Critical History and Genealogy

Christoph Schuringa

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I have two main reasons for treating the topics of critical history and genealogy together. The first concerns a discontinuity. Although a number of commentators have supposed that what Nietzsche understands by ‘critical history’ and what he understands by ‘genealogy’ are significantly analogous,[[1]](#footnote-1) I want to question the supposed analogy. The second concerns a continuity that masks a discontinuity. Nietzsche’s concerns, both in the period of the *Untimely Meditations* in which he introduces the notion of critical history, and in the period of *On the Genealogy of Morality* in which he introduces the notion of genealogy, are primarily *existential*. More specifically, his primary concern is with what, as he would put it, ‘serves life’ (something, of course, brought out in the title of the second *Untimely Meditation* itself, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History *for Life*”). While this interest in what is, in some sense, conducive to life marks a continuity, there is a shift in the underlying conception of life.

The first issue may seem of rather limited, and narrowly scholarly, interest. It is well known that Nietzsche’s concerns develop and change considerably from the ‘early’ period of the *Untimely Meditations* to the ‘late’ period of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, and so emphasizing a disanalogy between critical history and genealogy may not seem to contribute anything very significant. If we consider the function that ‘critical history’ has in the earlier text, however, which only starts to become clear if we think carefully about the structure and nature of the text, we will see that the first issue leads into the second. It is only if we fully grasp the way in which critical history both stands apart from, but is also interconnected with, the other two modes of history introduced in the second *Untimely Meditation* that we will appreciate the continuity, and the contrast, with the later project of genealogy in respect of the role that life plays for both the earlier and the later projects.

What I hope will emerge during the course of my discussion is the significance of the topic of life for both the early and the late Nietzsche, and the way in which his concerns with critical history and genealogy, more specifically, are each shaped by a conception of life. In trying to bring this out, I want to emphasize the centrality of existential concerns in Nietzsche’s thought, by contrast with the kind of concerns that commentators have often been more interested (especially in recent work) in exploring when it comes to both HL and GM—typically, more philosophically ‘standard’ concerns with the epistemology or methodology of historiography. A reason why the centrality of the existential concerns has sometimes got obscured is that the more ‘standard’ concerns do figure in his writings, and that he himself is not always clear on what his main priorities are. In HL, in particular, he moves almost frenetically between an array of interconnected issues relating to the pursuit of the past—some of them existential, some cultural, some theoretical. But I do hope to show that we better understand Nietzsche’s projects if we see them as ultimately driven by existential concerns. Doing so brings us closer to earlier ways of reading him, prevalent in the early decades of the twentieth century, that predate attempts to co-opt him as an interlocutor in analytic philosophy or in post-Heideggerian philosophy. We also, as I hope to show, come to appreciate, as earlier readers often did, what is disturbing about the nerve—‘life’—that runs through Nietzsche’s thought.

1. The Second *Untimely Meditation*

There are a number of peculiarities about the second *Untimely Meditation* as a text. It is well known that Nietzsche later in his life showed little interest in it, and came as close to repudiating it as he does any of his texts (Salaquarda 1984, p. 1). This is all the more extraordinary for an author to whom it comes naturally to constantly return to his earlier texts in order to re-read them and re-expound them to his readers, a tendency that reaches its histrionic climax in the section “Why I Write Such Good Books” in *Ecce homo*.[[2]](#footnote-2) By contrast, it is also a familiar fact that the second *Untimely Meditation* was, for a time, one of Nietzsche’s most influential texts, inspiring the movement known as *Lebensphilosophie* that emerged around the turn of the twentieth century.

It is not difficult to see why Nietzsche became dissatisfied with the text shortly after its publication. As one of its first readers, Erwin Rohde, was quick to point out, the text did not manage to successfully integrate all of its many moving parts into anything like an organic whole.[[3]](#footnote-3) This reflects the gestation history of the text, which can be documented in detail through a study of surviving notebooks in which we can see Nietzsche gradually working out the panoply of conceptual distinctions in play in the final text.[[4]](#footnote-4) Nietzsche had initially planned to write about “the historical sickness” (*die historische Krankheit*) that he took to be afflicting his time,[[5]](#footnote-5) and was operating with a straightforward binary distinction between “iconic history” (which suffered from the sickness) and “productive history” (which was healthy). Soon the terms “iconic” and “productive” give way to “antiquarian” and “monumental” (or “classical”). The thought is now that there is a kind of engagement with the past that stimulates life, by “reliving” the great exemplary actions of the past (“monumental” history), and there is another kind that merely deadens life by engaging in a kind of interminable, pointless fact-gathering, associated with the activities of researchers in the library of Alexandria, that has lost sight of why the facts were being gathered in the first place. The former, for Nietzsche, was associated with the origins of German classical philology in the work of F. A. Wolf, which still recognized that the point of philology was to enliven the young by instilling classical ideals in them; the latter represented the degeneration in classical scholarship that he saw all around him and complained of in texts such as *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions* (KSA 1, pp. 641ff.).[[6]](#footnote-6)

As Nietzsche’s thinking develops, this straightforward two-fold opposition gives way to something much more subtle. What we get is a three-fold schema, comprising monumental, antiquarian, and critical modes of history. We can see that the category of ‘critical history’ enters the text very late from the way in which discussion of it is tacked on to the end of §3, as opposed to being given its own section. The line that Nietzsche now takes is that *all three* modes of relating to the past are required to serve life, each in its right measure and in the right circumstances, but also that each of them, if pursued excessively or in the wrong way or by the wrong people, can *harm* life. The measure of the degree to which each of these ‘modes of history’ serves life is what Nietzsche calls the *plastic power* of the person or culture engaging with the past in one of the three modes. It is dependent on the degree of plastic power to what extent each of the three modes are beneficial for life; a culture with little to no plastic power would simply perish from engaging with the past at all, since it would lack the resources to successfully integrate its engagement with the past into its present worldview.

It is easy to lose sight of this central tripartite configuration (monumental, antiquarian, critical) given that much of the final text of HL seems to be concerned with a more general issue about the over-cultivation of the ‘historical sense’, all of which is difficult to disentangle from attacks on a Hegelian conception of history, on the one hand, and a positivistic conception that Nietzsche appears to associate with Ranke, on the other. Matters are made worse by the way in which another tripartite distinction (that between ‘historical’, ‘unhistorical’ and ‘suprahistorical’) vies for the reader’s attention with the central one.

What Nietzsche is doing with his central tripartite distinction is highly distinctive, however. He is not here concerned with different approaches to historiography or with historical method (as some have been led to suppose given the temptation of subsuming Nietzsche’s concerns under more standard philosophical concerns than his were, in this case those of the philosophy of history as standardly conceived). His primary concern is, instead, existential, as the opening vignette taken from Leopardi advertises. We are asked to contemplate the cows in the field, whose every experience is forgotten as soon as it is had, and who therefore live in a continuous present. Nietzsche’s central question in the *Meditation* concerns the predicament of an animal (the human) who has capacities both for remembering and for forgetting: how is the economy of remembering and ‘active’ forgetting (or repression) to be negotiated? Nietzsche’s striking answer is that what is required is the attainment of some optimum interplay of three “modes” of (as we might say) historical being.

The philosopher after Nietzsche who has probably most fully appreciated this is Heidegger, who offers a remarkable discussion of the second *Untimely Meditation* in Division II (§76) of *Being and Time*. Heidegger sees that Nietzsche is concerned with modes of engagement with the past, with what Heidegger calls “historicality” (*Geschichtlichkeit*), and not with ways of doing historiography (what in English translations of Heidegger gets called “historiology”, and for which Heidegger himself uses the term *Historie*).[[7]](#footnote-7) Heidegger tells us that Nietzsche’s division (*Einteilung*) of historicality into the three modes is “not accidental”, and that the way the *Meditation* opens (with its reflections on memory and forgetting) “allows us to suppose that he understood more than he has made known to us” (ibid.).

There is not space to go into Heidegger’s reading in detail here, but the essential point for our purposes is that the three-fold division of the modes of history reflects, according to him, the structure of Dasein—that is, of the manner of Being that human beings instance. Dasein has a temporal structure; this temporal structure is, Heidegger thinks, the clue to answering the question of the meaning of Being. The temporal structure is not merely inertly “stretched” between the past and the future. “Dasein does not fill up a track or stretch ‘of life’—one which is somehow present-at-hand—with the phases of its momentary actualities. […] Understood existentially, birth is not and never is something past in the sense of something no longer present-at-hand; and death is just as far from having the kind of Being of something still outstanding, not yet present-at-hand but coming along. Factical Dasein exists as born; and, as born, it is already dying, in the sense of Being-towards-death.” (§72) The connection with history (*Geschichte*) is this: “The specific movement in which Dasein *is stretched along and stretches itself along*, we call its ‘*historizing* [Geschehen]’.” Historizing (*geschehen*) is what Dasein does, and it is thereby historical (*geschichtlich*).

Like Nietzsche, Heidegger takes it that understanding the “problem of history” (of *Geschichte*) is located *prior to* questions about what the “science of history” does. “If the question of historicality leads us back to these ‘sources’, then the *locus* of the problem of history has already been decided. This *locus* is not be sought in historiology [*Historie*] as the science of history [*Wissenschaft von der Geschichte*].” (§72) What we must get at is the phenomenon that is *prior* to what historiology gets at: “the basic phenomenon of history” (of our historical *existence*). I will not examine here Heidegger’s arguments for the specific way in which he understands the interdependence of the three modes of history, or of the strictly necessary character of the triadic structure (the basis of his claim that Nietzsche “understood more than he has made known to us”). Suffice to say that Heidegger is more appreciative than is characteristic in the literature on Nietzsche of the manner in which the three modes of history are meant to be complementary and interdependent.

Whether or not one agrees with the details of Heidegger’s reading, he is right on one central point. This is that Nietzsche’s primary concern in the second *Untimely Meditation* is not with historiography, with the epistemology of historiography, or with questions relating directly to his background as a philologist. I therefore find myself in disagreement with Anthony Jensen’s judgement on the *Meditation* in his recent study of the text: “Nietzsche’s focus in HL is not just or even primarily historicity—our existential relationship to our past—but to an equal degree the epistemological questions concerning the possibilities of objectivity, true description, explanation, and teleological structuring of accounts of the past” (Jensen 2016, p. 21). It is true that Nietzsche gives some attention in HL to historians’ aspirations to objectivity in a discussion that seems to target Ranke among others (HL6) and to the ‘parody’ of Hegelianism attained, Nietzsche thinks, in the teleological philosophy of history advanced by Eduard von Hartmann (HL 8). But these discussions never get into any real detail, and they do not seem well integrated into the essay, whose framing sections make it clear that the main issue is supposed to be how human beings can cope with the burden of the past. It is significant that the very opening words of the *Meditation* are the following words from Goethe: “In any case, I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity.” It is around this axis that, I think, Nietzsche’s discussions of historiography (in so far as they figure in HL) turn. Nietzsche is concerned, for example, that history should not turn into an Alexandrian scientific activity aspiring to objectivity *insofar as* such activity is harmful to life. One of the ways in which the *Meditation* is *untimely* is that it harks back to an ideal that Nietzsche finds in Goethe and Schiller, according to which *historia* must always ultimately be *magistra vitae*.[[8]](#footnote-8) These untimely figures are of interest to Nietzsche precisely in that they manage to focus the issue of our engagement with the past in the right place: the way in which it renders a service or disservice to life.

2. Critical History

We are now in a position to consider critical history as it figures in the triad of modes of history. We should constantly bear in mind that critical history is only ever, according to Nietzsche, to operate in conjunction with the other two modes.

Now critical history (which, as mentioned before, is a late addition to the text of the *Meditation* as it took shape through various drafts) is strange. It is not what the term might at first suggest: an approach to the past that casts a critical eye on past events, perhaps, or that tries to draw critical lessons from the past. Nor, as Heidegger rightly says in a lecture course he gave on the *Meditation*, is the meaning of ‘critical’ here that of “*historical-critical* with regard to sources” or “(scientifically) testing”, but rather “judging and negating” with respect to “the *past*” (Heidegger 2003, p. 78). Furthermore, we find when we examine Nietzsche’s text that this “judging” is said to be “unjust” and done not by “justice” but by “life itself”, “that dark, driving power that insatiably thirsts for itself”. Nietzsche even speaks of “judging and annihilating a past” (*eine Vergangenheit richten und vernichten*; HL 3, KSA 1, p. 270).

To come to grips with these remarkable claims, we need to quote the relevant passage at length:

Here it becomes clear how necessary it is to man to have, beside the monumental and antiquarian modes of regarding the past, a *third* mode [*Art*], the *critical*: and this, too, in the service of life. To be able to live, man must possess and from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve a past [*eine Vergangenheit*]: he does this by bringing it before the tribunal, scrupulously examining it and finally condemning it; every past, however, is worthy to be condemned—for that is the nature of human things: human violence and weakness have always played a mighty role in them. It is not justice which here sits in judgment; it is even less mercy which pronounces the verdict: it is life alone, that dark, driving power that insatiably thirsts for itself [*jene dunkle, treibende, unersättlich sich selbst begehrende Macht*]. Its sentence is always unmerciful, always unjust, because it has never proceeded out of a pure well of knowledge; but in most cases the sentence would be the same even if it were pronounced by justice itself. […] It requires a great deal of strength to be able to live and to forget the extent to which to live and to be unjust is one and the same thing. […] Sometimes, however, this same life that requires forgetting demands a temporary suspension of forgetfulness; it wants to be clear as to how unjust the existence of anything—a privilege, a caste, a dynasty, for example—is, and how greatly this thing deserves to perish. Then its past is regarded critically, then one takes the knife to its roots, then one cruelly tramples over every kind of piety. It is always a dangerous process, especially so for life itself: and men and ages which serve life by judging and destroying a past are always dangerous and endangered men and ages. For since we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also the outcome of their aberrations, passions and errors, and indeed of their crimes; it is not possible wholly to free oneself from this chain. If we condemn these aberrations and regard ourselves as free of them, this does not alter the fact that we originate in them. The best we can do is to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge of it, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away. It is an attempt to give oneself, as it were *a posteriori*, a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did originate:—always a dangerous attempt because it is so hard to know the limit to denial of the past and because second natures are usually weaker than first. What happens all too often is that we know the good but do not do it, because we also know the better but cannot do it. But here and there a victory is nonetheless achieved, and for the combatants, for those who employ critical history for the sake of life, there is even a noteworthy consolation: that of knowing that this first nature was once a second nature and that every victorious second nature will become a first. (HL3; KSA 1, pp. 269–70; Nietzsche 1997, pp. 75–77, translation modified)

There is much going on in this passage. We are told, first of all, that in the “break[ing] up and dissolv[ing] of a past” that critical history accomplishes it is not justice but life (which is a blind, dark force) that sits in judgement. Then we are told that justice would in most cases pronounce the same judgement, but this is because, as Mephistopheles says in Goethe’s *Faust* I (1339–41), “all that exists is *worthy* of perishing”. The remit of critical history is not, however, confined to such mere condemnation. In part it also gets its impetus against the background of a *suspension* of the forgetfulness that is associated with mere condemnation; that is, the stance of critical history is not one of mere *rejection*. In such cases, “life” must have got clear on the *injustice* of things (in the examples Nietzsche gives, “a privilege, a caste, a dynasty”) in order *then* to “regard [its past] critically”, and “take the knife to its roots”. It is only following *this* “dangerous process” that the work can then ensue of constructing for oneself “a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did originate”. Great discipline, Nietzsche insists, is necessary to supplant our “first nature” with a new “second nature”.

This passage is suggestive, but unclear along a number of dimensions. In particular it is doubtful whether the relationship between life and justice as it is supposed to function here can be successfully untangled.[[9]](#footnote-9) And neither is it clear whether practitioners of critical history are supposed to eventually believe fully the narratives they may invent for themselves to supplant the horrors they are attempting to distance themselves from. Nietzsche here raises, but does not answer, a series of highly interesting questions as to the desirability of supplying oneself with knowingly creative versions of the past. What is clear for our purposes, however, is that *life* is supposed to play a role in the case of critical history that is different from the role it plays for monumental or for antiquarian history. Monumental history serves life through its selectiveness: it *selects* great exemplars from the past to emulate. Antiquarian history serves life through the sense of continuity with the past that it provides. It is only in the case of critical history that life itself is said to play a formative role: the interests of life directly shape such history, rather than being merely served by it. (Life itself will, in an analogous way, become the topic again in the closing section of HL. Here again life will seem to stand on its own two feet as a power against which ‘knowledge’ or ‘science’ must prove itself.) Each of the three modes of history is supposed by Nietzsche to operate properly in the service of life; but critical history is distinctive in that it alone is shaped and guided by life itself.

The implication of the role played by life in critical history is that it effectively supplants justice as the ultimate arbiter. This gives a striking inflection to the term ‘critical’. Criticism, we might ordinarily think, presupposes a standard of justice: it is in light of this standard that criticism can take place. But justice is now to be supplanted by life, against whose judgements there will be no further court of appeal. All this remains sketchy in Nietzsche’s presentation, since he does not give much specificity to what justice can still be if it is subservient to life; he evidently thinks that justice will still play a role, since it is only subsequent to the assessment of elements of the past (e.g. “a privilege, a caste, a dynasty”) as *unjust* that critical history gets going.[[10]](#footnote-10) Life does two things (something that commentators, so far as I know, do not tend to notice): it both straightforwardly *condemns* where this involves suppression or forgetting, and, in some cases, “this same life that requires forgetting demands a temporary suspension of this forgetfulness”, and in doing the latter it “wants to be clear” on the injustice of the past (HL3; KSA1, p. 269). But life’s entitlement to do these things is something that is never questioned in Nietzsche’s discussion.

Critical history, then, has a distinctive role within HL. It is both conceived of as in interdependent interplay with the other two modes of history, and must be thought of as counterbalanced by them. But it is also the one mode of history that imports a substantive and direct relationship between history and life that in turn affects the entire constellation of modes of engagement with the past that Nietzsche presents in HL.

An author on Nietzsche who successfully brings out the strangeness of critical history is Christian Emden. Emden writes that “Nietzsche’s critical model of historical understanding is perhaps the most controversial aspect of *Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben*. How is a view of the past, which is ultimately bound to reject the past, able to provide orientation in history?” (Emden 2008, p. 163) The question that Emden raises is a good one. But I think that the very perplexity that it gives voice to ought to engender in us a scepticism about the idea that there is an analogy (or, in any case, a direct one) to be drawn between critical history and genealogy. Emden goes on to say that “perhaps such a model [as that of critical history] is truly impossible, but for Nietzsche it will prove to be the first tentative step toward a genealogy of modern culture” (ibid.). Emden may well be right that it is helpful to think of Nietzsche’s grappling with the idea of a condemnatory approach to the past as it figures in critical history as having played a role in his coming to the project of genealogy, although clearly there are other factors contributing to this development, such as Nietzsche’s pursuit in his ‘middle’ period of quasi-Darwinian genealogies of morality inspired by the work of Paul Rée. But there is also a sense in which the idea that critical history prefigures genealogy is deeply misleading. Not only does genealogy not seem to involve the kind of impossibility that Emden warns of: it does not require holding on to a fictive version of the past. But furthermore, as I now want to show, the relationship between critique and life is importantly different in GM.

3. Genealogy

Nietzsche’s project in *On the Genealogy of Morality* has generated a great deal of perplexity among commentators. Nietzsche provides this somewhat breathlessly composed text (which he claimed to have written over a period of only three weeks in the summer of 1887),[[11]](#footnote-11) full of rhapsodic and sweeping claims, with a preface in which he makes some comparatively sober-sounding claims about what he hopes to achieve in the main body of the text.[[12]](#footnote-12) Among these claims are the ideas that what is needed is “a *critique* of moral values”, and that “for this” (*dazu*) is required in turn a “knowledge of a kind that has neither existed up until now nor even been desired” (GMPreface 6; KSA5, p. 253). Nietzsche goes on to suggest that getting hold of such knowledge “is a matter of travelling the vast, distant, and so concealed land of morality—of the morality which has really existed, really been lived”. What will be discovered in this process is “the real *history of morality*”, and this is something “which can be documented, which can really be ascertained, which has really existed” (Preface 7; KSA 5, p. 254).

How are we to make sense of such a project? How will such “real history” contribute to the critique Nietzsche wants to effect of, as he puts it, “all morality”? At the very least the relation between history and critique is now more complex than in the case of critical history. The point of critical history was to *condemn* (some passage of) the past, and live in the light of such condemnation (and where necessary having put a fictive or creative counter-narrative in the place of the original one). In the *Genealogy*, the relation between history and critique is different. Here historical investigation of the past is meant to bear on the critique that is that text’s chief remit: it is not a matter of *condemning* ‘a’ past (to use a Nietzschean formulation from the *Untimely Meditation*) but of first *investigating* such a past with an eye to a critique that in some sense is meant to be consequent upon such investigation. In fact, the relation as it figures in GM is something like the inverse of what we see in HL: the past is supposed to do the work of critiquing the present, not the present the work of critiquing the past. And for this it is important to get the story about the past right. In HLNietzsche had already signalled the importance of the idea that we cannot free ourselves from the past entirely; indeed in the passage on critical history he writes that “it is not possible wholly to free oneself from this chain” (HL3; KSA1, p. 270). Not only this, but, as he expresses it in *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*, “the past continues to flow in us in a hundred waves” (VM 223; KSA 2, p. 477). We cannot get away from the past, and furthermore it continues to shape us, whether we like it or not.

It is quite easy to see that Nietzsche’s claims about offering ‘real history’ are not mere *façon de parler* or merely a rhetorical device intended to mislead.[[13]](#footnote-13) In his notebooks of the period he speaks repeatedly of conducting “histories of morality”, and in *The Antichrist* he says: “I go back, I tell the *genuine* history [*echte* Geschichte] of Christianity” (AC 39; KSA 6, p. 211). The continuity of the account he offers in AC 24–47 of this supposedly “genuine history” with that of GMbecomes abundantly clear when we look at Nietzsche’s plans for a second instalment of GM that was to contain a further three “treatises” (see NL 1887: 9[83]). The second of these three new treatises was to have been entitled “Zur Geschichte der Moral-Entnatürlichung” (“On the history of the denaturing of morality”), a title that corresponds to the project carried out in AC 24–47. Again, in a letter to Jacob Burckhardt, Nietzsche refers to GMas “studies of moral history [*moralhistorische Studien*] under the title *On the Genealogy of Morality*” (14 November 1887, KGB III/5, p. 198), and in the notebooks he repeatedly uses phrases such as “history of our moral valuations” (see NL 1883: 8[15], 16[33]; NL 1884: 26[130]; 26[164]; NL 1886: 5[70]).

The question of how the history that Nietzsche provides in GMof the values that his audience allegedly subscribe to (supposing that we are to take his claims to offer real history at face value) can have a bearing on their critique has been much debated. There is a related question about whether Nietzsche commits the genetic fallacy, and if so whether this matters, which has again been much discussed. I want to set this debate aside here, and take it for granted that such history as Nietzsche offers of the values in question does indeed contribute in some way to their critique. What I want to focus on is the role played by *life* in this constellation.

In the case of critical history, life had a direct bearing on engagement with the past. The past was to be condemned, and to some extent reconstructed, in light of life’s own judgements on it. With the mature project of genealogy, things stand differently. Life will again have the role of ultimate arbiter, but its relation to the historical project is altered (it is indirect where for critical history it was direct). In addition, as I will show in the next section, how life gets conceived is itself significantly altered.

As I have argued elsewhere (Schuringa 2014, 2016) Nietzsche’s historical project in GMfeeds importantly into his overarching project of the late period, that of an attempted “revaluation of all values”. The historical work done in GMprepares the way for such revaluation by showing how present values are the outcome of a previous such revaluation, that of the so-called “slave revolt in morality”. The very realization that Nietzsche’s readers are shaped by the past in the way that GMallegedly demonstrates is supposed to do part of the work of the revaluation: that they have been so shaped, and that this shaping of their souls continues to be effective in them, points the way to the prospects for a reshaping of them that might prove durable in a similar way.

Life now plays the role of undergirding this project as a whole (genealogy plus revaluation). The crucial question that Nietzsche takes himself to address in GMis that of opening up the possibility of the attainment of a “*highest power and splendour* of the human type” (GMPreface 6; KSA 5, p. 253), one that he thinks “morality” has worked to thwart. It is the realization of this possibility that the revaluation is supposed to effect; in that sense the revaluation is the completion of the project Nietzsche has announced in GM. While it is easy to lose sight of the overall goal that animates GMas part of this wider project, it is quite clearly stated by Nietzsche himself. In asking what value existent values possess, he glosses the question as follows: “Have they inhibited or furthered human flourishing up until now? Are they a sign of distress, of impoverishment, of the degeneration of life? Or, conversely, do they betray the fullness, the power, the will of life, its courage, its confidence, its future?” (GMPreface 3; KSA 5, p. 250)

There is more to be said about how the project of genealogy might be thought to relate to critical history; but I have tried to suggest that the relationship between the two is less immediate than might be supposed. Critical history offers us a form of liberation from the past, but without much specification of how such liberation can be sustained. Genealogy, by contrast, feeds into the specific liberatory project of revaluation, which offers a substantive recasting of existing values. Critical history is hemmed in by monumental and antiquarian history. It is not clear whether genealogy is to be constrained in any such way; certainly the notions of monumental and antiquarian history drop out of the picture after HL, and it is doubtful whether something like an analogous role is carved out for them in Nietzsche’s later project.

Where there is a commonality between critical history and genealogy is in the way they each fall back on a conception of life—even though this takes a different form in each case. It is to Nietzsche’s varying treatments of the topic of life that I now turn.

4. Life

I have attempted to situate both the treatment of the modes of history in the second *Untimely Meditation* (and in particular what gets crystallized in its treatment of ‘critical history’) and Nietzsche’s later genealogical approach in the context of the topic of ‘life’. I am not the first to connect genealogy with the topic of life (see especially the detailed discussion in Hussain 2011), nor am I the first to connect GM with the notion of ‘serving life’ that is operative in the second *Untimely Meditation* (for a treatment that does so explicitly, see Merrick 2013).[[14]](#footnote-14)

What I want to focus on here is the disconnect between Nietzsche’s earlier and his later treatment of ‘life’, and I want to suggest that each of these are problematic in their own way. In the earlier text, as we saw, Nietzsche speaks of life as a dark, insatiable force “thirsting for itself”. By the time he comes to write the *Genealogy*, he is working towards a conception of life (principally in the notebooks) as characterized by will to power. Whereas the earlier conception was one that Nietzsche seemed content to leave quite nebulous, now, it seems, he is concerned to give a detailed and (sometimes) even scientifically respectable account of it.[[15]](#footnote-15) This promise of a fully worked-out conception of life is never, however, made good on, since it is a core component of the project that Nietzsche left unfinished when he suffered his mental collapse in 1889.

I want to suggest that we ought to find Nietzsche’s manner of relying on ‘life’, both early and late, deeply challenging—and even frightening. One of the ways in which we fail to take the measure of Nietzsche’s projects (early and late) is that we find it difficult to see central aspects of Nietzsche’s thought that loomed much larger in earlier interpretations. Readers of earlier generations gave a great deal of emphasis both to the conception of life as a dark, ineffable force that we find in the early work (e.g. Ludwig Klages, Gustav Wyneken and Walter Benjamin),[[16]](#footnote-16) and to the conception of life as will to power in the later work (e.g. Heidegger).

There is comparatively little to be said here concerning the earlier conception; its whole point is that life is ineffable. It ought to be easy to see why this is a frightening idea. As gets crystallized in the passage on critical history at HL3, life is a power to which we must give ourselves over unquestioningly, since responding to questions is not something it does. We ought to orientate ourselves to the past not only so as to “serve” life (as monumental and antiquarian history do), but to submit to it.

Matters are more complicated when it comes to the late work, for here Nietzsche has a great deal to say about life. Life is now not an ineffable force to which we submit; it is something like a principle to which we have already submitted just in virtue of existing. And this principle, Nietzsche now mostly thinks, ought to be ultimately susceptible of some kind of detailed elaboration. The question of how Nietzsche thought such an elaboration might go is deeply vexed, and no such successful elaboration is offered in the published and unpublished texts that have come down to us. What is unmistakable is the centrality of life. As with the earlier work, less seasoned readers of Nietzsche find it easier to see just how predominant the concept of life is than those who have spent a great deal of time with the texts. John Richardson aptly brings this out when he points out that what he calls “beginning readers” of Nietzsche “better notice” the importance of what Nietzsche is trying to do with the topic of “life”, and goes on to say that “I think it is Nietzsche’s *principal* justification for his values: life gives the main criterion by which he carries out his ‘revaluation of values’, and the fact that life supplies it is what justifies that criterion” (Richardson 2013, p. 756).

As Richardson demonstrates during the course of his fine-grained discussion of the topic of Nietzsche on life, Nietzsche says very many different things about life, and treats life in a range of different ways. It is probably ultimately not possible to incorporate all of these claims and ways of speaking into any kind of coherent, unified whole. Taking Richardson as our guide, however, we can take it that a prominent idea of Nietzsche’s is the notion that life stands in some important and specially close connection to the revaluation of all values. One way to read this connection is to take life to be straightforwardly equivalent to will to power (an equation for which there is decent support in Nietzsche’s texts); since will to power is repeatedly said to be the criterion of the revaluation of all values, we might then take life to be the criterion of the revaluation.

It is indeed not unreasonable to suppose that, as Richard Schacht has written, “life, as [Nietzsche] construes it, *is* ‘will to power’ in various forms” (Schacht 1983, p. 367). There is good evidence for this equation of life with will to power in Nietzsche’s texts. He tells us at JGB13 that “life itself is will to power” (KSA 5, p. 27), speaks in the Epilogue to FW of “the will to power as the principle of life” (KSA 6, p. 51), at GMII 12 of “the essence of life, its will to power” (KSA 5, p. 316), and in a *Nachlass* note (NL 1888: 14[174], KSA 13, p. 360) of “the will to power as *life*”.[[17]](#footnote-17)

It is notoriously difficult to specify, however, what we should understand ‘will to power’ to be. Will to power is sometimes restricted to organic beings, sometimes extended to absolutely everything. Indeed Nietzsche sometimes says not only that everything is will to power but that everything is nothing but will to power, as in the following well-known passage: “‘*This world is the will to power—and nothing besides!* And you yourselves are also this will to power—and nothing besides!’” (NL 1885: 38[12]; KSA 11, p. 611) In some sense what Nietzsche is attempting to do here seems to rely on a “metaphysical theory, comparable, for instance, to Leibniz’ monadology”, according to which “the world consists not of things, but of quanta of force engaged in something on the order of ‘universal power-struggle’ […], with each center of force having or being a tendency to extend its influence and incorporate other such centers” (Clark 1990, p. 206).[[18]](#footnote-18) When restricted to organic beings, will to power appears as some kind of drive for outward expansion and domination that might play an explanatory role in a theory of evolution that structurally parallels, but substantively differs from, that of Darwin. Here ‘will to power’ is to take the place of ‘will to existence’ (Z II 12; KSA 4, p. 149).[[19]](#footnote-19) Insofar as it applies to human agency, a recently prominent reading of will to power has been in terms of ‘overcoming resistance’ (see, for the origins of this reading, Reginster 2006). Here, again, however, Nietzsche faces the problem that he does not do enough to demarcate what wills power from what does not, or how willing power differs from not willing power. If everything all humans do involves willing power, how is it that will to power could be explanatory of human action?[[20]](#footnote-20)

While it is difficult to get much precision on the notions of life or of will to power as they figure in the late (published and unpublished) writings, there is one dimension along which Nietzsche has strikingly (and frighteningly) determinate things to say about life conceived in terms of will to power. This is the dimension of the growth or decline of life (in terms of will to power) over time, considered as a cultural phenomenon. He writes in *The Antichrist*:

Life itself is to my mind the instinct for growth, for durability, for an accumulation of forces, for *power*: where the will to power is lacking there is decline. It is my contention that all the supreme values of mankind *lack* this will—that the values which are symptomatic of decline, *nihilistic* values, are lording it under the holiest names. (AC6; KSA 6, p. 172)

If this passage is to be taken seriously as giving us the ‘criterion’ governing the genealogy and the revaluation of values, then we seem to end up with a curiously schematic picture. On this picture, what matters is the “ascent” or “descent” of the “type man”, or the “line man”, measured in terms of the realization of will to power (however exactly that is supposed to be done).[[21]](#footnote-21) I do not know how to bring together Nietzsche’s more generic conception of “life” and his more specific ideas about “ascent”, “descent”, “degeneration”, and so on; and I am doubtful that he ever worked this out. It may start to look, however, as if one way in which the interest that Nietzsche has in engagement with the past has shifted, towards a delineation of such lines of ascent and descent. He writes suggestively, just before the passage quoted above from AC: “A history of ‘lofty sentiments’, of the ‘ideals of mankind’—and it is possible that I shall have to write it—would almost explain too *why* man is so corrupt” (AC 6; KSA 6, p. 172).

The talk here of ‘ascent’ and ‘descent’ opens up a range of issues, not least because Nietzsche seems here to be thinking of assessments of value (in cultural terms, at least) as themselves having a historical dimension (by being concerned with tendencies that play out over time). Since the conception of life that underwrites such talk of ascent and descent remains lacking in specificity, however, such talk acquires an ominous ring. What are the relevant units of ascent and descent? Over what periods are ascent and descent measured? And what are the relevant cultural groups? Whose descent can legitimately be endured for the sake of whose ascent?

Leaving such questions about the aspiration to make valuing reliant on histories of ascent and descent, to one side, there is a further question about the interaction between life and the project of revaluation that leaves the status of history itself in suspense. One might, namely, even wonder whether Nietzsche thinks that engagement with the past is something that will continue to be of value subsequent to a revaluation of *all* values. If a monolithic conception of life determines everything about what is valuable, it would seem that the role of history gets circumscribed in such a way that it might well *cease* being of any value to life at all, once its genealogical task of preparing the way for the revaluation has been accomplished. In any case it looks much less obvious than it had to the young Nietzsche that our historical horizon should be confined within proper limits rather than washed away altogether. Nietzsche liked, in the last months before his *geistige Umnachtung*, to speak of an aspiration on his part to “break history into two halves”.[[22]](#footnote-22) This would seem to admit of an ominous reading, according to which history literally starts again subsequent to the revaluation, rendering what precedes it irrelevant. That such a reading seems possible indicates something, I think, of how far Nietzsche has travelled since making life the power to which critical history was to answer, as one part of a variegated picture of human beings’ existential need to engage with their past.[[23]](#footnote-23)

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1. Daniel Breazeale has written of “a direct link between Nietzsche’s early conception of the task of critical history and his later efforts as a ‘genealogist’ of contemporary values”; Breazeale even goes so far as to write that “critical history, now renamed ‘genealogy’, thus becomes one of the central tasks of philosophy—if, indeed, it does not replace it altogether” (2000, pp. 59, 71). See also Kittsteiner 1996, p. 58; Nehamas 2006, pp. 57–58; Saar 2007, p. 30; Emden 2008 (discussed below). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A less extreme example occurs at GM Preface 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Rohde’s letter to Nietzsche of 23 March 1874 (KGB II/4, p. 423): “At times I have the impression that individual pieces and excerpts were *initially worked out* by *themselves*, and then, without being fully dissolved back into the flow of the metal, were integrated into the whole”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Groundbreaking work was done on the composition history of HL by Salaquarda 1984; for a truly comprehensive study see Jensen 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ernst Schulin has argued that Nietzsche initially conceived the essay as a straightforward attack on historical study as such. See Schulin 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It may be worth pointing out that Nietzsche did not subscribe wholeheartedly to either of the two dominant approaches to philology in his own time—*Sprachphilologie* (whose figurehead was Gottfried Hermann) and *Sachphilologie* (whose leading light was August Boeckh). He took a culturally conservative view that implicated all of contemporary philology in the kind of ‘Alexandrian learning’ he objected to, and contrasted them both with a conception of philology that regarded it as “a means to transfigure one’s being and that of the emerging youth” (KGW II/3, p. 437). As Jensen points out, “Nietzsche’s final word about the entire philological civil war” was: “Wort- und Sachphilologie—dummer Streit! [stupid fight!]” (Jensen 2013, p. 56). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Nietzsche, of course, seems to use the terms differently: the title of *HL* is “Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der *Historie* für das Leben”. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See (for Goethe) Vivarelli 1994; (for Schiller) Guery 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lemm 2011 gives a sustained treatment of the topics of ‘life’ and ‘justice’ as they figure in HL, but places them in a context that make it difficult to bring these topics properly into focus. She opens her text by speaking of HLas a “famous essay dedicated to a consideration of the value of history” (p. 167), and from then on proceeds to treat Nietzsche as if he is concerned with *historiography*, as so many commentators on this text do. In the course of her long and subtle discussion, this preoccupation tends to crowd out those passages that do give significant attention to the problematic of the human being as a forgetting but also remembering animal. Lemm writes that “Nietzsche makes clear that life and history […] are […] diametrically opposed to each other” (p. 170); but as I read HLone of Nietzsche’s most significant and profound points concerns precisely the *interdependence* of life and history. When it comes to Nietzsche’s treatment of ‘justice’, irony plays a significant role in the text as I read it, an element absent in Lemm’s reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It will not, of course, be lost on seasoned readers of Nietzsche that condemnation of precisely these things are not what one would expect of Nietzsche himself. But the structural question about how justice can operate under the aegis of life remains even if we suppose that these are not examples that Nietzsche *himself* would endorse. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Nietzsche claimed to have committed it to paper between 10 July and 30 July 1887. See his letter to Georg Brandes, 10 April 1888 (KGB III/5, p. 287). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I do not mean to imply that Nietzsche’s sweeping claims in GM do not ultimately rest on sustained and thorough reading of historical material. The absence of scholarly apparatus, along with ironic references to scholarly tropes (such as the use of the term *Abhandlung* for its three component parts) may be taken as one of the numerous strategies of dissimulation and misdirection in which Nietzsche engages in this text. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For a reading along these lines see Gemes 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Merrick’s focus when it comes to GM, however, is on Nietzsche’s implication of nineteenth-century historiography in the ascetic ideal. My interest here is in Nietzsche’s own engagement with the past as manifested in the project of genealogy itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. We tend to think of Nietzsche’s will-to-power doctrine as highly eccentric. He himself thought he found corroboration for it, however, in scientific works such as Roux 1881. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See the helpful overview in Lebovic 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. These passages are all cited in Hussain 2011, pp. 151–3, p. 158 n. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For a comprehensive working-out of this idea, see Abel 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. A further complication here is that Nietzsche also contrasts “will to power” with “will to life”: “Nur, wo Leben ist, da ist auch Wille: aber nicht Wille zum Leben, sondern—so lehre ich’s dich—Wille zur Macht!” (Z II 12; KSA 4, p. 149). It is, of course, highly inadvisable to try to get clarity on conceptual distinctions in Nietzsche by drawing on *Zarathustra*. Nonetheless, the passage seems to confirm a general tendency in Nietzsche to bring ‘life’ (or ‘will to life’) and ‘will to power’ very close together, but to stop short of spelling out their precise relation to each other. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This problem poses an ever-present threat to “Nietzschean constitutivism”, which takes human agency to be constituted by will to power, as defended in Katsafanas 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The role played by Nietzsche’s notions of the “ascent” and “descent” of mankind has, to my knowledge, been insufficiently studied. The idea that the criterion of value might be a general tendency marking the overall direction of humanity over time is a highly novel one with striking implications. One author who has picked up on its significance is Philippa Foot (2002, p. 147). For this thematic in Nietzsche, see especially GD Streifzüge 33 (KSA 6, pp. 131–32); NL1888: 14[29]. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See the series of letters to various recipients composed between September and December 1888: 14 September 1888 (to Paul Deussen, KGB III/5, p. 426); 4 October 1888 (to Malwida von Meysenbug, ibid., p. 447); 18 October 1888 (to Franz Overbeck, ibid., 453); early December 1888 (draft, to Georg Brandes, ibid., p. 500); 8 December 1888 (to August Strindberg, ibid., p. 509); 9 December 1888 (to Heinrich Köselitz, ibid., p. 513). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. I am grateful for Anthony Jensen for comments which have helped to improve this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)