end of his active life, I will argue that this sweeping generalization neglects the central importance of friendships and how they could, and did, drastically change Nietzsche's intellectual disposition.

The third chapter will examine the period after Nietzsche's break with Wagner to historicize his later, mature thought. Again, friendship played a critical role: the impact of Nietzsche's close relationship with the Jewish philosopher Paul Rée will be explored in detail. I hope to show that in, ending his friendship with Richard Wagner, Nietzsche broke with his youthful aestheticism for good. The shock of terminating his friendship with Wagner set Nietzsche on the path to becoming a philosophical naturalist. This naturalist disposition can be observed in Nietzsche's persistent attempts to explain complex human psychological evaluations by linking them to underlying physiological causes. It also can be detected in Nietzsche's negative comments about his youthful thought that are found in his personal correspondence after his break with Wagner.

Further evidence from his reading materials, and of course, examples from his published works illustrate in detail how Nietzsche abandoned the aestheticism and scepticism of his earlier thought. What I believe will become clear is that Nietzsche, prior to descending into insanity in 1889, was quite unlike the postmodernist thinker he is often portrayed as being by contemporary historians.

The conclusion of this thesis will argue that Nietzsche's philosophy is not compatible with the "anti-essentialism" espoused by the historical theorists considered here. By the late 1880's Nietzsche endorsed a view that suggests that, at least in a materialist sense, we do have certain essential attributes, the result of our physiological disposition, that condition who we are and what we can become. While maintaining a sceptical position on any metaphysical conception of truth, Nietzsche's last two publications adopt epistemic language that few postmodern philosophers could accept. Nietzsche did believe we have access to truth, so long as the term is understood as not finding its origin in the metaphysical realm. Finally, Nietzsche's historiography does not seek to deconstruct or liberate humanity from the many structures of power that postmodern historians have painstakingly brought to our attention as being oppressive. Nietzsche mainly wished to deconstruct conventional Judean-Christian morality as a means towards empowering a new social hierarchy in which the cultural elite of the world would monopolize power. Nietzsche viewed pain and suffering as necessary for cultural greatness and believed any attempt to minimize their presence in our lives would be one of the greatest threats to the future of our species. Nietzsche endorsed an aristocratic outlook that simply cannot be reconciled with the theme of political emancipation that is dear to many postmodernists.

## **Chapter One**

### **Interpretations of the Postmodern Nietzsche**

Despite the availability of strong evidence to the contrary, many historians continue to depict Nietzsche as one of the founding fathers of the postmodern movement. While the 1980s and early 1990s “culture wars” between historians for and against postmodern methods of understanding the past have no doubt played a major role in rendering Nietzsche as a polarizing postmodern figure, the historical perception of his philosophy of history owes a great deal to three interpretations of his work that are widely disseminated among historians. Whether historians exclusively adopt the interpretation of Nietzsche’s philosophy provided by Hayden White, Michel Foucault, Allan Megill, or perhaps a mixed bag of all three, their conclusions tend to repeat the findings presented by each of these intellectual historians. Across the wide and varied terrain of the historical discipline, Nietzsche is either depicted as an irrational mystic (White), or a radical sceptic attempting to liberate us from the structures of power lurking behind all truth claims (Foucault), or as the champion of a postmodern aestheticism who denies truth yet seeks to return us to the world of myth in order to avoid a radical descent into nihilism (Megill). Yet, it needs to be asked whether these three related interpretations provide the most conclusive account of Nietzsche’s historical philosophy.

The goal of this chapter will be to outline the historical discipline’s three dominant interpretations of Nietzsche’s philosophy as provided by White, Foucault, and Megill. In tandem with an analysis of each historical reading of Nietzsche’s work I hope to show how those three interpretations have influenced the greater historical community. This chapter will then attempt to address the problematic nature of each historical reading and outline how a more critical and historicized account of Nietzsche’s philosophical project is necessary in order to accurately comprehend his historical theory.

## Hayden White

Hayden White's ground breaking book, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, was published in 1973. Within its pages White attempted to offer a structuralist account of how history is written by focusing on the "linguistic protocols" utilized by the major historians and philosophers of history during the nineteenth-century in Europe. The goal of the work was to show,

...that the style of a given historiographer can be characterized in terms of the linguistic protocol he used to prefigure the historical field prior to bringing to bear upon it the various 'explanatory' strategies he used to fashion a 'story' out of the 'chronicle' of events contained in the historical record.<sup>4</sup>

From this White concludes that there is no single "correct" interpretation of the past, but rather, many "correct" interpretations, each of which is only given priority over another explanation because of the historian's subjective *moral* and *aesthetic* taste.<sup>5</sup> This conclusion, however, was not meant to send history off into the abyss of relativism. Rather, White saw his task as one that challenged the "ironic" mode of historical representation that he believed was plaguing his discipline.<sup>6</sup> The growing nineteenth century demand to turn history into an objective science, with its lust for "realism", had produced an ironic consciousness within select intellectual figures, who saw any purely objective account of the past impossible. White notes that from an existential perspective irony has the effect of dissolving, "all belief in the possibility of positive political action" because of the paralysing revelation that occurs inside of us once we realize that all our cherished values are nothing more than an arbitrary attempt by our species to produce

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<sup>4</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1975), 426.

<sup>5</sup> Italics added.  
Ibid., 427.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 434.

meaning in a world that is fundamentally chaotic.<sup>7</sup> In order to escape this downward spiral into scepticism, relativism, and general despair, White hoped he could free his readers from their ironic disposition by showing how the ironic mode of emplotment is simply one among many others that historians can utilize when constructing a narrative of past events.

Within this monumental project White saw Nietzsche as having place of profound importance. For it was Nietzsche, White believed, who had overcome this ironic mode of consciousness, but that he did so at the expense of reason.<sup>8</sup> As he expressed in his article, “The Burden of History” seven years prior to the release of *Metahistory*,

Nietzsche hated history even more than he hated religion. History promoted a debilitating voyeurism in men, made them feel that they were late-comers to a world in which everything worth doing had already been done, and thereby undermined that impulse to heroic exertion that might give a peculiarly human, if only transient, meaning to an absurd world.<sup>9</sup>

Building upon this interpretation of Nietzsche, White offered a more detailed account of Nietzsche’s philosophy in relation to the “crisis of historicism” in *Metahistory*.

Fundamentally, White argued there that Nietzsche’s historical theory was conditioned by his distinction between “life-affirming” and “life-denying” types of historical discourse.<sup>10</sup>

White holds that any history that sought to “find the single eternally true, or ‘proper,’ way of regarding the past” was a form of what Nietzsche would brand as being “life-denying”.<sup>11</sup> This was because “life-affirming” historical discourse does not concern itself with the “Truth” but rather the realization of human creative emancipation. In order for

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>9</sup> Hayden White, “The Burden of History,” *History and Theory* 5 (1966): 124.

<sup>10</sup> White, *Metahistory*, 332.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 332.

humanity to achieve a higher “sense of self” history must have many different visions in which to accommodate the great diversity of beings on this planet.<sup>12</sup> This dichotomy between “life-affirmation” and “life-negation” as outlined by White produced a reading of Nietzsche that is heavily saturated in the belief that Nietzsche favoured aesthetic intuition over scientific fact.

Supporting his conclusion, White claimed that Nietzsche was a radical relativist who not only thought objectivity was “harmful” to humanity, but that it was also *unattainable* to begin with.<sup>13</sup> He states this most clearly in the following passage from *Metahistory*,

To expose the illusions produced by what was, in the end, only a *linguistic* habit, to free consciousness from its own powers of illusion-making, so that the imagination could once more ‘frolic in images’ without hardening those images into life-destroying ‘concepts’ – these were Nietzsche’s supreme goals as a teacher of his age.<sup>14</sup>

This quote articulates the view that, for Nietzsche, objective knowledge was simply an illusion that had become hardened into a concept. It is an illusion that has had its origins forgotten. White notes that if we take Nietzsche seriously it results in a dead end for us in terms of how we can seek to overcome our ironic consciousness. In order to free ourselves from our ironic state of mind we must become aware of the arbitrary nature of all human knowledge. However, to do so would be to pull the rug out from under our ability to take our created illusions seriously. For how can we truly believe something we know is simply an arbitrary creation? This leads White to emphasise Nietzsche’s position regarding the importance of forgetting in the second chapter of his *On the Genealogy of*

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 332.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 332.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 335.

*Morals*.<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche claimed that we must learn how to forget in order that we may create. Yet, this produces another problem. For how do we distinguish what we are to remember from what we are to forget? White reaches the conclusion that Nietzsche offers no adequate solution to such a riddle. Instead we are left with only the “here and now” in which as individuals we must choose to adopt, in terms of what illusions we ought to remember and those we ought to forget, whatever is more “life-affirming”.<sup>16</sup> Given that each individual must have complete freedom in order to be given the opportunity to reach their “full potential”, cohesive social action becomes a hindrance rather than a means towards self-improvement. By severing humanity from the means of collective action White concludes Nietzsche only gets beyond the problem of ironic consciousness by plunging us into the depths of subjective mysticism.

White’s reading of Nietzsche was highly influenced by the philosopher’s early works. Much of the cited material comes from *The Birth of Tragedy* and “On the Abuse and Use of History” both published in the early 1870’s when Nietzsche was just beginning his philosophical career.<sup>17</sup> Those early publications were deeply influenced by Nietzsche’s near obsession with the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, particularly the idea that all reality is “mere appearance” subject to the whims of our blind, violently striving “will”.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, like Schopenhauer, the youthful Nietzsche believed that only art, and in particular music, could allow one to find solace in this “apparent” world of hostility.<sup>19</sup> This dualism of neo-Kantian scepticism and Schopenhauerian aestheticism

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 346-349.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 370.

<sup>17</sup> White states that it is very important that one has a strong grasp of the key concepts Nietzsche introduces in *The Birth of Tragedy* if one is to understand the place of history in his later works. Ibid., 333.

<sup>18</sup> Chapter two will explore this connection in more detail.

<sup>19</sup> Julian Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 129.

ran through all of Nietzsche's youthful writings until his publication of *Human, All-Too-Human* in 1876. Interestingly, White makes nearly no mention of this book in his analysis. In fact, the whole "middling" period of Nietzsche's philosophical career is absent. The chapter jumps from *The Birth of Tragedy* and "On the Abuse and Use of History" to *On the Genealogy of Morals*, a work that was published thirteen years after "On the Abuse and Use of History".<sup>20</sup> White's reasoning for such an omission was that the *Genealogy* attempted to put into practice what Nietzsche theorized about thirteen years prior.<sup>21</sup> Yet, without engaging Nietzsche's works leading up to the *Genealogy*,<sup>22</sup> White has made the assumption that Nietzsche's early philosophy is straightforwardly consistent with his mature thought. It is this hypothesis that allows the interpretation of Nietzsche as both an aesthetic mystic and sceptical relativist to persist.

It would be highly unfair to paint White as the main "culprit" propagating a "mystical" interpretation of Nietzsche's thought. After all, White was more focused upon attempting to liberate historians from their ironic consciousness than seeking to provide a definitive account of Nietzsche's philosophical legacy. What White did inadvertently achieve, however, was the branding of Nietzsche within the then current historiographical debate as the "captain" of what Thomas Haskell referred to years later as the "epistemological left". Thanks to White, Nietzsche gets pushed to the fore as one of the philosophical figures historians must come to terms with if the profession hopes to escape its descent into meaninglessness. White made this clear in his article, "The Burden of

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<sup>20</sup> "On the Abuse and Use of History for Life" was published in 1874; *On the Genealogy of Morals* was published in 1887.

Ibid., 564-567.

<sup>21</sup> White, *Metahistory*, 357.

<sup>22</sup> *Human, All-Too-Human, Daybreak, The Gay Science, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, and Beyond Good and Evil*.

History,” where Nietzsche plays a pivotal role as the philosopher of history who he believed had to be overcome if history was to escape a collapse into irrationalism.<sup>23</sup>

*Metahistory* continued this apocalyptic tone when White concluded that a Nietzschean historiography destroys humanity’s connection to anything beyond their direct experience of the world.<sup>24</sup> By attempting to overcome the clutches of Nietzsche’s historical criticism, White validated Nietzsche’s relativism as a position worthy of consideration. As a result, those who were in favour of a more sceptical historiography suddenly seemed to have a powerful philosophical ally.

### **Michel Foucault**

Indeed just two years prior to the publication of White’s *Metahistory*, Michel Foucault published his article “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” which sought not to get beyond the pitfalls of Nietzsche’s scepticism, but rather to build upon it in order to illustrate the tyrannical influence history can have over human affairs. At the time of its publication the article received little attention from the historical community, but as Nietzsche increasingly became a cited figure within the historiographical debate (especially in the 1980’s and 1990’s), Foucault’s article gradually emerged as one of the defining accounts of what Nietzsche’s philosophy consisted of as it related to the discipline of history.<sup>25</sup>

One of the major themes historians have been drawn to in Foucault’s thought is what we may term “epistemic oppression.” This type of oppression was depicted as differing from more traditional means of overt tyranny in that the individual victim is not

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<sup>23</sup> White, “The Burden of History,” 124.

<sup>24</sup> White, *Metahistory*, 370-374.

<sup>25</sup> I will explain this in more detail below.

oppressed physically, but rather is mentally captivated by their own desire in what their given society has deemed “normal”.<sup>26</sup> Many historians believe that Foucault’s work seeks to release us from this “hidden tyranny” by undermining the assumed epistemological positivism that normative social claims hold over us. Hence, especially in *Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of a Clinic*, and *Discipline and Punishment*, Foucault attempts to illustrate how the human sciences- psychology, for example - have come to assume an objective authority that allows their normative claims to hold power. While Foucault also points to the constructive aspects of power, historians have been more captivated by his attempt to counter the oppressive effect of the human sciences by revealing the lack of epistemological foundation that these disciplines ultimately possess.

In order to prove his case Foucault found in Nietzsche the methodology with which he thought he could carry out his “post-structuralist” project. Already by 1967 Foucault had made mention that his historical method “owes more to Nietzschean genealogy than to structuralism properly so called.”<sup>27</sup> Moving one step further, his 1971 article, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” outlines what he took to be Nietzsche’s goal of providing a method of studying the past in which only “raptures and contingencies” would remain in its wake. Nietzsche’s use of “genealogy” as a tool to uncover the arbitrary formation of many seminal ideas at the heart of the Western intellectual tradition provided Foucault with a blueprint that would allow him to undermine the epistemological assertions being made by his structuralist contemporaries. Foucault asserts that unlike the historian, the Nietzschean genealogist,

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<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 140.

<sup>27</sup> Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 234.

...finds that there is “something altogether different” behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms. Examining the history of reason, he learns that it was born in an altogether “reasonable” fashion-from chance; devotion to truth and the precision of scientific methods arose from the passion of scholars, their reciprocal hatred, their fanatical and unending discussions, and their spirit of competition-the personal conflicts that slowly forged the weapons of reason.<sup>28</sup>

As the two influential Foucaultian commentators Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow explain, “the more one interprets, the more one finds not the fixed meaning of a text, or of the world, but only other interpretations” and this discovery leads to the revelation that *all interpretation is inherently arbitrary*.<sup>29</sup> The search for origins becomes, for the Foucaultian Nietzsche, a subtle means by which scholars (historians in this context) reify what are, fundamentally, arbitrary interpretations. Foucault believes that historians offer the epistemological justification necessary for intellectually suspect institutions and practices to gain power within a given society. As Foucault comments near the end of his article,

Knowledge does not slowly detach itself from its empirical roots, the initial needs from which it arose, to become pure speculation subject only to the demands of reason; its development is not tied to the constitution and affirmation of a free subject; rather, it creates a progressive enslavement to its instinctive violence. Where religions once demanded the sacrifice of bodies, knowledge now calls for experimentation on ourselves, calls us to the sacrifice of the subject of knowledge.<sup>30</sup>

Ultimately, Foucault claims that Nietzsche’s historical project is one that seeks to undo the imprisoning effect knowledge claims can impose upon our lives. He concludes by arguing that a Nietzschean historiography is one in which,

...the veneration of monuments becomes parody; the respect for ancient continuities becomes systematic dissociation; the critique of the injustices of the past by a truth held

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<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D.F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 142.

<sup>29</sup> Italics added.

Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 106-107.

<sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.,” 163.

by men in the present becomes the destruction of the man who maintains knowledge by the injustice proper to the will to knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

Nietzsche's historiography, according to Foucault, is one obsessed with personal liberation. Only by observing the tyrannical nature of knowledge itself can we seek to overcome its inherent injustice.

Foucault's article is unique due to its heavy reliance on material from Nietzsche's "positivist phase". This period is often described as falling between 1876, after Nietzsche's break with the composer Richard Wagner, and around 1884 with the publication of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. During this time Nietzsche was quite hostile towards metaphysical conceptions of "Truth".<sup>32</sup> It is not surprising that Foucault, a sceptic of "Truth" himself, would pull so heavily from the pages of *Human, All-Too Human*, *Daybreak*, and *The Gay Science*, works that stressed the anthropomorphic nature of all knowledge.<sup>33</sup> Like White, Foucault attempted to fashion a cohesive picture of Nietzsche's philosophy that ties his most scholarly friendly work, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, to one set of his writings at the exclusion of others. White virtually ignored Nietzsche's critical works written between 1876 and 1884 in favour of emphasising Nietzsche's early material. Conversely, Foucault bypasses Nietzsche's youthful and mature thought in favour of the more sceptical insights found in Nietzsche's "positivist" works. As a result, in the hands of Foucault Nietzsche appears to become somewhat of a precursor to Foucault himself. This semblance would have far reaching consequences for

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>32</sup> The term positivist is often applied to this period of Nietzsche's thought because of his lack of hostility towards the empirical sciences. Yet, we must be cautious here, as these works are also strongly Neo-Kantian as they stress the human inability to know any real objective truth about the world. Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 113-114.

<sup>33</sup> Nietzsche's works of the middle period (*Human, All-Too Human*, *Daybreak*, *The Gay Science*) are cited thirty-two times. Compare that with only one citation from his early works (*The Birth of Tragedy* and his *Untimely meditations*) and fourteen from his mature writings excluding the *Genealogy*.

the historical community, which tended during the discipline's "theory wars" to group Foucault and Nietzsche together as similar thinkers.

Some examples of this Foucaultian influence can be found in such historiographical texts as Georg Iggers' *Historiography in the Twentieth Century* and Alun Munslow's *Deconstructing History*. Within both works Nietzsche is described as a thinker who denies any type of objectivity.<sup>34</sup> Munslow goes as far as to provide an excerpt from Foucault's article "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" within his text, relating how intimately related both thinkers are.<sup>35</sup> Iggers also links Nietzsche to Foucault, mentioning that Nietzsche set in motion the conception that "knowledge is power."<sup>36</sup> Opponents of Foucault were quick to point out the similarities between the two thinkers as well. In *Telling the Truth about History*, written by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob collectively, Nietzsche's rejection of rationality is considered to be a precursor to Foucault and Derrida's more extreme, and in their view, anti-liberal, conception of history.<sup>37</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb depicted Nietzsche's historiographical project as one obsessed with "demystifying" the discipline of its illusions of obtaining any degree of objectivity.<sup>38</sup> Historians more sympathetic to the postmodern cause articulated the importance of Nietzsche as a historical thinker in a very Foucaultian manner. Hans Kellner states Nietzsche's significance as a thinker who showed us that

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<sup>34</sup> Georg Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 6-9.

Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 59, 78, 120.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>36</sup> Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century*, 9.

<sup>37</sup> Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1994), 205.

<sup>38</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Telling it as you like it" in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 1997), 160.

history is a meaningless flux to which we, as historians, give coherence/representation.<sup>39</sup>

F. R. Ankersmit celebrated Nietzsche's acceptance that history never encounters the past itself but rather only other interpretations of what we take the past to be.<sup>40</sup> Regardless of whether historians approved or disapproved of Foucault's intellectual project, they all tended to agree that his interpretation of Nietzsche, as a precursor to his own thought, was sound.

### **Allan Megill**

Given the impact that the "Literary Turn" was having upon intellectual historians during the 1980s, it was only a matter of time before a scholar attempted to trace its philosophical development. This was precisely what Allan Megill attempted to do in his 1985 book, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida*. Megill focused on the four intellectual heavyweights he believed to be most influential in terms of shaping the philosophical position that had become known as "postmodernism". In the book Megill offered an interpretation of Nietzsche that claimed his philosophical project was the work of an ambiguous author attempting to overcome the nihilism of his contemporaries by producing a radical critique of objectivity that was purposely inconsistent. Megill also argued that despite Nietzsche's radical scepticism he was never able to abandon the aestheticism of his youth. As a result, Megill infers that Nietzsche's radical scepticism produced a discourse of "crisis" that only aestheticism could overcome. Megill continues his study by highlighting the theme of "crisis" within the works of

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<sup>39</sup> Hans Kellner, "Language and Historical Representation" in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 1997), 136-137.

<sup>40</sup> F.R. Ankersmit, "Historiography and Postmodernism" in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 1997), 287.

Heidegger and Foucault and their similar attempt to utilize aestheticism to surmount it. This process eventually reaches its conclusion with Derrida, who denies both the very possibility of aestheticism and the notion of crisis that it sought to overcome.

Like White, Megill supported the view that Nietzsche's mature writings were a continuation of his youthful, overtly aesthetic works. While he notes that Nietzsche's "positivist phase" does present a problem for his reading, Megill still argues,

This [the aesthetic reading of Nietzsche's work] is the thought that underlies his dictum, to be found twice in the main body of *The Birth of a Tragedy* and repeated in the 1886 preface, to the effect that, "it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*..." And it is a thought that would persist throughout his career.<sup>41</sup>

Along with his commitment to an aesthetic reading of Nietzsche's philosophical project Megill also incorporated the anti-objectivist reading promoted by Foucault. He claims that,

To put it in the simplest terms: Nietzsche stands as the founder of what became the aesthetic metacritique of "truth," wherein "the work of art," or "the text," or "language" is seen as establishing the grounds for truth's possibility.<sup>42</sup>

By weaving together the aesthetic and anti-objectivist interpretations of Nietzsche's work Megill was able to explain two of the major flaws associated with each position. As was noted above, White's Nietzsche left us little room for collective political action. We are asked to flee into a type of "subjective mysticism" rather than attempting to effect any substantial positive political change in our present. At the other extreme, Foucault's Nietzsche is one obsessed with personal liberation, vigorously denying any type of dominant interpretation of reality as having epistemic worth. White's Nietzsche tends to be passive, while Foucault's Nietzsche is fanatically active, attempting to rebel against all

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<sup>41</sup> Italics in original.

Ibid., 32.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 33.

authority. To bridge this divide Megill argued that Nietzsche does support a notion of “Truth” that allows him to pursue normative societal ambitions while nonetheless remaining an aesthetic philosopher.

Central to his binding of the two philosophical positions within Nietzsche’s thought was what Megill termed “the recovery of myth”.<sup>43</sup> It was here that Megill believed Nietzsche to be utilizing his epistemic scepticism as a gateway to establish an aesthetic non-Christian cultural revival for Western Society. Megill’s Nietzsche asserted that cultural growth is possible only so long as a people have myths which inspire them to greatness. The terms “life” and “nature” in Nietzsche’s philosophy ought to be seen, Megill believes, as synonymous with creativity and art.<sup>44</sup> Therefore it was in his view essential for the flourishing of life that myths continue to be cultivated. Unfortunately, in Nietzsche’s mind in the nineteenth century the spiritual mythology of Western society had been gradually destroyed by the accelerating speed of the scientific enlightenment, to the point that his educated peers could no longer take their myths seriously. This then compelled Nietzsche to attack the very foundations of the Enlightenment in an attempt to allow us to create myths once again. Only once Nietzsche’s readers realize that the enlightenment itself is an illusion can they set about creating the future myths necessary to further his great hope for humanity of achieving cultural greatness.

What is striking about Megill’s chapter on Nietzsche is how it attempts to link the German philosopher with twentieth century postmodern thought. Commenting on his position, Megill claims that,

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 76-81.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 30.

Such, at any rate, is one way of looking at Nietzsche. I am not convinced that this “aestheticist” view of Nietzsche totally sums up his thought, for I am not convinced that he had a single, conclusive doctrine.<sup>45</sup>

This would be echoed nearly ten years later in his article, “Review: Historicizing Nietzsche? Paradoxes and Lessons of a Hard Case”, in which Megill made it clear that the task of historicizing Nietzsche is all but doomed to fail.<sup>46</sup> This was because Megill toiled with great care in his book to illustrate the importance of language and ambiguity within Nietzsche’s philosophy. Language both creates and conceals reality from us, says Megill’s Nietzsche, leaving the perceptive subject trapped inside a “prison cell” of sorts with no access to any outside reality.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, Megill pointed out the many quotes that Nietzsche produced promoting the importance of deception in his own work.<sup>48</sup> Megill then asks us, how can we possibly attempt to historicize a thinker who both actively denies objectivity in the traditional sense and openly claims to be misleading us about his intentions throughout his work?

If we accept Megill’s interpretation, Nietzsche does appear to become a precursor for some later postmodern philosophers, particularly Jacques Derrida, as a result of his positive appraisal of such notions as “textual play” and demand for “absolute openness” pertaining to philosophical enquiry. As Megill notes, “What he values, it seems, is not the correctness of the commentary--since this is indeterminable--but rather its freedom...”<sup>49</sup> The naturalism and positivistic elements Megill perceives in Nietzsche’s thought became just another literary style utilized by the ambiguous author to undermine

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>46</sup> Allan Megill, “Review: Historicising Nietzsche? Paradoxes and Lessons of a Hard Case,” *The Journal of Modern History* 68 (March 1996): 121-122.

<sup>47</sup> Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, 95.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 93.

the established order and create the free discourse necessary for future artistic greatness. Megill's Nietzsche deploys the terms "health" and "nature" aesthetically, failing to account for the naturalist context in which they emerged, leading the two terms to adopt an aesthetic valuation that seeks to measure society's progress in relation to the philosopher's artistic ideals. The more "healthy" one is, the more open and aesthetically creative one has become.

By connecting Nietzsche to some of the themes found in thinkers like Derrida, Megill has presented historians of Nietzsche with a serious challenge. If Nietzsche is only concerned with "textual play" and epistemological relativism, how could one possibly attempt to present a contrary interpretation that could surpass that of Megill's own? Historians would simply be playing a game of reading smoke signals with no ability to distinguish whose guess is more accurate.

Megill's Nietzsche comes the closest to capturing the essence of Haskell's monster on the "epistemological left". This Nietzsche is a thinker who seeks to crush any pretence of objectivity historians have in order to pave the way for creativity. Given the growing influence literary departments were having on professional historians at this time, it is not surprising that Nietzsche became a precursor for the postmodern movement. Interestingly, Derrida plays the star role in Megill's study; he emerges as the one thinker who finally manages to close the door on the importance of aesthetic reality that Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Foucault had fanatically sought to open. Nevertheless, it has been this interpretation of Nietzsche that has helped to cement his status as a prophet of postmodern historiography. It is this Nietzsche whom Ewa Domanska described as

having his “deconstructive scent” all over the origins of postmodernism.<sup>50</sup> It is also Megill’s Nietzsche who dwells within the defining work of perhaps our greatest contemporary historical theorist, Frank Ankersmit. Commenting nearly ten years after the release of *Prophets of Extremity*, Ankersmit praised the book for being right on the mark when it came to Nietzsche’s philosophical thought.<sup>51</sup> His recent publication, *Sublime Historical Experience*, articulated that Nietzsche’s intellectual ambition was to deconstruct the subject’s place within history in order to liberate future thinkers from the tyrannical influence historicism has had upon Western Culture.<sup>52</sup> Like Megill’s, Ankersmit’s Nietzsche demands that we flee into a type of transcendental ahistorical state where we are to be free from the clutches of nineteenth-century scientism, history, and our own past identity.<sup>53</sup>

Sustaining Megill’s interpretation of Nietzsche is the belief that he cannot be that easily historicised. As a result, we are left with no coherent understanding of his intellectual project. In order to reach this conclusion Megill pulled heavily from an essay that Nietzsche never actually published, “On Truth and Falsity in an Extra-Moral Sense.”<sup>54</sup> The essay was given as a Christmas gift to Cosima Wagner as part of a collection of poorly written short prefaces titled, *Five Prefaces to Five Unwritten*

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<sup>50</sup> Ewa Domanska, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism* (New York: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 263-264.

<sup>51</sup> Ankersmit, “Historiography and Postmodernism,” 285.

<sup>52</sup> See also pgs. 75-76 for a detailed discussion of Nietzsche and language that is very similar to Megill’s account in *Prophets of Extremity*.

Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 190, 335-340.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>54</sup> “Nietzsche’s aesthetic standpoint, as manifested in “On Truth and Lie,” is crucial to understanding his enterprise as a whole, for his commitment to immediacy, and the countervailing movement to aesthetic illusion, underlie the persistently anti-philosophical, antiscientific strand in his thought.” Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, 54.

*Books*.<sup>55</sup> The essay stressed the inability of human beings to ever come into possession of the “Truth,” due to the arbitrary nature of language. Given that it foreshadows many of the themes that would be vital to the postmodern movement, it is not surprising the importance this work had for Megill. Rarely does Megill attempt to pull any contextual sources to aid his study of Nietzsche. His chapter deals almost exclusively with Nietzsche’s texts without looking at outside sources that may aid or challenge his interpretation. Given Nietzsche’s very casual writing style, which includes many ad hominem attacks and short aphoristic statements, it is very easy to paint him as a many-sided author who had no coherent theme outside of his rejection of objectivity and his longing for cultural revitalization. In Megill, we sometimes get Nietzsche the “modernist,” and in other passages we get Nietzsche the “postmodernist”.<sup>56</sup> This all but ignores the world in which Nietzsche actually lived.

To be fair, White, Foucault, and Megill all had little access to Nietzsche’s personal letters and annotated books as these were not readily available until after the Berlin Wall came down.<sup>57</sup> Since then only a few historians have attempted to historicize Nietzsche beyond picking and pulling quotes out of his various works. One of the most prominent historical books to make use of Nietzsche’s personal sources has been Christian Emden’s *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History*. Emden’s work sought to better grasp Nietzsche’s political thought by analysing his use of history and how it shaped his desire for political change. The book contains a wealth of material from Nietzsche’s private notebooks and personal correspondence, providing a rich in-depth

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<sup>55</sup> Young, *Nietzsche*, 158-159.

<sup>56</sup> Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 44, 107-109.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Brobjer, *Nietzsche’s Philosophical Context: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 107.

account of Nietzsche's historical methodology and how it guided his political thought.

Yet, despite this, Emden's conclusion is strikingly similar to that of the authors who came before him in regard to the aim of his historiography (genealogy),

For the overall direction of Nietzsche's attempt to overcome the historical and political crisis of modernity, genealogy is both a gain and a loss. It allows Nietzsche to adopt a more realist perspective, but it prevents him from outlining in more detail a valuable alternative, since the latter is always undermined by the critical potential of genealogy.<sup>58</sup>

While Emden's slightly neo-Foucaultian interpretation of Nietzsche is not persuasive, it provides us with yet another example of the lingering influence the three dominant past historical interpretations of Nietzsche's work have had upon historians.<sup>59</sup> Emden's interpretation accepts Nietzsche's naturalism but downplays its importance as a constructive element in his thought.

It is interesting to compare Emden's conclusion with that of the philosophers who have been studying Nietzsche over the past fifteen years. Distinguished Nietzsche scholars such as Brian Leiter, Christopher Janaway, Ken Gemes, John Richardson, and Maudemarie Clarke have, like Emden, come to the conclusion that Nietzsche is more or less a philosophical naturalist.<sup>60</sup> Yet, unlike Emden, the majority of philosophical scholars working on Nietzsche also believe that Nietzsche's intellectual project is one that seeks to "improve" humanity rather than to embark on a self-defeating project of genealogy. What this "improvement" is, and how one goes about achieving it, remains a contentious issue, but few philosophical scholars still hold that Nietzsche is a radical

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<sup>58</sup> Christian Emden, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 322.

<sup>59</sup> A notable exception is Swedish historian Thomas Brobjer who has throughout his intellectual career attempted to highlight the importance of science, and ultimately, a coherent naturalist philosophy within Nietzsche.

<sup>60</sup> Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's Genealogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 34.

sceptic in the same category as Foucault.<sup>61</sup> Given that Emden quotes Foucault to open his discussion of genealogy in his book it seems clear that the “Foucaultian Nietzsche” still has a place of large importance within Emden’s analysis.<sup>62</sup>

This brings us to the task of this thesis. The dominant interpretation of Nietzsche’s philosophy by White, Foucault, and Megill has had a profound impact on the historical community. It has been so strong that even the appearance of new evidence, in the form of Nietzsche’s released personal correspondence, used books, and rough drafts has not deterred historians from repeating the same conclusion regarding Nietzsche’s intellectual project as before. The pillars of this paradigm have been an over-estimation of aestheticism, radical scepticism, and irrational ambiguity within Nietzsche’s thought.<sup>63</sup> This thesis will seek to argue that the proto-postmodern interpretation of Nietzsche’s philosophy does not accurately explain Nietzsche’s intellectual ambitions once his thought is situated within the intellectual context that he was part of. The thesis will then attempt to articulate what a Nietzschean naturalist historiography entails in terms of both its goals and methodology.

To complete this task, I will attempt to historicize Nietzsche by linking his private correspondence, reading materials, and personal relationships with the general themes to be found in his texts. Despite being a hermit later in life, until 1889 Nietzsche was an active letter writer, composing countless messages to friends and family that often comment upon the themes developed more thoroughly in his books. Nor was Nietzsche a

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<sup>61</sup> The most recent defence of the sceptical reading of Nietzsche’s work comes from Jessica Berry. But the scepticism she articulates is tied to the sceptical philosophers of antiquity, not the postmodern thinkers of the twentieth century.

Jessica Berry, *Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>62</sup> Emden, *Nietzsche and the Politics of History*, 260.

<sup>63</sup> Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality* (New York: Routledge University Press, 2002), 4-5.

slouch when it came to reading. Much of his personal library remains intact, complete with marginalia and other notes that he scribbled down between the pages of many popular nineteenth-century books.<sup>64</sup> Finally, one cannot understand Nietzsche's thought without respecting the great impact his personal relationships with Richard Wagner and Paul Rée had upon his life. For all his boasting about being independent, Nietzsche often became obsessively attached to those personalities who influenced him the most.<sup>65</sup> This often meant that any volatility at a personal level spilled over into the intellectual sphere as well.

By contextualizing Nietzsche within the world in which he lived I hope to make it clear that over time Nietzsche increasingly adopted a naturalist philosophical position. However, the themes of aestheticism, radical scepticism, and irrational ambiguity cannot be ignored. Given the many comments Nietzsche makes well into his mature writings that appear to support those positions, it is essential that they are taken into account. This thesis will attempt to bridge these themes within my naturalist reading of Nietzsche. Whereas White, Foucault, and Megill sought to place Nietzsche's naturalism within the confines of their more postmodern understanding of his work, I will argue that the evidence supports the opposite manoeuvre of reading Nietzsche's aestheticism, radical scepticism, and irrational ambiguity as anchored in his naturalism.

I hope to illustrate that Nietzsche's naturalism has implications for his historical theory that conflict with the current historical consensus. Whereas White argued that Nietzsche promoted a tragic historiography, one that longed to flee the public sphere, I wish to show that in fact Nietzsche actively sought to engage the reading public by

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<sup>64</sup> See pp. 186-231 of Brobjer's *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context* for the most up to date detailed listing of the books Nietzsche read. Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context*, 186-231.

<sup>65</sup> Young, *Nietzsche*, 87-88.

confronting his contemporaries with their past in a manner meant to incite social change. Furthermore, I will claim that Nietzsche never attempted to destroy objectivity, but rather sought to question its value in relation to his project of helping us become more “healthy”. Finally, the Nietzschean conception of “health” will be examined in a naturalist sense as opposed to the aestheticist meaning often attributed to the term by Megill. What I hope to expose is that, for Nietzsche, “health” was tied to human physiological and psychological strengthening that often called for the very stresses and tyrannies that Megill believed Nietzsche was attempting to liberate us from. Rather than portraying him as a great freedom fighter, my reading of Nietzsche will argue that his historical project is one centered on promoting a notion of “health” that had its basis in the mannerisms of traditional aristocratic societies. “Health” for Nietzsche marks a return to the mentality of the Greek Sophists, not to the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida.

Far from simply offering a critique of late nineteenth-century Western society, or attempting to free budding artistic geniuses from the clutches of scientism, Nietzsche was attempting to build the foundations for what he hoped would be a “higher humanity.”<sup>66</sup> The use of history was essential for Nietzsche’s project to have any type of success. Nietzsche saw himself as being a “cultural physician” and employed an approach to understanding the past that had much in common with that of the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt. Coupled with Nietzsche’s cultural historical method was his employment of a highly rhetorical style that is reminiscent of the Greek historian Thucydides. I will conclude my thesis by linking these two historical figures through analysis of Nietzsche’s mature philosophy of history. My conclusion will argue that Nietzsche’s mature historiography was meant to appeal to his readers’ senses as much as to their intellects.

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<sup>66</sup> In Nietzschean terminology, “The Revaluation of all values”.

Nietzsche desired for us to recover our health (through the reevaluation of values) by countering the physiological and psychological corruption inherent in the creation of certain moral, religious, political, and even epistemological ideas. Because of this, Nietzsche did not utilize a methodology that relied on traditional argumentative strategies.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The “Birth” of the Aesthetic Nietzsche**

## Introduction

To answer the question of whether Nietzsche was a naturalist it is necessary to explore the aesthetic dimension of his thought. In this chapter, I will historicize Nietzsche by relating his two most cited early publications, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, and “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life”, to his personal correspondence, to books whose influence can be seen in his published works, and to events in his life that had a lasting impact upon his philosophy. This approach aims to establish the character of the “Aesthetic Nietzsche”, a thinker/person who equates the value of life with that of artistic creation, in order to compare him/it with a “Naturalist Nietzsche” later in this thesis. Finally, I seek to highlight the usage of the “Aesthetic Nietzsche” in the historical commentaries of his work provided by Hayden White and Allan Megill. I intend to show that these two historians offered perspectives on Nietzsche that are highly indebted to work before 1876. This resulted in these two historians promoting the idea that there is a strong continuity between Nietzsche’s early aestheticism and his later publications. I will conclude by outlining several reasons why we ought to be sceptical regarding this continuity.

## The Aesthetic Nietzsche

Nietzsche’s love of art began at a very young age. There is a story that as a baby he would stop crying at the sound of his father playing the piano.<sup>67</sup> As a youth he was a prolific writer, completing an autobiography at the age of fourteen and already showing signs of being, according to Nietzsche scholar Julian Young, an above average poet with

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<sup>67</sup> Young, *Nietzsche*, 6-7.

the many works he completed during this period.<sup>68</sup> He was a level eight pianist (by British standards) only two years after being introduced to the instrument, and frequently enjoyed playing the piano with one of his closest friends, Gustav Krug.<sup>69</sup> Nor was Nietzsche a slouch when it came to reading. He was said to practically live in his uncle's library whenever his family came to visit. One of the main activities Nietzsche and his friends took part in even before he left for boarding school was exchanging and commenting on various reading materials.<sup>70</sup> While his education at the prestigious German classical-humanist school Pforta left him little free time as a teenager, one of his first acts upon returning home for holidays in 1860 was the founding of the *Germania* society. This little circle which consisted of Nietzsche and his two closest friends was dedicated to the "highest aspirations of culture." *Germania* gives us our first glimpse of the importance the youthful Nietzsche placed on art as a vital element of cultural and societal well-being.<sup>71</sup>

The *Germania* society demanded that each of its members contribute an original work of literature, art, or music, once a month. Nietzsche presented numerous musical compositions and even an essay on philosophy entitled "Fate and Freedom".<sup>72</sup> While the society eventually died out a few years later, as the three members found themselves consumed with the rigors of university study, Nietzsche's biographer believes it did have a minor impact on Nietzsche's development by exposing him to the contemporary issues discussed within German culture during the early 1860's. The most enduring of these was

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<sup>68</sup> Nietzsche records that he completed forty-six poems between the ages of eleven and thirteen. Ibid., 17.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 14-18.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 29.

Nietzsche's exposure to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, as his friend Gustav was able to bring the piano score as his contribution to the society one evening. While not making him a Wagnerian overnight, this introduction to Wagner's music exposed Nietzsche to a growing controversy emerging within the musical circles of Germany. For along with the Wagnerian piano score Gustav also brought with him a copy of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* which had as its mandate the task of defending *Zukunftsmusik*, a genre to which Wagner's musical style belonged.<sup>73</sup> Wagner held that the goal of "future music" was to combine poetry and music in an "endless melody" that sought to connect his audience with an "unknowable something" that only a truly great musical genius could bring forth.<sup>74</sup> At first Nietzsche objected to *Zukunftsmusik* on the grounds that it was too commercial and superficial, but he increasingly became captivated by the thought that music had a special function in connecting us with something sublime.

This musical piety can be observed in many of Nietzsche's letters during his school years prior to meeting Wagner. In an 1858 note he writes,

God has given us music so that *above all* it might lead us upwards. Music unites all qualities: it can exalt us, divert us, cheer us up, or break the hardest of hearts with the softness of its melancholy tones. But its principal task is to lead our thoughts to higher things, to elevate, even to make us tremble.<sup>75</sup>

While Nietzsche still clung to his Christianity at fourteen, he continued to attribute something divine to music once he had abandoned his faith a couple of years later. In 1863 he wrote,

...the communication of this daemonic Something is the highest demand the artistic understanding must satisfy. This, however, is neither a sensation nor knowledge, but

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>74</sup> Richard Wagner, *Judaism in Music and Other Essays*, trans. by William Ashton Ellis (London: Bison Books, 1995), 338.

<sup>75</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* 1.1 4 ed. Colli and Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967-2006), 77. Quoted and translated in Young, *Nietzsche*, 37.

rather a dim intimation of the divine. Through movement there comes into being a feeling, from out of which heaven suddenly shines forth.<sup>76</sup>

Even by the time of his graduation from Pforta (1864) Nietzsche persistently defended the metaphysical value of music. This can be seen in his response to a colleague who suggested that music merely appealed to our nervous system. Nietzsche responded by saying,

Much more important is the fact that it produces a spiritual intuition, which, by means of its uniqueness, greatness and suggestive power, works like a sudden miracle. Do not think that the ground of this emotional intuition lies in sensation: rather it lies in the highest and finest part of the knowing spirit. Isn't this the same for you, too, - as though something beyond, unsuspected, is disclosed? Don't you sense, that you have been transported into another realm, which is normally hidden from men?...Nothing in art surpasses this effect...[Writing] to a friend more than two years ago I named the effect "something daemonic". If there can be intimations of higher worlds here is where they are concealed.<sup>77</sup>

It is clear that the young Nietzsche had strong feelings concerning the power of music and its aesthetic value. It should not surprise anyone that in 1865, after randomly purchasing Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* from a book store in Leipzig, Nietzsche became an instant convert.

Schopenhauer's philosophy bridged the gap between Nietzsche's scepticism concerning Christianity and his still present metaphysical convictions regarding the power of music. Schopenhauer, like Kant, believed that ontology was divided between the physical world of appearance, strictly conditioned by our minds, and a fundamental reality that exists beyond our senses that we can never access.<sup>78</sup> Over time Schopenhauer moved beyond Kant by arguing that the "thing in-itself" was actually a violently striving

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<sup>76</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Friedrich Nietzsche: Werke und Briefe: Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe* Vol. II ed. Hans Joachim Mette (Munich: Beck, 1933), 172. Quoted and translated in Young, *Nietzsche*, 38.

<sup>77</sup> Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 435. Quoted and translated in Young, *Nietzsche*, 39.

<sup>78</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* Vol. I trans. by E. Payne (New York: Dover, 1967), 17.

force animating every living being, which he termed the “will”.<sup>79</sup> This “will” Schopenhauer believed to be the source of all human misery as it blindly attempted to satisfy its (our) meaningless hunger for various material possessions in a shadow world (Kant) of illusions.

Reducing all reality to the whims of the “will” led Schopenhauer to argue that life, at bottom, is ultimately characterized by incessant suffering. Yet Schopenhauer did not abandon hope. He argued that through art, and in particular music, humanity could in fact escape this false world of suffering.<sup>80</sup> This is because Schopenhauer believed music did not represent anything in our world, as say, a painting or a sculpture does. To Schopenhauer music represented the “will” in its pure state, claiming that it gives us “veil-free” access to the “thing in-itself”. He asserted that experiencing music was an “unconscious exercise in metaphysics in which the mind does not know it is philosophising.”<sup>81</sup> Music alone, however, could not save humanity from its dim existence. Schopenhauer also prescribed a rigorous ascetic regimen by which one could attempt to resist the “will”. His hopes were that by rejecting the world of illusion and combating the “will” one could experience a type of nirvana that only a select few ascetic mystics had been able to master.

Schopenhauer’s influence on Nietzsche was immense and immediate. After reading *The World as Will and Representation*, Nietzsche began to speak of Schopenhauer as “my master” and referred to himself as his “disciple” in many of his personal letters to friends.<sup>82</sup> He also started to introduce “ascetic” practices into his daily

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<sup>79</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Will in Nature* trans. by E. Payne (New York: Berg, 1992), 216.

<sup>80</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. I, 196.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>82</sup> Young, *Nietzsche*, 87.

life, including shortening his daily sleep allotment to just four hours.<sup>83</sup> Nietzsche quickly demanded that his close friends fall in line and become Schopenhauerians as well. He even went so far as to threaten the termination of his friendship with anyone who happened to disapprove of his new “master’s” philosophy.<sup>84</sup> What attracted Nietzsche to Schopenhauer was the importance placed on art, and in particular, music, in terms of offering humanity a bridge to the divine. Whereas Nietzsche had rejected his Christianity on account of what he saw as its philosophical inconsistency, Schopenhauer offered an alternative system that both deified music and offered the prospect of personal salvation in a much more philosophically sound (neo-Kantian) manner. Indeed, the theme of music as redemption from our world of personal suffering is the underlying philosophy to be found in Nietzsche’s first book, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*. Yet, despite being a Schopenhauerian fanatic, Nietzsche remained sceptical regarding certain elements of his philosophy. For example, Nietzsche was dissatisfied by Schopenhauer’s constant use of predicates to describe the “will” since, according to the rules of neo-Kantian metaphysics, this is pointless on account of one’s inability to get beyond our world of sense experience and reason.<sup>85</sup> This scepticism led the young aesthete to dive head first into many of the secondary writings outlining neo-Kantian philosophy. While Nietzsche’s research did not shake his faith in Schopenhauer, it did entrench in his thought many of the themes that would dominate his philosophy until the late 1880’s. It would also help define his aesthetic position that we encounter in his early published works.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>85</sup> Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 1.4, 57. Quoted and translated in young, *Nietzsche*, 92.

Nietzsche's discovery of neo-Kantian philosophy began just before reading Schopenhauer in 1865. Once he arrived at the University of Bonn Nietzsche was increasingly attracted to philosophy, as he dedicated many hours of private study in an attempt to "self-teach" himself the basics of the craft. His first serious encounter with Kant came through his reading of Karl Fortlage's *Genetische Geschichte der Philosophie seit Kant*, which outlined Kantian philosophy and its impact on German intellectual culture in the first half of nineteenth century.<sup>86</sup> This helped pique his interest enough to take two philosophy courses during the summer of 1865, one dealing with ancient thought and the other being Karl Schaarschmidt's "Outline of the History of Philosophy."<sup>87</sup> The course, which traced the development of Western philosophical thought to the present, included discussion of Schopenhauer and his critique of Kant. Oddly, this seems not to have caught Nietzsche's attention as he made no comments about Schopenhauer prior to reading him directly.

After encountering Schopenhauer, however, Nietzsche went on a neo-Kantian reading frenzy. He read fellow pessimist accounts of Schopenhauer's philosophy from Bahnsen, Spielhagen, Radenhausen, and Hartmann, along with R. Haym's biography, *Arthur Schopenhauer*, and V. Kiy's *Der Pessimismus und die Ethik Schopenhauers*.<sup>88</sup> These works all attempted to build upon Schopenhauer's philosophy in order to help flush out the inconsistencies apparent in his thought. For example, Bahnsen's work, *Beiträge zur Charakterologie*, argued that there is not one "will" but rather many "wills" competing with one another in a constant struggle for supremacy.<sup>89</sup> Besides reading Kant

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<sup>86</sup> Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context*, 46.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

directly (*Critique of Pure Reason*), Nietzsche also picked up the books of eminent Kantian scholars such as Kuno Fischer, Friedrich Ueberweg, Otto Liebmann, Friedrich Lange, O. Kohl, and K. Rosenkranz.<sup>90</sup> Ueberweg's book, *Overview of the History of Philosophy from Thales to the Present*, contained a very lengthy annotated bibliography that Nietzsche copied and added to his reading list in 1867.<sup>91</sup> While the books are not present in his library, it seems likely he at least read some of the listed works while at the University of Bonn.

The neo-Kantian book that had the most impact on Nietzsche during this period was Lange's *History of Materialism*. The text provided a Kantian critique of mid nineteenth century materialism that would help form Nietzsche's own philosophical distinction between "truth" and "science." In a letter to a friend Nietzsche claimed that Lange's book offered "the best account" of "the materialist movement of our times, of natural science and its Darwinian theories," earning Lange Nietzsche's praise as an "enlightened Kantian."<sup>92</sup> Later Nietzsche commented that the book was, "undoubtedly the most significant philosophical work to have appeared in recent decades... Kant, Schopenhauer, this book by Lange – I don't need anything else."<sup>93</sup> Lange's history attempted to show that scientific materialism ultimately undermined itself by emphasising the human brain's subjective construction of our conscious experience when interpreting outer phenomena. For example, when light waves impinge upon the retina the mind interprets the light waves as, say, the colour red, which we then consciously

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>92</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Briefwechsel: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 1.2, ed. by Colli and Montinari, (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 517. Quoted and translated in Young, *Nietzsche*, 90.

<sup>93</sup> Curt Janz, *Friedrich Nietzsche: Biographie* Vol. 1 (Munich: Hanser, 1978), 198. Quoted and translated in Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, 65.

experience. The conclusion Lange reaches is that conscious perceptions are merely mental constructions of outer phenomena that are independent of human experience. Therefore, he argued, because of the evidence provided by science detailing the physiology of human perception, we are forced to conclude that human consciousness never comes into contact with the world “as it really is”.<sup>94</sup> Science can only give us knowledge about our world of appearance and hence all attempts to ground scientific materialism metaphysically are doomed to fail.

While this is all standard neo-Kantian theory, what separated Lange from other Kantians was his acceptance and promotion of materialism for understanding everything other than metaphysics. After establishing the impossibility of science to understand the “world as it really is”, Lange stated of materialism that, “...in the sphere of positive questions it is everywhere in the right...”<sup>95</sup> Scepticism about mankind’s position in the universe relative to other life forms as well as doubt about the objectivity of human consciousness provide further examples of Lange’s rather tame radicalism. These themes would be picked up by Nietzsche in his mature writings once he moved beyond his youthful aestheticism. However, during the late 1860’s Nietzsche was more concerned with reconstructing an understanding of Schopenhauer’s philosophy than attempting to destroy it. What Nietzsche took from thinkers like Lange was their sceptical assertion that Schopenhauer could never objectively know anything about the “will” beyond merely stating that it is “there.”

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<sup>94</sup> Friedrich Lange, *History of Materialism and Criticism of Its Importance*, trans. by E. Chester Thomas (New York: Arno Press, 1925), 224-225.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

The central themes of earthly suffering and personal salvation through aesthetic contemplation were never the targets of Nietzsche's critique. In a letter to a friend on this subject Nietzsche states that Schopenhauer's philosophy is,

...something one either grasps or does not. A third standpoint is inconceivable. Someone who does not smell a rose cannot truly criticise it. And if he does smell it then – *à la bonheur* ! After that he loses the desire to criticise.<sup>96</sup>

Later, after Nietzsche had abandoned his aesthetic philosophy, he comments in a couple notes of self-criticism that,

People suffering from religious after-pains...[speak of] the complete and certain gospel in the glance of Raphael's Madonna...[or listening to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony one is liable to] feel he is hovering above the earth in a dome of stars with the dream of *immortality* in his heart: all the stars seem to flutter around him and the earth seems to sink further and further away.<sup>97</sup>

What Lange offered Nietzsche was a means to take out the elements of "withdrawal" in Schopenhauer's philosophy, those parts that preached the virtues of ascetic mysticism, in favour of an active aestheticism that sought to offer both spiritual salvation and cultural rebirth for a German nation enthralled with Prussian militarism. While the "thing in-itself" can never be known, the profound effects of art upon the human mind were for Nietzsche overwhelming. They were too real for him to mistake them for mere physiological reactions of the body.

The last major influence in shaping Nietzsche's aesthetic thought came from the prolific German composer Richard Wagner. Nietzsche had initially been introduced to Wagner after transferring from Bonn University to the University of Leipzig. Upon being invited by his wealthy landlords to attend a lavish dinner party, Nietzsche had the opportunity to meet the musical mastermind. While their conversation was short, Wagner

<sup>96</sup> Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Briefwechsel: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 1.2, 595. Quoted and translated in Young, *Nietzsche*, 94.

<sup>97</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All too Human: A book for Free Spirits*, trans. M. Faber and S. Lehmann, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 89 and 106.

enjoyed Nietzsche's knowledge of the Greeks and love of Schopenhauer so much that he extended an invitation for the young philologist to come visit him anytime at his estate in Tribschen, Switzerland.<sup>98</sup> The encounter, much like his discovery of Schopenhauer, swept Nietzsche up into a pro-Wagner frenzy. He wrote to his friend Erwin Rohde,

Wagner whom I now know from his music, his poetry, his writings on aesthetics and, not least, from happy personal acquaintance with him, is the most vivid illustration of what Schopenhauer calls a 'genius'; the similarity in all particulars springs immediately to the eye.<sup>99</sup>

Shortly after their meeting Nietzsche was already referring to Wagner as "Richard", indicating the closeness he felt to the musician after only a single encounter. What was decisive appears to be Wagner's admiration for Schopenhauer. Nietzsche commented in a letter at length about the "joy" it brought him to hear such positive praise from Wagner about Schopenhauer and his philosophy.<sup>100</sup> After their first encounter (1868), it would be a year before Nietzsche could meet Wagner again. The following two and a half years were the happiest of Nietzsche's life, as his relationship with Wagner and his family grew very intimate.<sup>101</sup>

Life with Richard and Cosima Wagner offered Nietzsche a mature recreation of what he as a teenager had hoped to achieve through the creation of his *Germania* society. Often Richard, Cosima, and Nietzsche would walk together around the Wagners' lakeside dwelling discussing their hopes for the revival of German culture. The Wagners became so close to Nietzsche that they thought of making him the parental guardian of one of

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<sup>98</sup> Young, *Nietzsche*, 76-77.

<sup>99</sup> Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Briefwechsel: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 1.2, 604. Quoted and translated in Young, *Nietzsche*, 78.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 599.

<sup>101</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is," *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 703.

their children, Siegfried, if anything were to happen to Richard.<sup>102</sup> What they admired about the young philologist was his uncanny knowledge of the ancient Greeks. Wagner's ambition as a musician was to recreate the splendour of Greek tragedy in order to overcome the petty consumerism that gripped European society at that time. Both Richard and Cosima appreciated Nietzsche's comments on the Greeks, but became annoyed when he attempted to philosophize or produce his own music.<sup>103</sup> Despite this, Nietzsche, as his letters attest, enjoyed serving as the "humble servant" of the "genius."<sup>104</sup> Wagner, in turn, was thankful to have a star scholar of ancient Greek thought to help him in his attempt to revive the spiritual essence of Greek tragedy.

Wagner's keen interest in Nietzsche and Greek tragedy was largely due to his belief that Greek tragedy provided a blueprint for an artwork capable of rejuvenating European culture in a meaningful way. Wagner observed that the Greeks,

...solemnized the joint memorial celebration of their common descent in their religious feasts, that is, in the glorification and adoration of the god or hero in whose being they felt themselves included as one common whole...they materialized their national traditions in their art, and most directly in the fully-fledged work of art, the tragedy... [Greek tragedy became]...the abstract and epitome of all that was expressible in the Grecian nature. It was the nation itself- in intimate connection with its own history – that stood mirrored in its artwork, that communed with itself and, within the span of a few hours, feasted its eyes with its own noblest essence.<sup>105</sup>

The revival of tragedy in its Greek variant provided what Wagner hoped to be the creation of an intense communal religious experience. In such a state, one no longer remained fragmented from one's peers due to wealth or social status. Instead, the spectator became engrossed in a collective mythology and shared in the creation of a

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<sup>102</sup> Young, *Nietzsche*, 107.

<sup>103</sup> Young, *Nietzsche*, 109-110.

<sup>104</sup> Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Briefwechsel: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 11.1, 19. Quoted and translated in Young, *Nietzsche*, 108.

<sup>105</sup> Richard Wagner, *Wagner on Music and Drama*, trans. by W. Aston Ellis (London: Gollancz, 1964), 61 and 81.

unifying national experience. As a result, Greek tragedy created a meaningful identity for the individual by entrenching within that person a social and cultural identity. For the young Nietzsche, by coming together to create such artistic productions the Greek People took an active role in shaping their own identity. The creative artist did not “impose” his personal values upon the production, but rather acted as the “mouthpiece” for the communal spirit.<sup>106</sup> This allowed Wagner to say that, at its core, “the people” were the authors of their own theatrical production rather than being passive onlookers soaking up the creative vision of a single poet. It was the collective hope of both the scholar Nietzsche and the artist Wagner that their collaborative efforts would lead to the rebirth of Attic tragedy.

It was under the influence of both Wagner and Schopenhauer that Nietzsche wrote his two works that are most cited by historical theorists, *The Birth of Tragedy* and “On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life.” During this period, Nietzsche saw himself as the scholarly arm of Wagner’s artistic campaign to establish a national theatre for the newly created German nation. In 1872, Nietzsche even considered leaving his chair at the University of Basel in order to devote himself fully to the Wagnerian cause.<sup>107</sup> Nietzsche’s first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, dedicated to Wagner himself, was celebrated by both Richard and Cosima as the outcome of their “collective” philosophy.<sup>108</sup> The *Untimely Meditations*, of which “On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life” was part, were originally to be titled “Bayreuth Perspectives”, indicating

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>107</sup> Joachim Kohler, *Nietzsche and Wagner: A Lesson in Subjugation*, trans. R. Taylor (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 65-66.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 81.

Nietzsche's intention to link his writings with Wagner's grand artistic project.<sup>109</sup> These two works collectively contain many of the aesthetic ideals propagated by Schopenhauer and Wagner. The belief that life is essentially pain and suffering from which only art can deliver us momentarily would take center stage in each of these publications.

Furthermore, Nietzsche's hostility at this stage towards both objectivity and science can be seen in these two publications as repetitions of the positions articulated by his two strongest influences.

Nietzsche first published *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1872 at the age of twenty-seven. In it, he sought to articulate how the Greeks were able to come to terms with the horrors of human existence. Following Schopenhauer, Nietzsche argued that human existence consisted inherently of suffering, which suggested it would have been in man's best interest to have not been born.<sup>110</sup> In order to overcome this terrible revelation the Greeks turned to art in an attempt to shield themselves from descending into a self-destructive nihilism. Initially, this art took on a plastic, or "Apollinian", form in the guise of the Olympian Gods. Building upon the metaphysical framework provided by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche held that "Apollinian" art denoted the material world of appearance, or of "things" (which are really images) rather than illuminating Schopenhauer's destructive "will" (reality as it fundamentally is).<sup>111</sup> Nietzsche highlights Homer's epic poetry as allowing the Greeks to endure life by deifying their existence via the interplay between the Greeks and their Olympian deities. Unfortunately, this plastic world of "Apollinian" art could not come to terms with all of life's terribleness. It could never replicate the

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 96-97.

<sup>110</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music," *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 42.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 36.

internal strife that one subjectively experienced thanks to the violently striving “will” which lay at the heart of all life. Only through the intoxicating power of music, or “Dionysian” art, could one both mimic and momentarily free oneself from the tyrannical hold of the “will”. Repeating Schopenhauer, Nietzsche argued that music offered the listener the possibility of entering into a state of blissful “oneness” with fundamental reality.<sup>112</sup>

Yet it is here that Nietzsche broke with his philosophical influence by identifying a problem. This is because the intoxication brought forth by the “Dionysian” effect of music has the negative impact of making us pine for death. In his own words Nietzsche proclaims,

But as soon as this everyday reality re-enters consciousness, it is experienced as such, with nausea: an ascetic, will-negating mood is the fruit of these states...Now no comfort avails any more; longing transcends a world after death, even the gods; existence is negated along with its glittering [Apollonian] reflection in the gods or in an immortal beyond. Conscious of the truth he has once seen, man now sees everywhere only the horror or absurdity of existence.<sup>113</sup>

As a result, Nietzsche’s task became one that sought to overcome Schopenhauer’s method of coping with the horrors of human existence, Nietzsche sought a solution that would allow us to continue living.

It is at this juncture in the book that Nietzsche introduces Attic tragedy in order to solve the existential crisis that the ancient Greeks faced. Neither “Apollo” nor “Dionysus” can adequately offer us salvation from the horrors of our existence alone. Only together, united in the theatrical performance of Attic tragedy, could the “Apollonian” and “Dionysian” forces offset each other’s shortfalls. Nietzsche argued that the plot of tragedy, its “Apollinian” element, saved the theatrical audience from

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 59-60

descending into a “Dionysian” abyss by engrossing them within the imagery of their own shared mythology. Nietzsche believed that myths were essential to this process because they were inherently understood and revered by everyone present at the performance in terms of their moral revelations and plot structure.<sup>114</sup> In essence, the mythic nature of Greek tragedy allowed the production to have a religious effect that would otherwise be impossible if the plot had been foreign to the spectators. The dramatic element of Attic tragedy allowed the truth about existence, that at bottom one dwells in a “false” world of intense suffering, to adopt a plastic “Apollinian” form. This could be seen, in Nietzsche’s thought, by the fact that the main characters in Greek tragedy came to represent the terrible truths of human existence. Conversely, the chorus in Attic tragedy takes on an “Apollinian” role by highlighting through sound the more significant events that occur during the play. Music was utilized to “glorify” the tragic fate that awaited an Oedipus or Prometheus; it would comfort the audience with the sense that, despite all its suffering, life is still worth living. Nietzsche commented that the chorus had the effect of justifying all of the horrors present in the dramatic portion of the performance by confirming that, at bottom, life is “indestructibly powerful and pleasurable”.<sup>115</sup> In doing so, Nietzsche claimed that

...with this chorus the profound Hellene, uniquely susceptible to the tenderest and deepest suffering, comforts himself, having looked boldly right into the terrible destructiveness of so-called world history as well as the cruelty of nature, and being in danger of longing for a Buddhistic negation of the will. Art saves him, and through art – life.<sup>116</sup>

Through the chorus, the spectator gained the Schopenhauerian insight that at bottom we are all one immortal “will” transcending this world of suffering and mere appearance. Yet,

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 135-136.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 59.

these musical interludes serve to glorify the Apollinian aspect of the tragic story itself, thereby justifying the terribleness of existence and saving us from descending into an intense longing for death. To summarize this process Nietzsche claimed that “Dionysius speaks the language of Apollo; and Apollo, finally the language of Dionysus; and so the highest goal of tragedy and of all art is attained.”<sup>117</sup>

If the Greeks had figured out how to cope with the horrors of existence through tragedy, the question then arose as to why this wisdom disappeared only to be recovered by Nietzsche in the late nineteenth century. Nietzsche’s answer was that Socrates destroyed Greek tragedy by introducing “aesthetic rationalism” as the supreme means of evaluating art. This Socratic philosophy of art displayed, “. . .the unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it.”<sup>118</sup> Through the plays written by Euripides, Nietzsche argued, the rationalistic spirit found in Socrates changed the dynamic of Greek tragedy by attempting to explain away those elements of the performance that lacked a rational foundation. As a result, choral singing was first popularized and then eventually eliminated from future productions as its earlier profound effect became unexplainable and therefore deemed unworthy for the stage. Art, therefore, lost its life affirming power.

Not just content with explaining the death of Greek tragedy, Nietzsche contended that the dominating influence of “aesthetic rationalism” continued forward all the way down to his present. For Nietzsche this was worrisome for two different reasons. First, Nietzsche believed that thanks to the “courage and wisdom” of Kant and Schopenhauer

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 95.

his contemporaries ought to know that all their knowledge of reality must eventually come to a depressing conclusion.<sup>119</sup> The scholar of knowledge has to face the horrible truth that the quest for objectivity can never escape the veil of mere appearance imposed on us by our own minds. We can never access “reality in-itself” via Socratic rationalism. Secondly, Nietzsche thought the predominance of scientific materialism, fuelled by the Socratic hunger to correct the ills of human existence, had done catastrophic harm to our artistic sensibilities. Nietzsche’s contemporaries, by uncovering the anthropomorphic nature of their myths, religions, and fables, had undercut their own ability to experience art metaphysically. This led to a potentially destructive situation as Socratic rationalism both undermined the power of art to protect one from the horrors of existence, and denied itself the ability to carry out its ultimate goal of correcting reality thanks to the results of neo-Kantian philosophy. Thus Nietzsche, following in Wagner’s footsteps, called for the rebirth of tragedy as a means to undercut the growth of European nihilism before it was too late. To do so, Nietzsche concluded his book explaining that his native Germany, through the tragic theatrical productions of his dear friend Richard Wagner, could offer the people of Europe their best hope for salvation.<sup>120</sup>

As one can see, *The Birth of Tragedy* touched upon the themes that are key to the aesthetic interpretation of Nietzsche’s philosophy. The importance of myth and music as a means to combat the bleak picture of human existence articulated by Schopenhauer, combined with Nietzsche’s strong disdain for a materialist understanding of fundamental reality, highlighted his aesthetic agenda. Key to Nietzsche’s argument was the strategy of linking the flourishing of “life” to the degree aestheticism infused a particular culture.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 139-144.

Without the “limited horizon” of artistic creation Nietzsche believed humanity was doomed to descend into the depths of Schopenhauerian despair. Conversely, wherever “Socratic aestheticism”, exemplified by critical rationalism, happened to be a culture’s single means of interpreting reality, “life” was in great danger.

It is within the context of *The Birth of Tragedy*, with its persistent Schopenhauerian and Wagnerian influences, that one ought to approach Nietzsche’s most direct contribution to historical theory, “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life”. The initial publication of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) met with harsh resistance from the German philological community. Most reviewers attacked Nietzsche for turning his back on the philological discipline that gave him the platform to speak in the first place.<sup>121</sup> Some professors even advised their students to stay away from the University of Basel in order to avoid Nietzsche’s corrupting influence.<sup>122</sup> At the same time, Wagner was running into difficulties trying to raise funds for his Bayreuth Theatre. It appeared as though the great hope that Nietzsche concluded his first book with had been ignored by his contemporary Germans. In his view, instead of heralding a new era of culture via the rebirth of tragedy, the German public had become mesmerized by the military prowess of their newly created nation-state. Nationalism threatened to distract the Germans from their higher goal of assuming the cultural leadership of all Europe. In a letter Nietzsche captured this mood by saying,

It is quite false to say that previously the Germans were aesthetic now they are political. The Germans sought an ideal in their Luther; German music, higher than anything else we know as culture. The quest for that should stop because they have power? Precisely power (on account of its evil nature) should direct them there more strongly than ever. He

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<sup>121</sup> Emden, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History*, 98.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

must apply his power to his higher cultural goal...The glorification of the modern state can lead to the destruction of all culture.”<sup>123</sup>

Furthermore, during the early 1870’s the German public was not proving interested in reading Nietzsche’s appeal for the revival of Attic tragedy. Rather, it was David Strauss and his book, *The Old and New Faith* (1872), in which the virtues of modern philological scholarship and scientific materialism were praised, that consumed the public’s attention. Strauss’s scientific optimism was one of the factors that led to the publication of Nietzsche’s first *Untimely Meditation*, where he re-articulated his critique of critical rationalism found in *The Birth of Tragedy* but in a much more vindictive tone.<sup>124</sup> A scathing critique of his book by fellow philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff further fuelled Nietzsche’s desire to defend and elaborate the ideas brought forth in *The Birth of Tragedy*. While Nietzsche believed he was laying the foundation for the revival of German culture Wilamowitz accused him of being a poor scholar who had turned his back on the teachings of his profession.<sup>125</sup> As 1873 passed into 1874, Nietzsche and Wagner were discovering that their collective hopes for a German/pan-European cultural renaissance were falling upon deaf ears. Wagner was running out of money, with few people willing to buy sponsorship certificates to support his ambitions in Bayreuth. Nietzsche had become an outcast amongst his philological peers throughout Germany, and neither Wagner nor Nietzsche seemed capable of winning significant numbers over to their cause. It was within this context that Nietzsche wrote “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life” as yet another attempt to promote the agenda already presented in *The Birth of Tragedy*. This time Nietzsche addressed an academic audience,

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<sup>123</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe* Vol. 7, ed. by G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: Gruyter, 1999), 80. Quoted and translated in Young, *Nietzsche*, 174.

<sup>124</sup> Young, *Nietzsche*, 168-170.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 151-152.

particularly the youth within academia, whom Nietzsche believed he could still “save” from developing into meaningless document collectors.<sup>126</sup>

Nietzsche began his essay by stating that the goal of historical scholarship ought to be the enhancing of “life”.<sup>127</sup> Once again, Nietzsche’s use of the term “life” is near synonymous with “art” as he claimed that “life” can only grow and prosper when it is surrounded by the “limited horizon” of myth.<sup>128</sup> Nietzsche’s attack on nineteenth century historicism mirrored his earlier critique of critical rationalism. By uncovering the past to such a degree, Nietzsche’s contemporaries were unwittingly destroying the mythic framework necessary for human action, and thus for “life”, to prosper.<sup>129</sup> Humanity must be able to “forget” the past to an extent just as it also needs to comprehend it in order to live productively. As we become heavily immersed in history we eventually observe that every culture rests upon an arbitrary foundation, and thus, the ability to experience our, or any other culture, religiously fades away. Nietzsche summarizes this point when he states that

All living things need an atmosphere around them, a secret circle of darkness. If this veil is taken from them, if people condemn a religion, an art, a genius to orbit like a star without an atmosphere, then we should no longer wonder about their rapid decay and the way they become hard and barren.<sup>130</sup>

Historical enquiry, much like the Socratic rationalism found in *The Birth of Tragedy*, is self-refuting from an ontological perspective. Nietzsche points out that the overbearing instinct of the historian to historicise the totality of human existence will finally reach the

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<sup>126</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* (LaVergne: Nu Vision Publications, 2007), 73.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-45.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-30.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

point in which it turns inward and devours itself.<sup>131</sup> By historicising history, Nietzsche's youthful scholars of "tomorrow" would eventually discover the painful fact that their discipline also rested upon an arbitrary foundation. Similar to the nihilistic state Socratic rationalism produces once it reaches its self-defeating conclusion, Nietzsche's historians, upon reflection, will find themselves plunged into an ironic state of consciousness. Yet, it is at this moment, at the peak of their despair, Nietzsche felt, that they would gain the possibility to set history on the right course by realizing that only as a work of art can history fulfill its "life" affirming task. When understood, Nietzsche believed it would become clear to all that only if "history suffers transformation into a pure work of art" will it be able to "preserve instincts and arouse them", and thus enhance "life".<sup>132</sup>

Despite the focus many historians have placed on the essay's early analysis of the different modes of historical thought (monumental, antiquarian, and critical) outlined by Nietzsche, the majority of the text consists of his call to subject history to the demands of art. Nietzsche's ideal historian resembles a painter more than an academic scholar, as can be seen by how he defines "historical objectivity" as being,

A certain standpoint in the historian who sees the procession of motive and consequence too clearly for it to have an effect on his own personality. We think of the aesthetic phenomenon of the detachment from all personal concern with which the painter sees the picture and forgets himself. . . ; and we require the same artistic vision and absorption in his object from the historian.<sup>133</sup>

Continuing this thought, Nietzsche goes so far as to say that "life-affirming" history could have "no drop of common fact in it and yet could claim to be called in the highest degree objective."<sup>134</sup> Practically speaking, Nietzsche states that this type of historian "invents ingenious variations on a probably commonplace theme, in raising the popular

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 55-56.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 42.

melody to a universal symbol and showing what a world of depth, power, and beauty exists in it.”<sup>135</sup> Nietzsche terms this as the “superhistorical” element of the historian’s task in which the historian turns “the eyes from the process of sheer becoming to that which gives existence an eternal and stable character—art and religion...”<sup>136</sup> Furthermore Nietzsche’s historian is also someone who knows when to destroy the past. He or she understands what the vital role of the “unhistorical”, or “the power of art, of *forgetting* and of drawing a limited horizon around oneself”, is to the “healthy” development of a people.<sup>137</sup> It was not lost on Nietzsche that this process could become dangerous if left unchecked. His rather Wagnerian solution states that so long as history is left to those few individuals full of personal “genius”, profound “experience”, and intense “reflection”, everything ought to go smoothly.<sup>138</sup>

Thus one can observe quite readily that “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life” repeats much of what was found in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche’s distinction between the “unhistorical” and the “superhistorical” is very similar to the “Apollinian” and “Dionysian” dualism introduced in his first book. The “unhistorical” need to forget the past and the “Superhistorical” longing to glorify it mirrors the two aesthetic conceptions Nietzsche established two years earlier. Nietzsche’s solution to the crisis of historicism, that only when the “unhistorical” and “superhistorical” are combined in unison by a creative genius could history be “life-promoting,” marks a return to the very same conclusion he reached in the final pages of *The Birth of Tragedy*. The essay’s critique of “scientific history” is almost a duplicate of Nietzsche’s attack on Socratic

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 45.

rationalism. Again, he stressed the self-defeating conclusion that all purely rational enquiry must eventually face (neo-Kantian conclusion) along with its harmful effect on human “life” by destroying the illusions necessary to protect us from a crippling nihilism. As one can observe, Nietzsche’s aesthetic philosophy never dealt with epistemological or ontological concerns separately. Both were connected to the degree that even his essay on historical theory ultimately became a platform for his aesthetic ontology. Nietzsche never abandoned this “all or nothing” approach to philosophy despite his fragmented aphoristic style.

The only striking difference between the two publications came from Nietzsche’s increasingly hostile attitude towards his contemporary Germans. No longer does Nietzsche approach his contemporaries with great hope. Rather, he chastises them for having allowed themselves to be corrupted “by history” and for believing that their military victory over the French in 1871 somehow reflected German cultural superiority rather than Prussian military efficiency.<sup>139</sup> Hegel, in particular, now provoked Nietzsche’s ire because he had established the intellectual foundations for Germans to believe that the creation of their new nation state marked the apex of, or conclusion to, an ideal world historical process.<sup>140</sup> Nietzsche went to great lengths to argue that state-worship ought to be beneath a truly cultured people. Only the youth of Germany could provide Nietzsche with any type of optimism. These “fighters” and “dragon slayers” were Germany’s only hope for the creation of a more beautiful “humanity” because they had not yet been corrupted by the new German state’s near obsession with history.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 29-31 and 69-71.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 71-73.

To summarize, the core of Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophical outlook was the belief that only art could enhance human life. This conclusion was reached by Nietzsche primarily due to his background in neo-Kantian philosophy. Following Lange's *History of Materialism*, along with both Kant and Schopenhauer's existing critiques of metaphysics, Nietzsche inferred that a critically rational and materialist understanding of reality could never get beyond the world of mere appearance. Schopenhauer and Wagner argued that through art, especially music, one could in fact transcend this world of mere appearance and attain momentary salvation from the clutches of nihilism. Given Nietzsche's strong commitment to cultural revival from an early age, it ought not to surprise us that he became infatuated with the aestheticism preached by his two most prominent influences. Without art, humanity would be forced to see the chaotic nothingness that enveloped its very existence. Everything one took seriously would become hollow, merely an empty vessel devoid of meaning and dwelling in the shadow of the "thing-in-itself". This in turn paralyzes; one can no longer act because there is no longer an existential reason to do so. There is no longer a "what for" that guides human action. Thus it is only by returning to, or resurrecting art that humanity can be saved from this fate. Nietzsche's goal before 1876 was precisely that. He sought to work within the structures of Schopenhauerian and Wagnerian thought in order to produce a means of warding off the destructive by-product of modern criticism, suicidal nihilism. Only through art could humanity regain the capacity to live meaningful lives once again. Only by living meaningfully could humanity be expected to grow and prosper.

Overall, both *The Birth of Tragedy* and "On the Abuse and Use of History for Life" articulate the same aestheticist demand for the primacy of art over materialism. A

key consequence of this continuity has been that historians have often fixed these two works together as containing the theoretical framework for Nietzsche's entire philosophical career. This is roughly the approach both Allan Megill and Hayden White have taken when constructing their chapters on the German philosopher. While their conclusions differ, each historian takes Nietzsche's youthful aestheticism as his most enduring contribution to history and philosophy. They both seek to find within Nietzsche's later writings the same aesthetic position expressed in his published works prior to 1876.<sup>142</sup> The positive "life affirming" role assigned to art/mythology and the negative "life-denying" label applied to critical rationalism/fundamental materialism, as articulated by the youthful Nietzsche, are found reproduced in Megill and White's analysis. White's critique of Nietzsche- that he leaves us trapped within a "subjective mysticism" in which we attempt to live by illusions that we know are such- is ultimately a critique of the Aesthetic Nietzsche. Megill's complaint that Nietzsche, despite all his scepticism, still imposed upon us a notion of "aesthetic Truth" is also an attack that can only have value when levied against the Aesthetic Nietzsche.

This continuity presupposed by both historians fails to take into account the importance of outside influences upon Nietzsche's thought. As we have seen, Nietzsche's early aestheticism was greatly influenced by his close friendship with Richard Wagner and their joint admiration for the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. For all his genius, Nietzsche had the bad habit of uncritically adopting the views of those who had a profound impact on his intellectual development. Early in this chapter we noticed that Nietzsche described himself as a "disciple" of both Schopenhauer and Wagner. His infatuation reached the point where he was willing to sacrifice long term friendships and

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<sup>142</sup> See chapter one.

potentially his academic career, in order to promote their ideals. We shall observe this trend once again in relation to Nietzsche's friendship with the psychologist Paul Rée in the following chapter. It should come as no surprise that any fissure between Nietzsche and Wagner would have profound consequences for his philosophy. Neither White nor Megill attribute enough significance to this eventual split; as a result they are unable to notice Nietzsche's shift away from his early aesthetic ambitions.

Beyond 1876, Nietzsche certainly published works that do not make it easy to disregard his early aestheticism. He readily employed themes and language that make the potential continuity with his youthful works seem possible. Indeed, Megill has a point when he claims that all interpretations of Nietzsche must come to terms with his repeated use of the symbol "Dionysus" in his later thought.<sup>143</sup> Similarly, Hayden White is not wrong for noticing the importance of "forgetting" and the negative spin Nietzsche gives to critical scholarship in the *Genealogy of Morals*.<sup>144</sup> What I believe each historian has missed, however, is the secondary value these aesthetic conceptions have within Nietzsche's philosophical outlook after his break with Wagner. For example, two of Nietzsche's early influences, Schopenhauer and Lange, utilized a great deal of natural scientific work to support their eventual neo-Kantian conclusions. There is a great deal of biology and psychology in Schopenhauer's writings just as there is a wealth of physics and physiology in Lange's large book. Here these sciences played a secondary role as each thinker sought mainly to support their separate conclusions that ultimately place metaphysics beyond scientific reach. I will attempt to show that in his mature writings Nietzsche followed a similar strategy, but unlike Schopenhauer who used science to

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<sup>143</sup> Megill, *Prophets of Extremity*, 43-47.

<sup>144</sup> White, *Metahistory*, 360-361 and 369-370.

promote aestheticism, Nietzsche utilized aestheticism in order to produce a more naturally scientific, and thus, materialistic, understanding of human life. In essence, I will argue that Nietzsche relegated aestheticism to the domain of psychology by the end of his philosophical career.

Nietzsche's move away from the aestheticism of Schopenhauer and Wagner was not an overnight phenomenon. Many elements of their thought stayed with him throughout his intellectual career. For example, Nietzsche continued to hold a neo-Kantian conception of metaphysics that equated any truth claim with a flawed attempt to escape error up until *Twilight of the Idols* was published in 1889.<sup>145</sup> Nietzsche's descriptive account of "perspectivism", his belief that the more "eyes" we bring to bear upon an object the better our "objectivity" will be, has led many commentators to assume he was advocating a democratization of human knowledge.<sup>146</sup> When this is combined with other neo-Kantian attacks levelled against speculative science, it strikes the reader that Nietzsche very well could be attempting to promote his youthful aesthetic agenda throughout his mature writings. This has led many to assume that Nietzsche marks the beginning of an intellectual trend that culminates with such postmodern thinkers as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.<sup>147</sup> Because Nietzsche denied that any one truth claim is "true", the goal of his philosophy appeared to become the uprooting of any epistemology that attempted to formalize itself above all others. Michel Foucault's reading of Nietzsche argued that the German philosopher's ambition was precisely that. Such an interpretation, however, is deeply rooted in the philosophy of the Aesthetic

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<sup>145</sup> See Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 113-114.

<sup>146</sup> McGill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error*, 110.

<sup>147</sup> See chapter one.

Nietzsche. While some of his early ideas took longer to abandon than others, eventually Nietzsche's thought did move beyond the aestheticism of his youth.

## **Chapter Three**

**“Beyond” Wagner - The Emergence of the Naturalist Nietzsche.**

## Introduction

The previous chapter examined the foundations of the youthful aestheticism that was dominant in Nietzsche's thinking prior to 1876. Nietzsche's fanatical devotion to Wagner and their joint admiration for Schopenhauer's philosophy resonated through his published writings up until this date. Historians have, for the most part, taken Nietzsche's youthful aestheticism as indicative of his overall philosophy throughout his career.<sup>148</sup>

What historians have failed to take sufficient account of is the tremendous break that occurred in Nietzsche's thought after the end of his friendship with Wagner. At the same moment that Nietzsche abandoned the ideals of Bayreuth, he became friends with the materialist scholar of morality Paul Rée. Through Rée, Nietzsche began to focus his attention away from the metaphysical positions prevalent in his early publications in favour of a more naturalist understanding of human life. While Nietzsche eventually would turn against Rée's philosophy too, his commitment to a naturalist methodology would persist until the conclusion of his career in 1890.

This chapter seeks to illustrate the heavy importance that Nietzsche's break with Wagner, and his subsequent friendship with Rée, had for his transition from aesthetic to naturalist thinker. It then considers the implications of this transition in regard to Nietzsche's use of aestheticism in his mature thought. To do so, this chapter begins with a short account of Nietzsche's falling out with Wagner and his subsequent friendship with Rée. It will offer quotations from Nietzsche's private correspondence that indicate clearly his desire to abandon the aesthetic themes found in his early writings. Nietzsche's reading

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<sup>148</sup> Thomas Brobjer, "Nietzsche's View of the Value of Historical Studies and Methods," *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 65 (April, 2004): 301.

materials will also be utilized to provide further evidence of his turn away from aestheticism in favour of a more materialistic view of reality. Building upon this evidence, I hope to show that Nietzsche's mature publications were the work of a naturalist philosopher rather than a aesthetic idealist.

### **Into the Abyss**

Just prior to 1876 Nietzsche began to experience the first wave of major health problems that would plague him for the remainder of his life. Blurred vision, pounding head-aches, and fits of vomiting forced Nietzsche to set aside both his professorship and his friendship with Wagner.<sup>149</sup> Despite longing to be with Wagner on the eve of the Bayreuth Festival, Nietzsche's time to himself gave him the opportunity to explore areas of his thought that would have been off limits in the Wagner household. During his period of recovery, removed from Wagner and Bayreuth, Nietzsche came into contact with his second most profound intellectual influence, the Jewish psychologist and philosopher Paul Rée.

Rée was a recent graduate of the University of Halle who, like Nietzsche, was an adamant Schopenhauerian. While still a student Rée had taken a liking to Nietzsche, and Nietzsche, after reading Rée's first major publication, *Philosophical Observations*, felt compelled to start corresponding with the young Jewish thinker.<sup>150</sup> What made Rée unique among Schopenhauerians was his refusal to adopt the metaphysical and aesthetic claims present in Schopenhauer's thought. Influenced by such thinkers as Darwin, Comte, La Rochefoucauld, Montaigne, and Vauvenargues, Rée adopted a philosophical outlook

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<sup>149</sup> Young, *Nietzsche*, 206.

<sup>150</sup> Young, *Nietzsche*, 212-213.

rich in empiricism, evolutionism, positivism, naturalism, and utilitarianism, which consigned any metaphysical speculation to the realm of psychology.<sup>151</sup> He was often quoted as stating that any reader who cannot “stomach” Darwin ought to stay away from his books.<sup>152</sup> *Philosophical Observations* captured Nietzsche’s attention by providing a sceptical account of human consciousness that found its basis in Darwinian, rather than neo-Kantian thought. Rée littered the book with cynical comments like, “Speakers and authors generally convince only those who were already convinced”, and “We regard only those critics as competent who praise our achievements.”<sup>153</sup> Nietzsche’s next major publication, *Human, All too Human*, would contain many similar jabs. Rée’s book also utilized the aphoristic style that would become so prevalent in Nietzsche’s later writings.

In their correspondence, Nietzsche made it clear that in Rée he had found a friend in whom he could discuss openly the more animalistic elements of human life. This “openness”, the ability to bring up any controversial topic in conversation, was in stark contrast to Wagner’s insistence on discussing only what he thought important enough to merit his contemplation. Nietzsche’s excitement regarding this newly found freedom was expressed in an early letter to Rée when he stated,

Shall we make this shared need the basis of our friendship and hope to meet often? It would be a great joy and profit to me if you say ‘Yes’. Let us see, then, how much personal openness a friendship founded on this basis can bear! I do not find it so easy to promise this...But I wish from the heart to deserve your openness...<sup>154</sup>

In a letter to Rohde, Nietzsche celebrated his new colleague’s intellect as that of a moralist with the “sharpest insight”, something “very rare among the Germans.”<sup>155</sup> Yet,

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<sup>151</sup> Brobjer, *Nietzsche’s Philosophical Context*, 40-41.

<sup>152</sup> Young, *Nietzsche*, 212.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>154</sup> Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Briefwechsel: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 11.5, 505. Quoted and translated in Young, *Nietzsche*, 213.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 494.

as Nietzsche remarked later in *Human, All too Human*, the methodology employed by Rée, despite “hitting the mark again and again” had the depressing effect of bringing the “black mark of human nature” to the surface.<sup>156</sup> More precisely, Rée’s thought brought forth the notion that from an evolutionary perspective, all metaphysical claims, and the high emotional states they produce within us, were *cowardly attempts* by the human mind to shield itself from the true horrors of human existence. This differed from Nietzsche’s earlier aestheticism which argued the contrary- that it was precisely when we are lifted from this world of painful illusion through the transcending metaphysical power of Dionysian art (music) that we come to realize the falseness of our surroundings and receive the calming thought that at bottom we are all immortally one with existence. A logical consequence of Rée’s position was that a thinker who could face the horrors of existence without any need of metaphysical salvation would be considered “brave”, whereas a philosopher who needed metaphysical comfort would be branded a “coward”. While Nietzsche certainly did not change his philosophical position overnight, his friendship with Rée had the consequence of producing within him a sceptical attitude concerning the aestheticism he had so strongly supported in the past. Thus Nietzsche, just prior to embarking for Bayreuth in the summer of 1876, found himself for the first time experiencing doubts about his own thought.<sup>157</sup>

The Bayreuth Festival took place during the month of August in 1876. It would become the fateful symbolic event that marked the death of the Aesthetic Nietzsche, and

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<sup>156</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All too Human*, 41.

<sup>157</sup> Perhaps the best example comes from a letter Nietzsche sent to Rohde in October 1875. In it, Nietzsche revealed that his thought was heading in a new direction. He told Rohde that he lacked control over where his new orientation might take him and described the whole experience as the most “difficult” to date in terms of sorting out his own philosophical position.

Nietzsche, *Nietzsche Briefwechsel: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 11.5, 490.

all but ended his friendship with Richard Wagner. Already arriving with doubts about Wagner's aesthetic ambition, Nietzsche was mortified by what he saw during his time at the festival. First, the audience attending Wagner's production was anything but the group of free thinkers Nietzsche had idealized; instead, it was the vulgar aristocratic and petty bourgeois German elite who swelled the small streets of the Bavarian town. Even the Kaiser, who was a known critic of Wagner's work, attended a performance and embraced his old enemy.<sup>158</sup> What was supposed to be a pan-European event had become hijacked by the German elite to promote the nationalist agenda that Nietzsche loathed. Secondly, Wagner appeared to care most about the staging and appearance of the performance, which Nietzsche felt distracted the audience from the pseudo-religious atmosphere needed to take the mythical plot seriously. Wagner employed mechanical devices, naturalistic scenery, proper dress and décor in order to impress upon his audience a sense of realism. Nietzsche, however, believed that what made Greek tragedy so profound was its use of the audience's imagination to enhance the poor costumes and limited technology available during Classical Antiquity.<sup>159</sup> For Nietzsche the Greek audience played a role in actively shaping their theatrical production, while Wagner's spectators simply found themselves bombarded by "special effects".

The final insult that marked the conclusion of Nietzsche's friendship with Wagner occurred a few months later when both individuals were seeking refuge from poor health in Italy. During Nietzsche's stay in Bayreuth, Malwida von Meysenbug, a close friend of Wagner's, had suggested that he accompany her to Sorrento where he could convalesce at the large house she had rented close to the sea. Nietzsche accepted the offer and brought

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<sup>158</sup> Kohler, *Nietzsche & Wagner*, 115.

<sup>159</sup> Young, *Nietzsche*, 225.

along Rée to accompany him on his journey. Unbeknownst to the two, Wagner was also planning a trip to Sorrento. Already somewhat agitated by Nietzsche's demeanour at Bayreuth, Wagner was horrified to discover that his one time protégé had become close friends with a "Jew". After a series of minor altercations, Nietzsche was given a choice: either terminate his friendship with Rée, or be banished from Wagner's inner circle.<sup>160</sup> Nietzsche refused to abandon Rée and thus found himself no longer welcome in the Wagner household.

While later incidents would further divide the two former friends, including Wagner's corresponding with Nietzsche's doctor citing the cause of his illness as excessive masturbation, events in Sorrento marked their official break.<sup>161</sup> Nietzsche's intellectual orientation was moving more towards a natural materialist outlook while Wagner appeared to be heading back into the arms of the Church.<sup>162</sup> Already in Italy Wagner had let slip a few of the themes to be found in his future production of *Parsifal*.<sup>163</sup> His advocacy of Christianity, after so long promoting the ideals of an atheist philosopher (Schopenhauer), would be the target of Nietzsche's later attacks against his former mentor. Nietzsche's distaste for Wagner's new intellectual outlook was also aided by Rée, whose scientific approach to philosophical analysis, helped to sever the bond between Wagner and Nietzsche. Rée had, through his correspondence with Nietzsche, already cast doubt regarding the latter's aestheticism prior to the Bayreuth Festival. Nietzsche's infatuation with Rée's scientific approach to philosophical questions, very

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<sup>160</sup> Kohlner, *Nietzsche and Wagner*, 128-129.

<sup>161</sup> Young, *Nietzsche*, 239-240.

<sup>162</sup> Roughly, methodological naturalism is a philosophical position in which a thinker utilizes the dominant scientific methods prevalent at the time of research to guide their eventual conclusions. Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, 4-5.

<sup>163</sup> Kohlner, *Nietzsche & Wagner*, 128-130.

noticeable to Malwida in Sorrento, led him to reject Wagner's demand to terminate his new friendship. Again, one sees Nietzsche's susceptibility to become completely engrossed within the horizon of somebody else's philosophical thought. By becoming a "Réelian", a thinker whose task was to unravel, rather than construct, the metaphysical illusions comforting humanity, Nietzsche had to account for his previous publications. It is here that Nietzsche provided what ought to be viewed as definitive proof of his split with his youthful aestheticism.

Even as early as his next publication, *Human, All too Human*, Nietzsche was able to provide a piece of self-criticism that frankly acknowledged his break with his earlier thought. Insightfully, Nietzsche summarized his own personal experience when he wrote,

With ever greater speed, men are repeating the usual phases of the spiritual culture that has been attained in the course of history. Presently, they begin to enter the culture as children moved by religion, and in their tenth year of life, perhaps, those feelings attain the greatest vitality; then they make the transition to weaker forms (pantheism) as they approach science; they get quite beyond God, immortality, and the like, but yield to the spells of a metaphysical philosophy. This, too, they finally cease to find credible; art, on the other hand, seems to offer more and more, so that for a time metaphysics barely survives as a metamorphosis into art or as an artistically transfiguring mood. But the scientific sense grows more domineering, and leads the man on to natural science and history, and in particular to the most rigorous methods of knowledge, while art takes on an ever more subdued and modest meaning. All this tends to happen within a man's first thirty years.<sup>164</sup>

In a notebook passage from 1877 Nietzsche went so far as to claim,

I want to expressly inform the readers of my earlier writings that I have abandoned the metaphysical-artistic views that fundamentally govern them: they are pleasant but untenable. He who speaks publicly early is usually quickly forced to publicly retract his statements.<sup>165</sup>

Nietzsche's correspondence expressed similar doubts. In a letter to Rohde, Nietzsche described his *Untimely Meditations* as being the product of an "immature dilettante" and

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<sup>164</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All too Human*, 165-166.

<sup>165</sup> Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, Vol. 8, 23, 159. Quoted and translated in, Brobjer, "Nietzsche's View of the Value of Historical Studies and Methods," 304.

hoped his future writings would escape the polemic negativity apparent in those works.<sup>166</sup> To Rée, Nietzsche confided that all he found in his “first five little books” was the immaturity of his youth.<sup>167</sup> Later (1881), after receiving a kind letter praising his *Untimely Meditations* from a Professor Fincke of the Peabody Institute in Baltimore, Nietzsche wrote back claiming that there were better works by his hand (*Human, All too Human*) for the professor to read and that his *Untimely Meditations* ought to be viewed as, once again, the creation of youthful inexperience.<sup>168</sup>

Nor was Nietzsche’s self-criticism restricted to the period just after his break with Wagner. His low opinion of his earlier writings continued throughout his intellectual development. In a letter written during the autumn of 1883 Nietzsche remarked that: “Behind my *first period* grins the face of *Jesuitism*: I mean the deliberate holding on to illusion and the forcible annexation of illusion as the *foundation of culture*.”<sup>169</sup> Nietzsche repeats this sentiment in a letter written in 1885 stating,

One honours and despises in younger years like a fool, and uses one’s most tender and highest feelings for interpreting men and things, which do not belong to us, as little as we belong to them. *Youth* is something falsifying and deceitful. It seems, that the honour and anger which the youth takes into itself, has no peace and quiet at all until it “has falsified” men and things in such a manner that it can release its feelings on them. Later, when one has become stronger, more profound and “more truthful” one is frightened to discover how little one saw when one sacrificed at these altars.<sup>170</sup>

At one point in 1885, Nietzsche actually pondered the possibility of purchasing all the unsold copies of the books he published prior to 1876.<sup>171</sup> In 1886, Nietzsche wrote a piece of self-criticism as part of his re-release of *The Birth of Tragedy* in which he

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<sup>166</sup> Christopher Middleton, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1996), 124.

<sup>167</sup> Brobjer, “Nietzsche’s View of the Value of Historical Studies and Methods,” 306-307.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>169</sup> Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe* Vol. 10, 16, 23. Quoted and translated in, Brobjer, “Nietzsche’s View of the Value of Historical Studies and Methods,” 307.

<sup>170</sup> Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe* Vol. 11, 41, 2. Quoted and translated in, Brobjer, “Nietzsche’s View of the Value of Historical Studies and Methods,” 308.

<sup>171</sup> Brobjer, “Nietzsche’s View of the Value of Historical Studies and Methods,” 309.

claimed that the book was “badly written, ponderous, embarrassing, image-mad and image-confused, sentimental, in places saccharine to the point of effeminacy, uneven in tempo, without the will to logical cleanliness, very convinced and therefore disdainful of proof...”<sup>172</sup> Letters written in 1888 once more affirm Nietzsche’s low opinion of his first major publications. Again, he claims that they are products of his “youth”, and he only refers to them as having value in terms of tracing his own intellectual development.<sup>173</sup>

While it is true that Nietzsche provided a more positive review of his earlier works in his autobiography, *Ecce Homo*, his praise was not directed at the books themselves, but rather at one or two ideas within them that he believed to have later perfected in his mature thought. Thus, what Nietzsche celebrates in *The Birth of Tragedy* was his initial understanding of how the Greek’s overcame their pessimistic condition.<sup>174</sup> Similarly, in “On the Abuse and Use of History for Life” Nietzsche points out that the essay has merit because it underlined how at an early age he was hostile to both contemporary academia and German nationalism.<sup>175</sup> What is important to take note of here is that the aesthetic solutions Nietzsche provided in those two publications receive no commendation or even mention. The writings only have value to him at this stage in so far as they show the development of his philosophy from its youthful beginnings to his later, more refined thought.

The dual impact of Nietzsche’s break with Wagner and his subsequent friendship with Rée also manifested itself in the reading materials in which Nietzsche immersed himself after 1876. Before his split with Wagner, Nietzsche’s ambition had been to unite

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<sup>172</sup> Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music,” 19.

<sup>173</sup> Brobjer, “Nietzsche’s View of the Value of Historical Studies and Methods,” 309.

<sup>174</sup> Nietzsche, “Ecce Homo,” 726.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 732-733.

the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Wagner by overcoming their many internal contradictions. As a result, Nietzsche spent a great deal of time in the early 1870s reading neo-Kantian literature in an attempt to teach himself the core philosophical concepts governing German Idealism. After abandoning Wagner, and finding himself inspired by the naturalist insights of his new friend Paul Rée, Nietzsche once again read up on subjects in which that he had no formal academic background. As one would expect, this list of books we know he read consisted mainly of books that focused upon materialist explanations of human development.

Nietzsche's reading covered a broad spectrum of natural and social scientific thought, in fields including cultural anthropology, neurology, biology, nutrition, physics, physiology, and psychology. Stimulated by Rée's use of British anthropological sources, Nietzsche read John Lubbock's *The Origin of Civilization* and Edward Burnett Tylor's *Primitive Culture* during the mid-1870's.<sup>176</sup> This exposure to British thought would eventually result in Nietzsche reading Herbert Spencer's *Data of Ethics* and his *Introduction to the Study of Sociology*.<sup>177</sup> Other books Nietzsche read regarding anthropology included Otto Caspari's *Early History of Mankind*, Julius Lippert's *The Religions of the Civilized Nations of Europe*, Albert Hermann Post's *Foundations for a General Law on Comparative Anthropology*, as well as more historical accounts of human cultural development in Friedrich von Hellwald's *History of Culture*, and E.H. Lecky's *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*.<sup>178</sup>

Nietzsche complemented this anthropological material with a large collection of works on

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<sup>176</sup> Emden, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History*, 188.

<sup>177</sup> Thomas Brobjer, "Nietzsche's Reading and Knowledge of Natural Science: An Overview," *Nietzsche and Science*, ed. by Gregory Moore and Thomas H. Brobjer (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003), 36.

<sup>178</sup> Emden, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History*, 190.

the subject of evolution. While he never read Darwin in the original, Nietzsche encountered evolutionary ideas in books such as Alfred Espinas's *Animal Societies*, Karl Semper's *The Natural Conditions of Existence as they Affect Animal Life*, along with the pre-publication material he proof-read for Rée's two upcoming titles, *The Origin of the Moral Sensations* and *Evolution of Conscience*.<sup>179</sup> Later, in the mid-1880s, Nietzsche read more comprehensive evolutionary studies such as George Heinrich Schneider's *The Animal Will: System, Exposition and Explanation of the Animal Drives*, and its sequel, *The Human Will from the Standpoint of Recent Theories of Evolution (of 'Darwinism')*, along with Francis Galton's eugenically-oriented *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development*, and James Bell Pettigrew's *Animal Locomotion*.<sup>180</sup>

The psychological development of human life became another subject of intense reading for Nietzsche. We can observe this in his collection of such books such as Alexandre Herzen's *The Brain and Cerebral Activity from a Psycho-Physiological Viewpoint*, August Krauss's *The Psychology of Crime*, Henri Joly's *Psychology of Great Men*, Leon Dumont's *Pleasure and Pain: On the Theory of the Feelings*, and Harald Hoffding's *Outlines of Psychology on the Basis of Experience*.<sup>181</sup> While the French moralists were not overly scientific, Nietzsche, under Rée's influence, spent a great deal of time reading La Rochefoucauld, Montaigne, Vauvenargues, Chamfort, and La Bruyère, who may be considered proto-psychologists.<sup>182</sup> In the late 1880s Nietzsche similarly absorbed the psychological insights found in authors of fiction such as Stendhal,

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<sup>179</sup> Brobjer, "Nietzsche's Reading and Knowledge of Natural Science," 36.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>182</sup> Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context*, 62-63.

Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Strindberg.<sup>183</sup> Nietzsche would eventually claim that Dostoyevsky was his best source for psychological knowledge.<sup>184</sup> Yet, it would be wrong to conclude here that at this point in his life Nietzsche ever became totally absorbed in one subject. Though he certainly favoured psychological and physiological works, the diversity of what he was reading confirms that Nietzsche had an interest in many types of scientific knowledge. This can be seen in his possession of such diverse books as Robert Mayer's *Mechanics of Heat*, Wilhelm Roux's *The Struggle of the Parts in the Organism*, E.H. Weber's *Investigations of the Process of Stimulation in the Muscular and Nervous System*, J.G. Vogt's *Force*, Jacob Moleschott's *The Theory of Food*, and James Johnston's *The Chemistry of Common Life*.<sup>185</sup>

As in his overtly scientific book collection, Nietzsche's prose also offers evidence of his shift away from the aestheticism of his youth. Describing the period of his life after his break with Wagner, Nietzsche explained in *Ecce Homo* that, "A truly burning thirst took hold over me: henceforth I really pursued nothing more than physiology, medicine and natural science."<sup>186</sup> In the same book Nietzsche also laments the blunder that he "became a philologist – why not at least a physician or something else that opens one's eyes?"<sup>187</sup> In a letter written to a friend during the early 1880's Nietzsche expressed his thirst for scientific knowledge stating,

...Let me say in confidence: the little work that I can do with my eyes now belongs almost exclusively to physiological and medical studies (I have been so badly educated!- and must really *know* so much!<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>184</sup> Young, *Nietzsche*, 451.

<sup>185</sup> Brobjer, "Nietzsche's Reading and Knowledge of Natural Science," 38-45.

See also, Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, 64-65.

<sup>186</sup> Nietzsche, "Ecce Homo," 742.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 697.

<sup>188</sup> Brobjer, "Nietzsche's Reading and Knowledge of Natural Science," 38.

Nor was such a letter merely idle chatter. During the late 1870's and early 1880's Nietzsche became convinced that such "little things" as diet, working environment, use of leisure time, and amount of sleep dictated whether one would live a happy and fulfilling life more than any aesthetic ideal.<sup>189</sup> Nietzsche sustained this position right up until his descent into insanity, writing in *Ecce Homo* that it was, once again, the "little things", his instinctive choice of food, climate, and leisure activity that made him "so clever."<sup>190</sup>

After *Human, All too Human*, Nietzsche's published works increasingly relied on the naturalist outlook prevalent in his readings to explain human action. In *Daybreak*, for example, Nietzsche claimed that "The beginning of justice, as of prudence, moderation, bravery – in short, of all we designate as the *Socratic Virtues*, are *animal*; a consequence of that drive which teaches us to seek food and elude enemies."<sup>191</sup> In the same book Nietzsche continues this theme by commenting,

Whatever proceeds from the stomach, the intestines, the beating of the heart, the nerves, the bile, the semen – all those distempers, debilitations, excitations, the whole chance operation of the machine of which we still know so little! – had to be seen by a Christian such as Pascal as a moral and religious phenomena, and he had to ask whether God or Devil, good or evil, salvation or damnation was to be discovered in them! Oh what an unhappy interpreter! How he had to twist and torment his system!<sup>192</sup>

Nietzsche's next book, *The Gay Science*, published in 1882, follows the same logic. One passage from the book that articulates this well is aphorism number 145, in which Nietzsche states,

A diet that consists predominantly of rice leads to the use of opium and narcotics, just as a diet that consists predominantly of potatoes leads to the use of liquor. But it also has subtler effects that include ways of thinking and feeling that have narcotic effects. This agrees with the fact that those who promote narcotic ways of thinking and feeling, like some Indian gurus, praise a diet that is entirely vegetarian and would like to impose that

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<sup>189</sup> Young, *Nietzsche*, 282.

<sup>190</sup> Nietzsche, "Ecce Homo," 692-714.

<sup>191</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, ed. Brian Leiter and Maudemarie Clark (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 27.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

as a law upon the masses. In this way they want to create and increase the need that they are in a position to satisfy.<sup>193</sup>

Even *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1884), Nietzsche's book that initially appears to be his most unscientific creation, articulates his preference for a materialist understanding of the body. For Zarathustra proclaims that, "...the awakened, the enlightened man says: I am body entirely, and nothing beside; and the soul is only a word for something in the body."<sup>194</sup> Perhaps the most striking affirmation of naturalism comes from *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), in aphorism 230, when Nietzsche writes,

To translate man back into nature; to become master over the many vain and overtly enthusiastic interpretations and connotations that have so far been scrawled and painted over the eternal basic text *homo natura*; to see to it that man henceforth stands before man as even today, hardened in the discipline of science, he stands before the *rest* of nature, with intrepid Oedipus eyes and sealed Odysseus ears, deaf to the siren songs of old metaphysical bird catchers who have been piping at him all too long, "you are more, you are higher, you are of a different origin!" – that may be a strange and insane task, but it is a *task!* – who would deny that?<sup>195</sup>

Nor would Nietzsche ever set aside his naturalist outlook, as his final two writings, *Ecce Homo* and *The Antichrist*, remain entrenched within the naturalist framework prevalent after Nietzsche's break with Wagner. He commented that "Descartes was the first to have dared, with admirable boldness, to understand the animal as *machina*: the whole of our physiology endeavours to prove this claim. And we are consistent enough not to except man, as Descartes still did."<sup>196</sup>

Nietzsche's self-critique of his earlier aesthetic thought and his emerging passion for scientific scholarship reinforces the importance Nietzsche's abandoned friendship with Wagner had for his philosophy. By failing to investigate further into the effects of

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<sup>193</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 193.

<sup>194</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 2003), 61.

<sup>195</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 351-352.

<sup>196</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Antichrist," *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (London: Penguin, 1977), 580.

this abortive friendship historians have consequentially assumed that Nietzsche's philosophy remained entrenched within the aestheticism of his youth. Such a reading glosses over Nietzsche's own comments that speak to the contrary. Following Rée, Nietzsche increasingly sought a naturalist understanding of human life in order to advance his broader philosophical goals. Wagner's aesthetic world outlook was replaced by that of Nietzsche's new close companion. The implications of this transition in Nietzsche's thought touched almost every aspect of his philosophy, including his philosophy of history. While Nietzsche never wrote an official follow up to "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life" the influence of his naturalism did change the way Nietzsche valued and used history. This is most evident in Nietzsche's study of human morality, which permeates the majority of his mature publications.

Nietzsche's mature thought is often marked by its fixation upon the subject of human morality. Following the lead of Rée, whose second publication, *The Origin of Moral Feelings*, sought to account for the development of human moral behaviour, Nietzsche began to investigate the physiological and psychological forces that he believed ultimately shape our moral view of reality. Both thinkers agreed that human consciousness is merely epiphenomenal, and that the true driving engines of human life lie within our various sub-conscious drives and instincts.<sup>197</sup> Rée summarizes this position well in *The Origin of Moral Feelings* when he writes, "The history of intellectual abilities thus demonstrates that our perceptive capacity primarily exists for the satisfaction of our instincts."<sup>198</sup> Nietzsche echoes Rée throughout his later works, making claims such as, "Our moral judgements and evaluations...are only images and fantasies based on a

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<sup>197</sup> Brendan Donnellan, "Friedrich Nietzsche and Paul Rée: Cooperation and Conflict," *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 43 (Oct.-Dec., 1982): 599.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 606.

physiological process unknown to us” so that it is always necessary to draw forth “the *physiological* phenomena behind the moral predispositions and prejudices.”<sup>199</sup> To Nietzsche,

...every table of values, every “thou shalt” known to history or ethnology, requires first a *physiological* investigation and interpretation, rather than a psychological one; and every one of them needs a critique on the part of medical science.<sup>200</sup>

Initially, the Nietzsche-Rée investigation into the origins of morality was limited to revealing the instinctual egotism inherent in every altruistic moral claim.<sup>201</sup> This, however, created two major problems that would become the core of Nietzsche’s mature philosophy. First, because our moral claims are the product of self-serving physiological phenomena and differ from culture to culture, is it possible that some moralities represent physiological “sickness” and others physiological “health”? Second, if certain moralities are expressions of physiological “decay,” what has allowed them to persist? What physiological and psychological conditions are necessary for one morality to flourish at the expense of another?

In order to answer those two questions Nietzsche developed and used a methodology he termed “historical philosophizing.”<sup>202</sup> At the core of this methodology is Nietzsche’s biological assumption that,

Every animal...instinctively strives for an optimum of favourable conditions in which fully to release his power and achieve his maximum feeling of power; every animal abhors equally instinctively, with an acute sense of smell “higher than all reason,” any kind of disturbance and hindrance which blocks or could block his path to the optimum.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 120, 214.

<sup>200</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 491.

<sup>201</sup> Donnellan, “Friedrich Nietzsche and Paul Rée: Cooperation and Conflict,” 599.

<sup>202</sup> Emden, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History*, 139.

<sup>203</sup> Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” 543.

Nietzsche couples this instinctual drive towards power with his belief that at bottom what matters is physiological build, that is,

...something unteachable, some granite of spiritual *fatum*, of predetermined decision and answer to predetermined selected questions. Whenever a cardinal problem is at stake, there speaks an unchangeable “this is I.”<sup>204</sup>

While this “essence” does not completely determine one’s development, Nietzsche believes it will prompt us to seek moral evaluations that are in the best interest of our physiological composition. Thus, for example, just because somebody is tall doesn’t necessarily mean they will be successful playing a sport like basketball, but it does increase the likelihood that they will have success compared to someone who is short. Nietzsche feels one’s physiological “essence” is reflected in one’s moral values so that one’s moral claims give “decisive witness to who he is.”<sup>205</sup> Therefore, using philosophy as an example, Nietzsche concludes that each philosophical system amounts to nothing more than a sub-conscious physiological memoir of its author. Summarizing this position Nietzsche states,

...our thoughts, values, every ‘yes,’ ‘no,’ ‘if’ and ‘but’ grow from us with the same inevitability as fruits borne on the tree – all related and each with an affinity to each, and evidence of one will, one health, one earth, one sun.”<sup>206</sup>

Nietzsche then utilizes these methodological procedures historically to trace the development of moralities from different parts of the world in his mature publications. What he concluded was that there were generally two types of morality that shaped

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<sup>204</sup> Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” 352.

Another clear comment on this subject comes from *Twilight of the Idols* when Nietzsche states, “... a well turned out human being... *must* perform certain actions and shrinks instinctively from other actions; he carries the order, which he represents physiologically, into his relations with other human beings and things.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols,” *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (London: Penguin, 1977), 493.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>206</sup> Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” 452.

human development. The first was the creation of warrior-aristocratic communities, Master Morality, and the second, the product of resentful reaction against aristocratic exploitation, Slave Morality.

Though the two categories Nietzsche employs sound as though they merely represent a political division between “oppressor and oppressed”, he is quick to declare that the difference is also physiological. Those who are attracted to Slave Morality tend to be the “physiologically unfortunate and worm-eaten,” whose real misfortune is possibly the result of

...the *nervus sympathicus*, or in an excessive secretion of bile, or in a deficiency of potassium sulphate and phosphate in the blood, or in an obstruction in the abdomen which impedes the blood circulation, or in degeneration of the ovaries, and the like.<sup>207</sup>

Those who are physically weak or sick, who lack the ability to impose their will upon their social and natural environment, will likely be supporters of Slave Morality.

Conversely, those who manifest the characteristics of Master Morality tend to possess, “...a power physicality, a flourishing, abundant, even overflowing health” that is necessary for maintaining the warrior-aristocrat’s cardinal activity of conducting war.<sup>208</sup>

Nietzsche comments that historically, as a result of their superior martial skills, these aristocratic-warriors were able to impose themselves upon their weaker opponents and thus to obtain naked political power. While crude and brutal, the warrior-aristocrat is taken by Nietzsche to be “healthy” and, once culturally refined, to project a system of valuation upon the world that Nietzsche believed to be synonymous with that underlying physiological health.

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 560, 563.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 469.

Slaves by contrast are morally and physically “unhealthy”; this is because according to Nietzsche their morality was created as a *reaction* against Master Morality. Slave Morality calls the virtues of their Masters “evil” and glorifies the attributes of their downtrodden condition as “good”. Thus power, beauty, sexual licence, competition, individualism, and inequality are for the Slave “evil”, while equality, plainness, chastity, humility, and self-sacrifice are designated as “good”. What became problematic for Nietzsche was that, at some point in history, Slave Morality was able to turn the tables upon Master Morality and become the dominant moral discourse for European Civilization. This in turn presented a physiological danger, for if Slave Morality was deemed “unhealthy” it meant that Nietzsche’s contemporaries were utilizing a morality that might be disadvantageous to their health. Nietzsche summarizes this horrifying insight by asking,

What if a symptom of regression were inherent in the “good,” likewise a danger, a seduction, a poison, a narcotic, through which the present was possibly living *at the expense of the future*? Perhaps more comfortably, less dangerously, but at the same time in a meaner style, more basely?...So that precisely morality was the danger of dangers?<sup>209</sup>

By falsifying reality, by inverting the morality of the superior humans, the Slaves (most notably as represented by the priestly class in Nietzsche’s later writings) were able to take political power away from their former masters.<sup>210</sup> However, they did so at a price, for in order for their values to gain political supremacy, they had to deny humanity the means of attaining the physiological health and splendour that was promoted by the morality of their sworn enemies. They had to reshape reality so that it conformed to their moral outlook.

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 456.

<sup>210</sup> Nietzsche never really adequately explains how this happens other than mentioning that the Slaves had numerical superiority and their oppressors were prone to adopting Slave outlooks when physiologically exhausted.

Yet, considering that we have not perished as a species one ought to ask what Nietzsche means in particular when he uses the term “health”. Despite the fact that his conception of “health” is never given a straight-forward definition in his later writings, his use of the term is often associated with certain attributes that are frequently mentioned in his final publications. First, the healthy individual has a positive disposition in relation to his environment.<sup>211</sup> Psychologically, the healthy human being “affirms” the world around them rather than denying or demonizing it in favour of another reality. Second, the human being who is healthy both will be able to satisfy his instinctual cravings and will do so with a good-conscience. In particular, Nietzsche is thinking of the negative attitude towards sexuality in which Slave Morality has demonized and given sexual pleasure a “bad conscience” that rejects Master Morality’s high regard for procreation.<sup>212</sup> Third, a healthy individual attempts great things; he seeks to break away from the pack and utilize all the elements of life to complete a task that he is instinctually pursuing.<sup>213</sup> It is a sign of Nietzschean health that an individual can endure severe physical/psychological suffering, seek intense competition, and honour their mortal enemies as a means towards furthering their life task, whatever that happens to be. Not only do the healthy endure these pitfalls of life, they affirm them, they understand their importance in shaping who they are and what they have become. Finally, to be healthy one needs to have a positive disposition towards oneself.<sup>214</sup> That one does not seek to be rid of oneself, to seek “redemption” from what one physiologically is “at bottom” really

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<sup>211</sup> Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” 395.

<sup>212</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols,” 562-563.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 534.

<sup>214</sup> Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” 418.

becomes for Nietzsche the key to determining whether a person represents “ascending life” or is internally “decadent.”<sup>215</sup>

Taken as a whole, to be “healthy” in a Nietzschean sense means to be constantly seeking instinctually to reach the apex of one’s physiological potential with a good conscience. This is why Nietzsche claimed that each animal instinctually seeks out the right conditions in which to achieve its highest feeling of power, and why throughout Nietzsche’s mature works the idea of “ascending life” is nearly interchangeable with his (oft misused) conception of “the Will to Power”.<sup>216</sup> It’s not so much that Slave Morality threatens humanity with annihilation, though in certain cases Nietzsche believes it can, if it prevents those healthy members of the human race from reaching the peak of their physiological strength. Slave Morality is good for the “slaves”, but once it breaks out and claims or seeks to be universal, it threatens the health of those individuals who possess a superior physiological composition not congenial to that morality. It becomes a “false consciousness” that blocks the healthy from reaching their full potential. Thus, because he thought Slave Morality had triumphed with Christianity, Nietzsche sought towards the end of his career to provide a “revaluation of all values”, an attempt to turn the table of values back in favour of a type of Master Morality for those individuals like himself who cannot flourish under the then hegemonic regime.

What I believe is most important to take away from Nietzsche’s mature conception of “health” is that it reverses his earlier position regarding the term. In chapter two we observed how the Aesthetic Nietzsche believed that artistic illusions were necessary in order for “life” to prosper. Before 1876 Nietzsche assumed that critical

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<sup>215</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Case of Wagner,” *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 646-647.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 646-647.

rationalism and natural materialism were leading humanity down a dark path towards “suicidal nihilism” because it exposed the anthropological nature of human mythology. After 1876, Nietzsche’s understanding of health and his esteem for science and natural materialism swung completely in the opposite direction. For the Naturalist Nietzsche health was perceived to be located in our physiological composition, where the “little things” such as the food we eat, the climate we live in, the practices of our leisure time, how much sleep we get a day, and our daily exercise regime speak more to whether we will live happy, fulfilling lives rather than what type of artistic illusions we embrace.<sup>217</sup> This physiological health reveals itself in a psychological disposition that affirms “this world”, despite all the trials and tribulations inherent in it, and that does not seek refuge in some “other world” beyond human experience. That is a far cry from the Aesthetic Nietzsche’s claim that it is possible for life to grow and prosper only when we operate within a “limited horizon”, saturated by artistic illusions that both compel us to action and offer us “metaphysical comfort” when we grow weary.

By linking “health” to human physiology, the Naturalist Nietzsche also broke with his early aestheticism in terms of how to improve the human condition. Initially, following Schopenhauer and Wagner, Nietzsche believed critical rationalism and natural materialism represented the greatest impediments to human growth. The thrust of Nietzsche’s critique was that given the generalized neo-Kantian conclusion that things-in-themselves are inaccessible to human Reason, science could never analyze anything beyond the phenomenal and the realm of Reason. On this reasoning, he argued, one would have to conclude that science is just another illusion, a harmful one at that because it unravels all other illusions prior to disclosing its own arbitrary foundation. Thus, in

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<sup>217</sup> Nietzsche, “Ecce Homo,” 712-714.

order to enhance humanity, it became a question of which myths, once internalized by a people, would produce the best results. In Nietzsche's mature thought we find this process reversed. The sub-conscious becomes for Nietzsche the "true world" in the sense that it is our sub-conscious instincts and drives that determine who we are and what we will become. They in turn shape our conscious world, the world of "appearance" in which we operate. Unlike the closed neo-Kantian distinction between the "thing-in-itself" and the world of "appearance", Nietzsche's mature dualism, thanks to scientific enquiries into human physiology and psychology, accepts that individuals can communicate back and forth by observing the effects certain physical phenomena have upon our psychological valuations. The bridge linking our sub-conscious to our waking experience is analyzed by scientific materialism, which in turn allowed Nietzsche to produce a means with which to "enhance life" that found its epicentre within our physiological composition. As a result, whereas the Aesthetic Nietzsche saw natural materialism as the biggest impediment to the growth and prosperity of humanity, for the Naturalist Nietzsche the natural and social sciences became the only means by which humanity could possibly gain the understanding necessary to improve its condition.

If science thus overtook aestheticism as the prime means by which to enhance humanity in Nietzsche's mature thought, one is left with the question raised earlier as to why he still, quite vocally at times, praised aestheticism. As we saw in chapter one, many historians have seen this as evidence of a continuity in Nietzsche's thought that stretched across his entire philosophical career. Megill is indeed correct to point out that Nietzsche never demonized aestheticism in his later publications as he did science in his earlier thought. Yet, what he and others have failed to observe is that Nietzsche's use of

aestheticism changed in his mature writings. Nietzsche's reliance upon human physiology reduced the relevance of aestheticism by relegating it to the status of a mere symptom, a certain expression of health or decadence, within his now broader naturalist understanding of human life. Consider such quotes as,

Nothing is beautiful, except man alone: all aesthetics rests upon this naïveté, which is its *first* truth. Let us immediately add the second: nothing is ugly except the degenerating man— and with this the realm of aesthetic judgment is circumscribed. Physiologically, everything ugly weakens and saddens man. It reminds him of decay, danger, impotence; it actually deprives him of strength.<sup>218</sup>

and,

Aesthetics is tied indissolubly to these biological presuppositions: there is an aesthetics of *decadence*, and there is a *classical* aesthetics— the “beautiful in itself” is a figment of the imagination, like all of idealism.<sup>219</sup>

These attest to Nietzsche's reduction of aesthetic phenomena to mere signs of our internal physiological composition.

Still, Nietzsche saw a place for art in his later philosophy as a means to attach positive value to his new insights. “Ascending life”, according to Nietzsche, produces an aesthetic disposition that “gives to things out of its own abundance— it transfigures, it beautifies the world and *makes it more rational*”, and it has the potential to seduce us to those things that will promote our health. Abundance here should be understood as *physiological* excitability, the result of our sexual instincts being aroused and then refined to produce a frenzied conscious experience in which the individual bestows upon reality valuations that reflect this heightened feeling of strength, and thus of health.<sup>220</sup> Unlike the privileged position aestheticism held within the philosophy of Nietzsche's youth, for the

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<sup>218</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols,” 526.

<sup>219</sup> Later in the same passage Nietzsche associates “classical aesthetics” with Master Morality. “...Master Morality (“Roman,” “pagan,” “classical,” “Renaissance”) is, conversely, the sign language of what has turned out well, of *ascending* life, of the will to power as the principle of life...” Nietzsche, “The Case of Wagner,” 646.

<sup>220</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols,” 518.

Naturalist Nietzsche aestheticism was useful primarily diagnostically, that is as a means of measuring one's physiological health. Rhetorically, it is true aestheticism still remained important for Nietzsche in the sense that he believed artistic presentation was more persuasive than rational argument for challenging his reader's moral valuations. This helps explain why Nietzsche wrote in the aphoristic style and praised *Zarathustra* as his best work. Yet, we need to be cautious here; Nietzsche's rhetorical use of aestheticism was strictly contained within the confines of his naturalist thought and its sole purpose was to seduce future readers to his materialist conclusions. Therefore, Nietzsche could still claim to be the philosophical disciple of Dionysus and endorse a scientific view of reality without contradicting himself.

The nature of "Truth" also changed in Nietzsche's philosophy the further he departed from his youthful thought. As we observed in Chapter two, the Aesthetic Nietzsche found metaphysical truth to be unattainable despite occasionally flirting with the Schopenhauerian-Wagnerian conclusion that music could indeed connect us with the divine. Moving forward, what is startling to those who wish to support a naturalist reading of Nietzsche's philosophy is that Nietzsche did not abandon his neo-Kantian position until 1889, only months prior to his collapse into madness. We still find quotes littered throughout his mature publications like *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morals* that are openly hostile towards any attempt at imposing transcendental significance upon one interpretation of reality. Scientific thought is not excluded, as Nietzsche maintained the view that science falsifies the world from a metaphysical perspective despite its practical usefulness for us as human beings.<sup>221</sup> In the *Genealogy* he even goes so far as to pronounce himself as being the "sternest opponent of

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<sup>221</sup> Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," 225.

all materialism.”<sup>222</sup> Further comments during this period, like Nietzsche’s notebook remark that “there are no facts, only interpretations” have provided the basis for a postmodern reading of his epistemology. If Nietzsche was openly hostile towards scientific materialism in one section of a publication and yet praised it in another then the possibility opens up that such an inconsistency was deliberately constructed on his part and thus undermines any attempt by scholars to argue one way or another regarding the direction of Nietzsche’s philosophical thought. What we are left with would be, from an epistemological perspective, “many Nietzsches”, in which the literal meaning of his thought becomes incoherent, leaving us only his deconstructive propositions as having any epistemological value.

Both Allan Megill and Michel Foucault have put forth interpretations of Nietzsche’s epistemology that have taken advantage of relativist quotations from his mature publications. Megill argues that Nietzsche’s epistemological inconsistencies are evidence of his postmodern ambition to destroy his reader’s faith in the rationalism that was central to eighteenth and nineteenth century European thought. Consistency was destroyed to make way for the return of aesthetic myth; in essence, Megill put forward the position that Nietzsche was coherently incoherent in his mature thought as a way to articulate the same philosophy that was apparent in his youthful philosophy. Foucault saw Nietzsche as the great iconoclast, as one of the first philosophers to deny the epistemic value of nineteenth century scientism, in order to free us from its inherent tyranny. By being inconsistent, the Foucaultian Nietzsche cleverly displays to his audience the futile nature of all epistemological claims and thus, by avoiding the reification of any one theory, discloses to us the power structures lurking in the background of all epistemic

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<sup>222</sup> Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” 565.

language. In both accounts Nietzsche's epistemic philosophy was taken to be intentionally inconsistent and reflective of his desire to deconstruct rather than construct a conception of "Truth".

Yet, if we contextualize many of Nietzsche's comments that are hostile to a scientific conception of "truth," we discover that Nietzsche is only critical of scientific materialism when it claims to attain *metaphysical* Truth.<sup>223</sup> What I believe the mature Nietzsche was articulating was his continuing adherence to the Kantian ontological separation between the metaphysically unknowable realm of things-in-themselves and our world of phenomenal experience and human sense perception. For example, take one of Nietzsche's most cited sentences in which he is critical of scientific materialism, part 16 of the third essay in the *Genealogy*, and place it within the wider context of the paragraph in which it is found,

...To express this presupposition in a more general form: I consider even "psychological pain" to be not a fact but only an interpretation— a causal interpretation— of facts that have hitherto defied exact formulation— too vague to be scientifically serious- a fat word replacing a very thin question mark. When someone cannot get over a "psychological pain," that is *not* the fault of his "psyche" but, to speak crudely, more probably even that of his belly (speaking crudely, to repeat, which does not mean that I want to be heard crudely or understood crudely- ). A strong and well-constituted man digests his experiences (his deeds and misdeeds included) as he digests his meals, even when he has to swallow some tough morsels. If he cannot get over an experience and have done with it, this kind of indigestion is as much physiological as is the other- and often in fact merely a consequence of the other.- With such a conception one can, between ourselves, still be the sternest opponent of all materialism.<sup>224</sup>

This paragraph seems to conform in the main to Nietzsche's naturalist understanding of the world despite the conclusion he reaches in the final sentence.

The last vestiges of Nietzsche's epistemological scepticism would be abandoned in 1889. His publications during his final productive year all contain strong epistemic

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<sup>223</sup> Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, 23-25.

<sup>224</sup> Nietzsche, "On the Genealogy of Morals," 565.

language that praise as “true” his naturalist findings while condemning as “false” all idealism that does not find its basis in some form of empiricism. Nietzsche scholar Maudemarie Clark summarizes this transition well when she comments on Nietzsche’s aphorism “How the ‘True world’ Finally Became a Fable” found in *Twilight of the Idols*:

Nietzsche’s characterization of truths as illusions or fictions amounts to calling the empirical world, the world accessible through common sense and science, illusory and fictitious. His history of the “true” world [see *Twilight of the Idols*, part IV] indicates that he gives up ascribing reality to any world other than the empirical world, *and* that he recognizes that this requires him to relinquish his claim that the empirical world is illusory...Nietzsche later recognized his initial failure to appreciate the consequences of denying the thing-in-itself [as he first does in *Beyond Good and Evil*], which means that he himself went through a period in which he denied the thing-in-itself, but continued to characterize the empirical world as mere appearance or illusion.<sup>225</sup>

What occurred in the final year of Nietzsche’s productive life was that he finally overcame the neo-Kantian distinction inherent in his earlier thought. For a great deal of his philosophical career Nietzsche held implicitly to the generalized neo-Kantian view that we could never know or reach the “thing-in-itself”. In 1889 he finally took the phenomenal step of denying it any inherent value whatsoever. We dwell in the phenomenal world and thus only truths pertaining to this realm can claim to have any value for us as human beings.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have observed how Nietzsche’s thought was radically altered by the termination of his friendship with Richard Wagner. This, coupled with the strong influence Paul Rée exerted over Nietzsche’s philosophy in the late 1870’s, provided the impetus that eventually led Nietzsche to abandon his early aesthetic philosophy.

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<sup>225</sup> Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 114.

Nietzsche's transition from aestheticist to naturalist was slow and by no means clear cut. Quotes can be found throughout his mature works that upon first glance still seem to suggest a continuity with the writings of his youth. Yet, historicizing Nietzsche makes it apparent that such a continuity is difficult to support. Nietzsche's personal correspondence provides scholars with ample evidence of his growing hostility towards his youthful publications as the 1880's progressed. Further, thanks to the work of such eminent Nietzsche scholars as Thomas Brobjer, we know that Nietzsche was actively immersing himself in books on the material sciences after 1876. Nor does examination of Nietzsche's publications contradict this trend as his later books seek increasingly to understand various moralities as the necessary consequences of human physiology. While denying materialism any metaphysical value, Nietzsche's thought operated within a broad naturalist paradigm that he was exposed to thanks to his close friendship with Paul Rée. Though Nietzsche would later break with Rée both personally and intellectually, he would never return to the aestheticism of his youth.

The tendency of historians to read Nietzsche as a postmodernist is partly a consequence of neglecting the events in his life that had a profound impact on his thought. As we have seen throughout this thesis, Nietzsche had the habit of becoming completely engrossed in the philosophy of others. Initially his fascination was with the thought of Schopenhauer, then it was with the aestheticism of Wagner, followed by the scientism of Rée whose friendship swept Nietzsche into such a frenzy that he was willing to sacrifice other friendships and his professional career in order to promote each world view. This is not to suggest that Nietzsche never broke free from his intellectual influences, but rather that they, upon initial exposure, had a profound effect in shifting his thought from one

world view to another. By 1889 there were only minor similarities between Nietzsche and Rée's work, but the framework in which Nietzsche constructed his philosophy had been shaped by the naturalist ideas of his colleague. Failing to take note of this has led historians to assume a strong continuity between Nietzsche's first few publications and the rest of his thought, or to believe because of his aphoristic style, that his philosophy had no aim at all other than liberating us from the various power structures that dwell at the heart of the Western philosophical tradition.

The failure of historical theorists to properly historicize Nietzsche's philosophical development has consequently had the side effect of producing accounts of his historical methodology that rely heavily upon material taken from his short essay, "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life". As we have seen in this chapter, Nietzsche openly rejected a great deal of his youthful aestheticism. This ought to provoke our suspicion in terms of whether such an essay can serve as an accurate reflection of Nietzsche's ultimate opinion regarding the use or purpose of history. The final chapter of this thesis will attempt to reconstruct Nietzsche's historical methodology as it evolved throughout his mature publications. I will pay close attention to the themes of mysticism, radical scepticism, and postmodern ambiguity that are critical to the dominant interpretations of Nietzsche's philosophy of history as provided by White, Foucault, and Megill, and I will attempt to contrast them with the more naturalist methodology Nietzsche utilized towards the end of his productive life.

## **Conclusion**

Nietzsche's naturalist turn has rarely been explored in terms of its implications for his historical methodology. While some, like Thomas Brobjer, have gone to great lengths to illustrate Nietzsche's positive appraisal of such nineteenth century historical heavyweights as Friedrich August Wolf and Barthold Georg Niebuhr, the majority of Nietzsche scholars have failed to explore this domain of his thought in a thorough manner.<sup>226</sup> For historians, the influence of White, Foucault, and Megill in solidifying a reading of Nietzsche as a proto-postmodernist has no doubt contributed to this absence of scholarship. The conventional view of Nietzsche's historical methodology is one that emphasises the deconstruction of broad historical cultural continuities (Christian Morality) in an attempt to liberate the reader from what Nietzsche perceived to be impediments to personal freedom and thus self improvement. While some historians have interpreted Nietzsche's attempt to liberate us from these "hidden tyrannies" as part of his desire for an eventual return to an aesthetic mysticism (White), or as the beginning of a radical critique of all power structures in general (Foucault), or perhaps simply as the work of a playful author seeking to hide any aspiration to impose his personal valuations upon his readers (Megill), all agree that the principles of deconstruction and personal liberation are hallmarks of Nietzsche's historical project.

Yet, as we saw in the previous chapter, Nietzsche's use of history in his later thought utilized the findings of the natural sciences, specifically from the disciplines of psychology and physiology, for the normative goal of creating a pseudo-aristocratic commonwealth of creative individuals. At the heart of the late Nietzsche's methodology was an assertion of the importance of power as the prime psychological motivator that

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<sup>226</sup> Thomas Brobjer, "Nietzsche's Relation to Historical Methods and Nineteenth-Century German Historiography," *History and Theory* 46 (May 2007): 171-172.

determine how human beings act. For the mature Nietzsche, any moral claim cannot but be an attempt by one “type” of life to acquire, or limit, the power of another. As a consequence, Nietzsche sought to be viewed only as a therapeutic thinker, in the sense that he wanted to free the elite minority of individuals he deemed skilled enough to achieve cultural greatness. Nietzsche was no democrat, nor was he advocating a retreat from political life to the degree suggested by White. For Nietzsche, the deconstruction of Christian Morality and his demand for a revaluation of values were political acts. Towards the end of his career Nietzsche even referred to his project as representative of what he termed “Great Politics,” due to the grand scope of his analysis as compared to the limited political perspective of his European contemporaries.<sup>227</sup> Nietzsche rarely engaged in contemporary political discourse. He refrained not from a desire to withdraw from politics but rather because contemporary political discourse offered little help in pursuing the naturalist consequences of his philosophical investigations.

What about Nietzsche the playful ambiguous postmodern author? It would be rather odd that someone who was calling for a revaluation of values was merely doing so out of jest. Nietzsche’s mature thought remained consistent in that it sought to uncover the foundations of nineteenth century European morality in the hope of replacing it with something else. While Nietzsche clearly did deconstruct much of the Western philosophical canon along the way, it would be a mistake to treat that outcome as the sole aim of his project. For example, passages like aphorism 16 in *Beyond Good and Evil*, where Nietzsche sceptically questions the unity of human subjectivity, tie into his overarching naturalist project of showing that it is sub-conscious physiological forces that

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<sup>227</sup> Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” 320-321.

greatly condition who we are and what we do.<sup>228</sup> Further comments by Nietzsche, like the oft cited remark, “I am one thing, my writings are something else” might strike the reader as an affirmation of a postmodern position. Yet, once again, if we contextualize the quote we soon realize that Nietzsche is referring to the fact that he was often greeted with curiosity and amazement by others because he had such dark thoughts for someone who was often so cheerful and polite when out in public.<sup>229</sup> Nietzsche did not write for “the many” but for the small “few” whom he believed could take European culture to the next level. Though such a literary tactic can make the author difficult to follow, it is important to remember that Nietzsche had an elite target audience that he was appealing to and cared little for those individuals not part of that select group.

What is also forgotten by those who support a postmodern reading of Nietzsche is his ongoing support for scientific methodology after 1876. Such comments as, “...scientific *methods*...one must say it ten times, *are* what is essential, also what is most difficult, also what is for the longest time opposed by habits and laziness” are hard to imagine coming from the pen of a postmodern philosopher.<sup>230</sup> Nor does the following conform to the characterization of his philosophy as postmodern: “Those who know that they are profound strive for clarity. Those who would like to seem profound to the crowd strive for obscurity.”<sup>231</sup> Nietzsche’s relation to historiography was no different. He approved of the scientific turn history took in the nineteenth century and only criticized the discipline when it attempted to supersede philosophy as the prime legislator of human

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 213-214.

<sup>229</sup> See, for example, Nietzsche’s relationship with nineteenth century feminists. Despite his crude opinion of women in his later publications Nietzsche never hesitated to offer his time and hospitality to those feminists seeking to engage him in conversation as they passed through Sils-Maria. Young, *Nietzsche*, 398-399.

<sup>230</sup> Nietzsche, “The Antichrist,” 650.

<sup>231</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 201.

values.<sup>232</sup> For the mature Nietzsche, history was the “...art of reading well- of reading facts without falsifying them by interpretation, without losing caution, patience, delicacy, in the desire to understand.”<sup>233</sup> Such a remark has more in common with Theodor Mommsen than it does a Foucault or Derrida.<sup>234</sup>

If Nietzsche was not a postmodernist then the question must be asked what his historical methodology, as he developed it beyond 1876, represents. As we saw in chapter two, the youthful Nietzsche thought that in order to improve humanity one needed to escape the prevailing critical rationalism and natural materialism of the nineteenth century. As a result, Nietzsche promoted a brand of aestheticism that he felt was necessary for the prosperity and growth of the human race. This changed in his later writings as Nietzsche regarded the aesthetic realm of human experience as being dependent upon subconscious psychological/physiological forces that direct biological development. With this shift in focus Nietzsche began to place prime importance upon the material conditions of human life and sought to undermine those value systems that neglected, or denounced, these natural factors. The same approach can be observed when we turn to Nietzsche’s mature historiography. As in “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life,” cultural materials remain Nietzsche’s prime historical source. Yet, breaking with his youthful historiography, the mature Nietzsche examined his cultural sources as a doctor would examine a patient. He utilized his background in philology to trace the meaning of a cultural source back to what he believed were its psychological origins and then critically analyzed that psychological disposition with his ever expanding reservoir

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<sup>232</sup> Brobjer, “Nietzsche’s Relation to Historical Methods and Nineteenth-Century German Historiography,” 178-179.

<sup>233</sup> Nietzsche, “The Antichrist,” 635.

<sup>234</sup> Brobjer, “Nietzsche’s Relation to Historical Methods and Nineteenth-Century German Historiography,” 157, 173-174.

of self-taught physiological knowledge. Nietzsche could claim the ability to reduce cultural representations of the past to the level of human physiology: A culture was (or is) either “life affirming”, meaning it showed the signs of human health and vitality, or “life denying” in that it represented human degeneracy and weariness.

Apart from Nietzsche’s tendency to reduce historical phenomena to the level of human physiology, his historical methodology closely resembles that of his old colleague from the University of Basel, Jacob Burckhardt. Cultural history, as Burckhardt conceived of it, attempted to bring forth “the inner qualities of past humanity and proclaims how it was, what it wanted, how it thought and saw, and what it was capable of.”<sup>235</sup> Rather than seeking particular pieces of evidence in an attempt to explain as accurately as possible what happened in the past, the cultural historian,

...does not want to learn from his sources the ‘facts’ of the past; he studies from his sources because they express the spirit of former times. It does not matter, therefore, whether they are factually correct, whether they lie or indulge in exaggerations or inventions. Even misleading statements may tell us something about the mind of a former age.<sup>236</sup>

Like Nietzsche, Burckhardt was more concerned about understanding the inner psychology of an historical epoch and the human beings that encompassed it rather than any one particular person or event on its own. In order to understand the psychology of a historical epoch both thinkers investigated the artistic remnants of a past society in an attempt to communicate its essence in a way that would allow the present to understand that “inner perspective” of a by-gone age. This focus led both thinkers to deploy a style of writing cultural history that at times subordinated the traditional disciplinary demands of

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<sup>235</sup> John Hinde, *Jacob Burckhardt and the Crisis of Modernity* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2000), 229.

<sup>236</sup> Felix Gilbert, *History: Politics or Culture? Reflections on Ranke and Burckhardt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 89.

causal explanation, chronological narrative, factual empiricism, and historical meaning or truth.<sup>237</sup> Where Burckhardt and Nietzsche differed was in explaining what produced that relationship between a people and their surroundings. Nietzsche fixed a people's aesthetic experience to their internal physiology in an attempt to judge whether the culture in question was, in his terms, either "ascending" or "descending". Burckhardt, though sympathetic to Nietzsche's cause, did not feel comfortable making such sweeping judgements. While not embracing the mature Nietzsche's scientism, Burckhardt's quest to uncover the "experience", or psychology, of the past mirrored Nietzsche's approach to his historical sources.

One of the traits that Nietzsche greatly admired about Burckhardt's method of writing history was his emphasis on human irrationality and on uncovering how it had affected cultural development. An example of this continuity can be seen at the conclusion of *Twilight of the Idols* when Nietzsche laments the current state of late nineteenth century philology for failing to understand why the ancient Greeks had such a vibrant culture. To counter the status-quo, Nietzsche affirmatively cites Burckhardt's account of the orgiastic cults that dwelt at the heart of ancient Greek culture as offering the best explanation as to why ancient Greek culture was so profound.<sup>238</sup> Both thinkers felt that a tremendous build-up of raw passion and pent-up emotion caused the ancient Greek's to seek an outlet for the chaos they carried inside of themselves. Thus they created a deeply intense world of symbols that eventually crystalized into the high culture that inspired so many nineteenth-century scholars to research. By privileging historical sources such as cooking recipes, burial remains, and festival routines alongside traditional

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>238</sup> Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols," 560-563.

sources of historical evidence, Nietzsche and Burckhardt were able to discuss aspects of human nature that escaped the scope of other historians. This allowed the two thinkers to avoid the conclusion that history was inherently rational or morally progressive, an idea that many in the nineteenth century believed to be true. For Burckhardt and Nietzsche, the past had neither metaphysical value nor divine direction; to them, history was simply the articulation of past human experience which, for the most part, was often irrational and chaotic. While Nietzsche was much more optimistic about the role our various instincts and drives play in shaping our development, both thinkers understood that for history to be useful it had to know where to look in order to find the sub-conscious forces that give birth to a particular culture.

Nietzsche coupled his “Burckhardtian” historical approach with a rhetorical style that closely resembled that of the ancient Greek historian Thucydides.<sup>239</sup> Central to Thucydides historical account of the Peloponnesian War was his analysis of human self-interest and how it influenced the various armed encounters between Athens and Sparta. The Greeks’ lust to rule and desire for glory were not whitewashed by Thucydides. He openly put the morally suspect motives of his contemporaries and the horrible realities of the war into the very speeches of his historical personalities.<sup>240</sup> Thus, Thucydides attempted to bring forth the true motivating factors of the various political players of the conflict while suppressing the more historically plausible content of their speeches, which likely would have appealed to some notion of justice. Nietzsche greatly admired Thucydides for writing in this manner, calling the Greek historian, “...the great sum, the last revelation of that strong, severe, hard factuality which was instinctive with the older

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<sup>239</sup> See Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, 47-50.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

Hellenes.”<sup>241</sup> Thucydides had no ideal illusions about humanity; he understood that strength, power, and selfishness were the guiding sub-conscious motives determining human action. His goal was to make sure his readers understood this “hard truth” by giving those desires the spotlight when narrating his historical account.

In Nietzsche’s own writings we see a strong attempt to utilize Thucydides’ rhetorical style. For example, in Nietzsche’s most chronologically structured book, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he created a scene at the conclusion of the first essay in which he invites his reader to enter the mind of the typical idealist in order to observe how certain moral ideals originate.<sup>242</sup> In it, Nietzsche brings to life what he believes to be the true motivating forces that are driving the creation of the “lofty” moral ideals that privilege the weak over the strong. Repulsed, Nietzsche’s reader describes back to him what he observes:

Now they give me to understand that they are not merely better than the mighty, the lords of the earth whose spittle they have to lick (*not* from fear, not at all from fear! But because God has commanded them to obey the authorities) – that they are not merely better but are also ‘better off,’ or at least will be better off someday. But enough! Enough! I can’t take it anymore. Bad air! Bad air! This workshop where *ideals are manufactured* – it seems to me it stinks of so many lies.<sup>243</sup>

Similar examples of this stylistic approach can be found throughout Nietzsche’s later writings. In *The Antichrist* Nietzsche depicts the Apostle Paul promoting values of resentment and hatred rather than peace and love.<sup>244</sup> Nietzsche’s two works on Wagner, *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* and *The Case of Wagner*, both present his former friend as a lost, counterfeit artist in need of salvation. The shock value of putting what Nietzsche believed to be the true psychological motives into the mouths and minds of the

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<sup>241</sup> Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols,” 558.

<sup>242</sup> Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” 482-484.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 483.

<sup>244</sup> Nietzsche, “The Antichrist,” 616-625.

individuals he was analysing allowed him to appeal to more than just his readers' intellect. It permitted his select audience to "smell" the decay, to experience the lack of intellectual "cleanliness" a lack that had given birth to Slave Morality. For Nietzsche, in order for history-writing to be effective in the present it had to provoke a reaction. Thus he coloured his discourse with powerful statements that were often meant to goad the reader's pride just as much as our reason.

Like Thucydides, Nietzsche also believed that power was the prime psychological motivator of human action. For Nietzsche, every being (individuals as well as civilizations) instinctively strives for the ideal conditions in which to reach the apex of its strength. While Thucydides despaired that humanity was doomed to repeat the carnage of the Peloponnesian War because human nature would never change, Nietzsche was more optimistic. Our species' lust for power was not only the cause of unjust human suffering, it was also the guiding force that Nietzsche declared, once controlled and refined, gave birth to the artistic geniuses of Classical Greece and the Italian Renaissance. Whereas historians like Burckhardt and Thucydides have all identified the importance of power and how it can negatively affect human life, Nietzsche differed in that he viewed power as being value neutral. It was not a question of whether power could be eliminated, but rather of who had it and to what end they were utilizing it. For example, in order to undermine the predominance of Slave Morality, Nietzsche often employed the strategy of revealing the immoral use of power by those who professed to be acting morally. Yet elsewhere, Nietzsche was quite clear that so long as the goal was the attainment of a higher type of humanity, certain immoral actions, like lying, were permissible.

Nietzsche spoke positively of both Burckhardt and Thucydides throughout his mature period. Even when Nietzsche collapsed into insanity, he was still able to write Burckhardt a letter exclaiming that he (Nietzsche) was Jesus Christ.<sup>245</sup> While Thucydides could not be the object of such correspondence, Nietzsche never tired in his promotion of the Greek historian.<sup>246</sup> What Nietzsche especially admired about each thinker was their psychological realism when analysing the past. Not only did Burckhardt and Thucydides explain a certain historical event, but they were also able to bring to the fore the underlying psychology that motivated their historical subjects. This provided Nietzsche with a template from which to conduct his own historical research. Building upon the naturalism he had absorbed as a result of his close friendship with Paul Rée, Nietzsche was able to ground his cultural historiography in certain findings of nineteenth century science. In order to explain how change occurred historically Nietzsche followed Thucydides and argued that our natural lust for supremacy ensured a constant power struggle between competing societies, individuals, and even our own sub-conscious instincts. The mature Nietzsche's rhetorical style also mirrored that of Thucydides. The German philosopher desired not only to explain the past, but also to provoke his readers into changing their present. Given the close parallels between Nietzsche's historical methodology and those of Burckhardt and Thucydides, as well as Nietzsche's positive appraisal for their work, it is likely that they helped influence the development of his mature historiography.

At the core of Nietzsche's later historiography was what he identified as humanity's sub-conscious physiological craving for power. Given that different societies

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<sup>245</sup> Young, *Nietzsche*, 530-531.

<sup>246</sup> Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, 47-53.

have produced a wide variety of divergent cultures, Nietzsche took it as his mission to uncover which ones were formed by “healthy” instinct, and to undermine those formed by some human physiological deficiency. The purpose of history in Nietzsche’s mature thought was to provide the necessary evidence to provoke his contemporary audience into abandoning cultural values that he believed to be harmful to the health of the species. Yet while Nietzsche certainly utilized history and had a historical methodology, he consistently maintained that history ought to never become more than a mere tool at the disposal of the philosopher. However, it was in his therapeutic optimism that he differed in comparison to Thucydides and Burckhardt. Both of these historians have often been identified as being overly pessimistic on account of their belief that human beings cannot escape their destructive nature. While they both acknowledged that tremendous things happened in the past, neither had much faith that the personality of a Pericles, or the glories of the Italian Renaissance, could be duplicated in the future. Nor did either think that the price a society would have to pay to recreate those glories (incessant political and social conflict) was worth it. Nietzsche, by contrast, was remarkably optimistic that the greatness of Antiquity could be replicated, and even surpassed, in the future. History had the potential, he thought, to make the elite consciously aware of the many factors conditioning who they are and where mankind should be going as a species.<sup>247</sup>

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This thesis has argued that the widespread perception among historians of Nietzsche’s historiography being proto-postmodern is deeply flawed. This study has focused on three highly influential historical interpretations of Nietzsche’s historiography

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<sup>247</sup> See Nietzsche’s introduction in Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” 451-459. And Brobjer, “Nietzsche’s Relation to Historical Methods and Nineteenth-Century German Historiography,” 158-161.

provided by Hayden White, Michel Foucault, and Allan Megill, and has sought to show they all failed to take into account Nietzsche's philosophical shift and events in Nietzsche's life that drastically altered his philosophical orientation. The termination of his relationship with Richard Wagner and his subsequent friendship with Paul Rée created a divergence in Nietzsche's thought. Moving away from the overtly aesthetic orientation of his early publications, Nietzsche from 1876 increasingly adopted a naturalist philosophy that contradicted many of his previously dearly held ideals. History was not excluded from this existential reevaluation that Nietzsche underwent from 1876. While he never wrote a follow-up to his oft cited essay on historiography, "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life," which he published in 1872 during his early infatuation with aestheticism, Nietzsche's mature writings are frequently historical in nature, and they employ a historical methodology grounded in nineteenth century psychology and physiology. The absence of any obvious discussion focusing upon the topic of historical methodology by Nietzsche in his later publications has perhaps been what has led historians to assume a false consistency in his philosophy of history. By historicising Nietzsche's thought, this thesis has sought to make clear that such a consistency is untenable.

While seeking to revise the historical consensus regarding Nietzsche's philosophy of history, this thesis has also endeavoured to provide a new sketch of what a more contextualized Nietzschean historiography would be. After analysing Nietzsche's mature thought, I have argued that the German philosopher had more in common with the historians Jacob Burckhardt and Thucydides than with say, a Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida. Far from being a relativist, Nietzsche's historiography had at its core a naturalist

conception of human nature that was grounded in nineteenth century science. Nietzsche often referred to himself as a “cultural physician.” To carry out his role he adopted many of the traits we would expect to find in a cultural historian. His source materials were almost always the artistic remnants of an individual, or civilization. Nietzsche examined those sources not for any literal truth they possessed, but rather to treat each source as a physiological symptom, a by-product of the underlying health or illness of the organism that produced it. His goal was to bring to the attention of his select audience those cultural ideals and moral norms that he deemed harmful to their health. To do so, Nietzsche employed a style of writing that was highly rhetorical and reminiscent of the Ancient Greek historian Thucydides. While at times inconsistent, contradictory, and irrational, Nietzsche’s rhetorical flare consistently aimed to serve his prime goal of provoking his reader into abandoning values he thought were detrimental to their health. Nietzsche was sceptical that logic alone could convince others to adopt his vision; after all, Slave Morality had been so successful not because of its logic, but rather because it spoke to a physiological need. Likewise, Nietzsche purposely appealed to his readers’ intellectual conscience and self-pride, baiting them to react favourably to his philosophy by accusing them of being “cowards” if they did not.

It was Nietzsche’s hope that he could use history to help lay the foundation for a new cultural elite that would emerge in Europe. His project was elitist in nature and happily embraced the reality that countless human beings would be subjected to the whims of a select few. The details of this political compact are vague, and at times confusing, but what is clear to all commentators is that Nietzsche was no democrat, anarchist or socialist. White, Foucault, and Megill all seem to assume that Nietzsche

desired to free all of “humanity” from the tyranny of conventional morality. That is only half true. Nietzsche certainly wanted to free an elite from Slave Morality but he understood that for the average individual there was no choice involved. For him, one either needs Slave Morality or they do not; the need is physiologically conditioned. Only Nietzsche’s elite have the capacity to overcome Slave Morality because they have the necessary physiological conditions in place to desire another type of morality. Nietzsche believed the “corruption” of Slave Morality was already apparent to his elite at an emotive level. He designed his philosophy to clarify those feelings and present an alternative morality for his select audience. Those historians defending a postmodern historical epistemology would be hard pressed to endorse such a philosophy.

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