# Nietzsche: history as *memento vivere*

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**The subject of this paper is Nietzsche's understanding historicity as** a condition for human life. My intention here is to explore the nature of our historical conditioning in relation to the political experience of modernity – understood as an age in which our relationship with the past has precisely become a problem. To this end, I shall argue that Nietzsche's analysis of the relationship between history and agency reveals, first, how a specifically modern conception of history as process leads to the devaluation of action and a concomitant subjectification of human life, and second, how this result destroys the conditions of plurality that sustain the political realm. I develop this line of reasoning against the background of Nietzsche's understanding of history as a *memento vivere*: an inspiration towards vibrant life and action, a challenge to leave the security of the household and enter the public realm of political activity.

This seemingly unlikely reading of Nietzsche – the self-confessed 'antipolitical German' – is rooted in what may be called his worldliness: a love for the fragile, uncertain realm of human affairs that underpins our philosophical and political practices. It is precisely this concern with the world that underlies his unease at the fate of action (*praxis*) under conditions of modernity. For Nietzsche, the most fateful of these conditions is the notion of history as *process*, which results in a devaluation of public action and the concomitant subjectification of human life. This 'inner emigration' culminates in the disappearance of the domain in which mortal words and deeds acquire significance and human life achieves its meaning.

I shall deal with the above argument by means of three interrelated questions: (1) the significance of history for human life; (2) the problematic nature and ruinous political consequences of modern historiography; (3) the possibility presented to re-think our relationship with the past, and hence the meaning of human agency, without falling prey to the snares inherent in our political and philosophical inheritance. This last section will centre on Nietzsche's conception of Greek tragic drama as an aesthetic model of action which, I shall argue, generates an understanding of the relationship between historicity and worldliness.

Each of the above questions will be addressed in a separate section of the paper, beginning with a consideration of the nature of our historical conditioning.

## 1. The significance of history

Nietzsche, in his well-known meditation on the uses and disadvantages of history for life, reminds us that to be human is to never be fully contained in the present, for behind us trails all that we have been. At the same time, it is impossible to grasp or possess our past as a completed project. Our historical consciousness discloses to us that we *have become*, that we did not arrive in the present fully formed, but cannot reveal to us *who we are* in the present. One's immediate self is always unknown territory. The awareness of provisionality and incompleteness is expressed in the formulation "it was': that password which gives conflict, suffering and satiety access to man so as to remind him what his existence fundamentally is – an imperfect tense that can never become a perfect one' (Nietzsche 1983:61). This limitation would not matter if, like animals, we were capable of complete oblivion, in which the past is erased and each experience begins anew. Yet to be human is to be conditioned by this 'it was'. We win complete forgetfulness only at the cost of life itself:

> It is an understanding of the impossibility of fully possessing or escaping the past that informs the renowned wisdom of Silenus – the old satyr from *Oedipus at Colonnus*, half-god and half-goat – who, in response to king Midas's question about the best and highest thing for mortals, famously answers: 'What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is – to die soon' (Nietzsche 1967 42). This denunciation of mortal life springs from a recognition that our mortality– the singular, irreversible and unrepeatable line from birth to death – is framed by immortal nature, which does not die, but regenerates itself in great seasonal cycles.' In the process, individuated life is re-absorbed by amorphous nature and leaves no trace of its passing.

It is this ever-present threat of oblivion that calls up our longing for personal significance to our lives, a sense of permanence in a world that continually shows up the frailty of human affairs. In this, we manifest the desire to belong, to feel ourselves at home on earth. However – and this is what lies at the bottom of Silenus's proclamation – human life is always in disharmony with the natural realm in which this existence is played out. Unlike animals, we are

haunted by an unredeemable 'has-been'; not being gods, we are denied the all-seeing perspective which might disclose the full meaning and significance of our personal history. This is the double-bind of our historical consciousness: the incapacity either to forget or to forge a memory long enough to ascribe permanent meaning to mortal life.

If this were the final word on our position in the world, we would do well to limit our aspirations to a swift ending to this threadbare existence. Yet there exists a counter-force to the wisdom of Silenus: another, human world that is sustained by communal memory and in the context of which our mortal lives acquire a kind of lastingness. This realm may be said to have the character of a 'space of appearances' (Arendt 1958:199), a common world of meaning, in which human beings encounter one another, become visible to one another, and allow the events of their individual lives to be transformed into stories that live on in the memory of others. On this view, therefore, human life is not only conditioned by indifferent nature, but also by a sphere of meaning that is established through our transient words and deeds and sustained by memory. This shared realm lies *between* human beings, at the same time framing our mortal lives and enabling us to achieve a memory beyond the limits of a singular life.

In the third part of the paper, I shall examine the political dimensions of this inter-human realm in relation to Nietzsche's analysis of Greek tragic drama. For now, it is important to note that the emergence and continued existence of this sphere of memory does not automatically result from human living-together. Nietzsche argues that life in modernity is characterised precisely by the erosion of this realm of communal remembrance, and an accompanying retreat into an irreducible subjectivity. In the light of this turning away from the public world into the self, the capacity for action degenerates into an inner, unrealised potential of a subject, unable to sustain a world that is of shared concern to human beings. The meditation on history and Nietzsche's later reflections on modern nihilism trace the genealogical affiliation between this subjective turn, with all the political and philosophical consequences it entails, and a specific conception of history.

## 2. Modernity: history as a problem

The term 'modernity', in Nietzsche's sense, refers to both a condition – an experience, state of being, or self-conception – and a philosophical strategy. These two characteristics inform and sustain

one another, and are therefore inextricably linked in Nietzsche's critique of the age.

As a condition, modernity encompasses the experience of belonging to the 'just now', existing in a 'fragile, broken time of transition' in which it has become impossible to relate the past to the present. To define oneself as a modern is to feel oneself in a kind of interim state, loosened from the authority of the traditions which formerly secured communal life, and without recourse to new principles to govern and legitimise one's relations with others – a position that can be characterised as falling literally between past and future.[2] This dilemma is best described in terms of a disjunction between experience and understanding; an inability to make sense of the world in which one is constrained to live.

In a philosophical context, this experience of conceptual inadequacy places a question mark over the relationship between human cognition and the world that circumsc110ribes it. In Nietzsche's terminology, this is the actuality of nihilism: '*not* to esteem what we know, and not to be *allowed* any longer to esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves' (*WP* 5). The upshot of this is a view of the world as lacking in any inherent meaning or value. This disenchantment with existence may engender an ascetic withdrawal from life, or – danger of dangers – the development of systems of rational explanation intended to master the vagaries of human existence once and for all. For Nietzsche, the philosophy of modernity constitutes precisely such an attempt at mastery, informed by the most complete scepticism regarding the inherent value of the domain of mortal life.[3]

For the purposes of this discussion, I shall focus on the way in which this philosophical endeavour is embodied in a particular conception of history. At issue here is understanding the past and predicting the future in terms of 'the science of universal becoming' (Nietzsche 1983:77), which offers respite from the insecurity of worldly life by subsuming all things under abstract laws of development. Nietzsche's enemy here Hegel, whose speculative philosophy, to paraphrase David Farell Krell (1981:467), amounts to an attempt to win results from history. In Nietzsche's critique of modernity, Hegel (or, one should say: the conception of history as teleology that may derived from a particular reading of Hegel) is one of the great offenders.[4] The central problem here relates to the emphasis on result, outcome, teleology, which, in Nietzsche's analysis, speaks of a desire to tame human activity – and the world circumscribed by this activity – by subjecting both to a rational

principle of development. In its dialectical emphasis, this doctrine preaches a relentless optimism: our present, transitory existence partakes in the progressive unfolding of the higher aims of history and in this way achieves lasting meaning.

In Nietzsche's view, however, such optimism springs from an altogether darker source: a mistrust in life, a negation of the world in all its transitoriness. In an attempt to suppress this nihilistic sensibility, the science of universal becoming imposes a hierarchical opposition between *history* – understood as an abstract process of development – and *life*: the arena of contingent human action. Nietzsche's difficulty with this approach is that it reveres a predictable, but life-negating, teleology above the contingent, unpredictable human acts that are the worldly basis of history. The problem is not merely one of underestimating the value of action, but of a desire for a complete, all-encompassing framework to circumscribe all action and thereby determine its significance in advance. Nietzsche's concern here is with the overt political implications of such a philosophical strategy (an insight echoed by Hannah Arendt in her analysis of the origins of the political disaster of modernity: the emergence of the totalitarian state). For if human community is grounded in an inter-human domain sustained by our words and deeds – Arendt's space of appearances – then the reduction of human agency to a function within an inevitable process destroys the grounds of appearance, and hence of our communality.

Thus, under the domination of the belief in the historical world-process, individual action loses all significance. And this loss, in turn, initiates a withdrawal from any kind of shared existence in the world. Tracy Strong (1988:163) identifies this condition as 'the actuality of nihilism', in which one can no longer 'recognize in oneself the validity of another's judgement' (ibid.). In such a world, no claim retains its authority over us; no human being can appeal to another. Severed from a common world, the attempt to understand the conditions under which one live becomes a matter for inner contemplation, a plumbing of one's own subjective depths. At the same time, human agency retreats into the hidden chambers of the soul, where it degenerates into a subjective potential that is no longer realised in the world. The advent of the notion historical process therefore heralds an era of private concerns, the obsession with inner content while dispensing with outer form, a preference for the interior rumination of a subject rather than an active engagement with the world. Whoever tried to give voice to this experience of subjectification would have to proclaim:

> [P]erhaps I still have the right to say of myself *cogito, ergo sum*, but not *vivo, ergo cogito*. Empty 'being' is granted me, but not full and green 'life'; the feeling that tells me I exist warranted to me only that I am a thinking creature, not that I am an *animal* but at most a *cogital* (Nietzsche 1983:119).

In Nietzsche's analysis, this unconnected subjectivity at the heart of modern life is responsible for its most terrible political consequences. For, in the aftermath of the crisis of authority that accompanies the destruction of the public sphere of action and the retreat into an irreducible subjectivity there occurs a second loss: the destruction of the manifest differences, uniqueness and plurality which can only flourish in a world shared with other human beings. In place of the public realm there arises the phenomenon of mass society, composed of beings who are 'not men, not gods, not animals, but creations of historical culture, wholly structure, image, form without demonstrable content and, unhappily, ill-designed form and, what is more, uniform' (Nietzsche 1983:86). These mass-produced human beings lack the means for independent experience or understanding, and are therefore malleable by any external force strong enough to direct its members. In a prophetic passage, Nietzsche (ibid.:112-3) warns that it is only a matter of time before such a force arises, destroying all forms of political community and replacing them with 'systems of individualist egoism, brotherhoods for the rapacious exploitation of the non-brothers, and similar creations of utilitarian vulgarity'.

This, then, is the danger posed by the conception of history as process: the destruction of human commonality and the emergence of the mass from the unconnected subjectivity that follows in the wake of the dissolution of a common world. The question that confronts us at this point is whether the dissolution of familiar frameworks of meaning – the sense that we are caught between past and future – may also open up the possibility of rethinking the public world *without* recourse to a grounding tradition or historical justification, and thus to regenerate the public realm of speech and action that has been covered over by the centuries-long predilection for the inner world of the subject rather than the pluralistic life of the world. This question of course also touches on the relationship between history and action, to which Nietzsche (1983:95-6) provides a preliminary answer to this question by proclaiming that 'only if history can endure to be transformed into a work of art will it perhaps be able to preserve instincts [for life] or even evoke them'. In the following section I shall examine this answer in the context of

Nietzsche's analysis of Greek tragic drama and the political life of the polis.

## An aesthetic perspective: action, history, performance

Given the dangers of relegating human agency to the position of subjective potential, which is only exposed to the gaze of the world in the course of a general process of development, how does Nietzsche propose that we think of action? The first point to make in this regard is that one who acts, by altering an existing state of affairs, brings about something new, and therefore 'will and must offend some piety or other' (1983:75). This emphasis on the indeterminacy of action also recalls the famous dictum from *The Gay Science* (1974:244) that 'by doing we forego': every action irredeemably changes the course of events and therefore engenders the loss of other possibilities for action or valuation. On this view, human agency is non-teleological. To act, is to engage with the world without seeking to guarantee the meaning of one's deeds in advance. 'Greatness ought not to depend on success', writes Nietzsche (1983:113), meaning that the value of a deed lies in its execution, in the public display of virtuosity, and is not defined by its intended or accidental outcome.

In the second place, action can be understood as the means by which we appear to one another in the shared domain beyond the household. We disclose ourselves through our deeds, which require the presence of others for their unfolding, and a common world for a stage. Thus, our actions require a worldly space in which to appear in order to acquire any significance, while, conversely, such a public realm only exists by virtue of these deeds. Most important in this regard is the fact that this public space of appearance is not a deliberate fabrication; simply: it is not *made* by anyone, it cannot be determined by legislation, but arises spontaneously in the midst of performance. What promises (but never fully secures) the endurance of this inter-human domain is collective memory; the extent to which public deeds have been transformed into myths or stories that can be told and re-told to others and thereby circumscribe the horizons of communal life.

For Nietzsche, particularly in his later work on perspectivism, the figurative quality of these narratives allows us to retain an openness towards the many stories that structure the public domain, so that we may enter in our imagination into perspectives other than our own. This experience allows one 'to see oneself transformed

before one's own eyes and to begin to act as if one had actually entered into another body, another character' (Nietzsche 1967:64).

The moment of transfiguration that commences with hearing the story of another life is analogous to the experience of the audience in the drama. While the poet and historian transform the story of a singular life into a narrative, the dramatised form allows this story to be portrayed before an audience. Through the art of the play, the spectators are confronted with the deeds and sufferings of others, and in the process are transfigured in imagination into participants in the lives portrayed on the stage. Thus, the drama allows mortal words and deeds, for all their provisionality and incompleteness, to acquire a kind of lastingness through repetition and public display, whereby the story becomes part of communal remembrance.

Nietzsche, in *The birth of tragedy*, examines the emergence of this communality in relation to the tragic drama of pre-Socratic Greece. In this analysis, the tragedies arose from the unresolvable tension between individuated human life and the ever-present undertow of oblivion: the re-absorption into amorphous nature, which is the root of all human suffering. Seen in this way, the tension lies between a human world sustained by memory and the forgetfulness that is the fate of mortal life. It is out of recognition of the eternal battle between these two forces that the Greeks fashioned the myth of the tragic hero caught between conflicting claims of mortals and gods, who in a moment of hubris transgresses the laws of either one or the other and thereby initiates his own destruction. The account of his ruin reveals the tension that is embedded in the structure of action: the contest between the stabilising functions of history, community, and law on the one hand, and the unruliness and excess of human deeds that can never be fully contained by any such institutions.[5] In the drama, these deeds can live on in human memory despite their short-lived appearance in the realm of worldly affairs. In this sense, the shining images of the tragic hero constitute 'luminous spots to cure eyes damaged by gruesome night' (Nietzsche 1967:67).

In Nietzsche's account, the defining quality of the tragic drama is the 'good will towards appearances'. This love of appearances discloses itself in the public re-enactment of the deeds of the tragic hero, whereby an individual life becomes visible to others and acquires public significance. At the same time, the notion of appearance is bound up with an acknowledgement of identity as a surface phenomenon, a *temporary* staying of the Dionysian

undercurrent of undiversified life. 'Appearance' in this sense therefore signifies both the public nature of the drama – its role in sustaining an inter-human realm of meaning – and the provisionality and incompleteness of the myths or stories that make up this realm.

Thus, Nietzsche's solution to the problem of thinking human commonality in a way that does not depend on mastering the transitoriness of existence once and for all, lies in the model provided by the tragic drama. The constellation of actor, poet/historian, and spectator – those who perform extraordinary acts, those who provide an account of these deeds, and those who bear witness to such accounts – constitutes the realm of remembrance in which our mortal lives, so perishable by nature, can be made to endure. Yet this durability does not have the character of changelessness. The involvement of the audience in the structure of the drama indicates the irrevocably plural character of human communality. And, since the account of any deed, any individual life-story, takes place against the background of multiple interpretations, the meaning established by such means is always provisional. Both the drama and the *polis*, as public spaces of appearance, only exist by virtue of the fact that there are multiple stories to weave into drama, multiple perspectives that vie with one another in the *agora*. The conception of history as the science of processes, on the other hand, tries to secure the meaning of all deeds in advance, thus denying the plural character of the interpretative horizon within which such deeds exist and destroying the very significance it tried to ensure.

The above reflections on the link between action and drama illustrate an important point about the performative basis of the public realm: 'the possibility of there being a 'work', a tangible worldly entity, that is 'embedded' in its own production – at once alive in its own right and yet entirely dependent on the moments of performance' (Keenan 1994:306). The inter-human realm that is the stage for mortal words and deeds is no more solid than these ephemeral human activities. It is out of recognition for this delicate balance that Nietzsche portrays historical narrative as an account of the transient beauty of mortal words and deeds. As he writes in this regard:

> 'I hope that the significance of history will not be thought to lie in its general propositions, as if these were the flower and fruit of the whole endeavour, but that its value will be seen to consist in its taking a familiar, perhaps commonplace theme, an everyday melody, and composing

> inspired variations on it, enhancing it, elevating it to a comprehensive symbol, and thus disclosing in the original theme a whole world of profundity, power and beauty' (Nietzsche 1983:92-3)

History, conceived along these lines, acquires an aesthetic significance: it stands as a reminder of the beauty of human activity, as opposed to its usefulness, or its function within a general process of development. And, as Hannah Arendt (1965:21) expresses it so eloquently, it is precisely with our sense of beauty that we love the world.

In Nietzsche's conception, therefore, historical narrative is the tie that binds us to fragile realm of human affairs. The love of this human world is properly expressed as *amor fati* – the love of fate, and, by implication, the love of the world as our fatality. For we should remember, writes Nietzsche, 'that fate is nothing else but a chain of events; that man, as soon as he acts, creates his own events, determines his own fate' (1993:157). This formulation emphasises our involvement in the chance that shapes our lives. Fate, in this sense, functions as a 'limit-determination' (ibid.); it is the unpredictable, unregulated outcome of our actions that fashions the horizon of our existence, but for which we nevertheless remain responsible.

In this context, the artistry of historical narrative therefore does not depend on its capacity to master the vagaries of mortal life, but rather in its role as *'memento vivere'* (Nietzsche 1983:101): an inspiration towards the activity through which we create the public realm that circumscribes our existence; a challenge to live well in the face of radical contingency. Taking up this challenge would mean to leave the security of the household and enter the public realm of political activity, and to conceive of the value of action outside the confines of economics and administration. It would mean, in the final instance, to act within the public domain for love of the world that lies between us.

## Notes

1. Compare Arendt (1977:42): 'This is mortality: to move along a rectilinear line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order.'
2. The text I have in mind here is drawn from *The twilight of the idols*, par. 39: 'The entire West has lost those instincts out of which institutions grow, out of which the *future* grows: perhaps nothing goes so much against the grain of the 'modern spirit' as this. One lives for today, one lives very fast – one lives very irresponsibly; it is precisely this which one call 'freedom'. That which makes institutions is despised, hated, rejected: whenever the word 'authority' is so

much as heard one believes oneself in danger of a new slavery. The *décadence* in the valuating instinct of our politicians, our political parties, goes so deep that they instinctively prefer that which leads to dissolution, that which hastens the end . . .'

3. For a more extensive treatment of Nietzsche's understanding of modernity as nihilism, see Roodt, V. 1998. 'Nietzsche's dynamite: the biography of modern nihilism' in *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 37-43.

4. Clearly, Nietzsche reads Hegel as foreseeing an absolute end to history at the point where Spirit becomes fully conscious of itself. One might equally well advance a reading in which the activity of thought ceaselessly produces its opposite to which it then becomes reconciled – a perpetual movement without end, always postponing its results, and therefore without a determined telos (cf. Krell 1981 467-8). Yet the possibility of an alternative Hegel, unacknowledged by Nietzsche, in no way undermines the latter's critique of a specific conception of history as teleology insofar as this problematic notion has been taken as the dominant one under conditions of modernity. What is under attack in this case is the prevalent historicism of nineteenth century Europe – particularly Germany – that derived from a particular interpretation of Hegelian philosophy. Nietzsche is intent on demonstrating the nihilistic origins of the teleological conception of history as a way of warning against the likely political consequences of a sustained belief in the iron laws of history. It should be clear, moreover, that, for Nietzsche, Hegel merely voices the spirit of an age that has already lost confidence in its relationship to the past, and cannot be held personally responsible for this loss.

5. See Villa (1992) for a more extensive treatment of this insight.

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