

Brienne DeJong

Many times when people think of History they think of a discipline that strives to find the truth about the past, and then finds lessons and meaning from this truth. In On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History Friedrich Nietzsche seems to have quite a different perspective on what History is supposed to do. He agrees that meaning should be found, and life served from what History tells us. But as for the aspect of truth, Nietzsche takes a different view on this.

Why does Nietzsche argue against truth in the study of history? To answer this question, we will have to learn what he means by truth, and how it relates to the concept of justice. For this, we must turn to the text itself:

Historical justice, even when it is practiced truly and with pure intentions, is a terrible virtue because it always undermines the living and brings it to ruin: its judging is always annihilating. (Nietzsche, p 38).

Even when “Historical justice” “is practiced truly and with pure intentions, [it] is a terrible virtue...” This means that even when it is practiced correctly and with good intentions, no matter how good it seems, Historical justice is still bad. Being that under the best circumstances it is bad, one could conclude that there is no time when it is good. In this quote it is clear that Nietzsche is against Historical justice. The question now is why.

“Historical justice” is bad for Nietzsche because “it always undermines the living and brings it to ruin.” Clearly this would be a problem to Nietzsche because he is so concerned with History being something that can help life and the living. He goes on to say that “its judging is always annihilating.” Historical justice is now said to come with judgment. But what exactly does he mean by these things, how is Historical justice annihilating? To answer this question we need an example from the text.

“What one can learn from Christianity, that as a result of a historicizing treatment it has become blasé and unnatural until finally a completely historical, that is, just treatment has

resolved it into pure knowledge about Christianity and so annihilated it, all this one can study in everything that has life: that it ceases to live when it has been dissected so completely and lives painfully and becomes sick once one begins to practice historical dissection on it” (Nietzsche, p 40).

There is a lot that we can learn from this quote about what Nietzsche means when he says historical justice annihilates.

Again the idea of Historical justice is important, tied in through the historical, just treatment of a material. Nietzsche argues that a complete historical, just treatment of a subject results in pure knowledge of it. For Nietzsche, pure knowledge is “knowledge ‘without consequences’ or, more plainly, truth that comes to nothing” (Nietzsche, p 33). For him, this is a bad kind of knowledge. In the example of Christianity, it is this type of knowledge, this pure knowledge, that annihilates it. Pure knowledge destroys by making things unnatural, by removing their illusions. The treatment does not hold the same values as the subject it is analyzing. It takes the important meaning, customs and other sacred things and treats them in a nonchalant manner; they are just another subject, no longer revered.

Nietzsche uses an analogy of a dissection when discussing the treatment by historians on Christianity. One can assume that he uses this term loosely, equating it also to vivisection, as the subject in question was alive and healthy before this analysis. Christianity, as a living entity, now has a knife to it. As it is being cut open and examined, it still “lives painfully and becomes sick.” Even though it may survive this painful examination, it is the worse off for it. It is now weak and sick. For Nietzsche, life has certainly suffered.

But human ideas are not human life in the literal sense. Even if all our current ideas are destroyed and change, we may still survive. Perhaps doing away with some ideas will even increase our chances for survival. Nietzsche does not mean life in this literal, survival sense. Life

for him seems to be something very subjective, ruled by creative forces and self-expression. We can see echoes of this in one argument he has against a purely truthful account of history.

In a purely truthful account of history, meaning and beauty are often lost. When one becomes objective about life, “nothing can affect them any longer; should something good and right happen, as deed, as poetry, as music: at once those hollowed out by education will look beyond the work and inquire after the history of the author” (Nietzsche, p 31).

Education, when focused on truth and not meaning, causes people to become “hollowed out.” They focus too closely on details, and not on the meaning and life that surrounds it. This helps us understand somewhat what Nietzsche values in life, but still does not give an accurate definition of the term life.

A truthful, just analysis of history and the concept of science seem to be closely related for Nietzsche, “dissection,” a term often linked with science, is a recurring description of how historical justice treats the subject it studies. With the growing emphasis on disciplines of study becoming more scientific, Nietzsche cries to have History return to its unscientific state, for the sake of life. For him, by ruling life by science, and thus by knowledge, what should be valued life is decreased. We no longer rely on our instincts. We no longer have powerful illusions to believe in. For him, this life is not worth much. This life of knowledge is “much less life and guarantees much less life for the future.”¹

Here we see proof that life for Nietzsche entails more than just mere survival. It requires instincts and illusions. To really live, we must interact with the world in an active way. We must have instincts, reacting to events in non-intellectual ways, being run by emotions. We must hold

¹ “One even sees cause to triumph in the fact that ‘science now begins to rue life’: perhaps this will be achieved; but surely as life ruled in that way is not worth much because it is much less life and guarantees much less life for the future than the life which used to be ruled not by knowledge but by instincts and powerful illusion” (Nietzsche, p 41).

to powerful illusions, having beliefs passionately. We must think and feel and relate, not simply be analytical robots.

After all of this, it is still not clear how justice and truth relate. Nor is it clear exactly what these terms mean. Value judgments have been put on justice. It has been shown what the end effects of justice can be. But it is still not even clear what Nietzsche means by justice.

We must return once again to the text for more evidence. To help us understand justice better, Nietzsche describes a scene where a man attempts to be justice.² In this scene we see that through being just the man must judge without sympathy or anger. He must detach himself from this job, and the verdicts that he calls out. This means that justice is not swayed by values and emotions. Justice must be an impartial judge of history, remaining neutral to both the horror and the glory of life.

For Nietzsche justice seems an almost evil thing. It is judging, making sure that each event and each person is treated like they deserve to be. But in order to do this completely, one must become like “a cold demon of knowledge” (Nietzsche, p 32). This is a very interesting choice for Nietzsche to choose to describe one who is just. That he is cold gives further evidence that he is not swayed by feelings or values. The one who brings justice is no longer tolerant, doubtful, mild or generous. He is now strict and certain in his judgment. In this form, we must fear him as a demon.

That he is like a demon shows the distain that Nietzsche feels for the job this just man is doing. The phrase echoes the feelings Nietzsche had toward pure knowledge. This is knowledge

² “The hand of the just man who is competent to sit in judgment no longer trembles when it holds the scales; pitiless toward himself he places weight upon weight, he is not downcast when the scales rise or fall and his voice is neither harsh nor broken when he proclaims the verdict. Were he a cold demon of knowledge he would spread about himself an icy atmosphere of superhumanly terrible majesty which we would have to fear, not revere: but that he is a man and attempts to rise from trivial doubt to strict certainty, from tolerant mildness to the imperative ‘you must,’ from the rare virtue of generosity to the rarest of justice, he now resembles that demon...” (Nietzsche, p. 32).

that is empty, without meaning or real use. This pure knowledge is also “cold knowledge without consequences” (Nietzsche, p 33).

But even this man who resembles a demon does not just want cold knowledge. He also wants truth to be “truth as the Last Judgment.”³ Here we see two elements that make up truth, and finally begin to get a definition of truth. Part of truth is this idea of pure knowledge and cold knowledge. But it is also judge, and does so with justice and finality. Truth is knowledge paired with irrevocable justice.

Finally we can understand how truth and justice relate. These two terms are deeply connected and dependent upon each other. We see that through arguing against Historical justice, Nietzsche is also arguing against truth in the treatment of History.

Nietzsche argues against truth by arguing against the two closely connected components that make up truth. The first is justice, which requires the active scholar to be an impartial judge. The second is pure knowledge (also called cold knowledge). For Nietzsche this kind of knowledge is bad because it destroys important elements of life.

To Nietzsche justice, namely historical justice, is bad because it requires one to be impartial. This means that emotions, meaning, values and all that truly make up life, must be ignored. By focusing on the details it overlooks the beauty of life, missing out on aesthetics and relationships with others. The splendor of art and religion are ignored. Nothing can remain sacred. The horrors of life are no longer shocking, no longer something to learn lessons of meaning and morality from. The harmful forces in life are treated just as dispassionately as the beneficial ones.

³ “For he wants truth but not only as cold knowledge without consequences, rather as ordering and punishing judge, truth not as egoistic possession of the individual but as sacred justification to shift all boundary markers of egoistic possessions, in a word, truth as the Last Judgment and certainly not as the chance prey and pleasure of the individual hunter” (Nietzsche, p. 33).

Another problem is that justice leads to pure knowledge. Pure knowledge breaks apart things that are important to life. By analyzing its subject so closely, it finds faults and disproves myth. It destroys by removing illusion. It eradicates meanings that are important to life. It does not replace the meaning it destroys, leaving life empty. This pure knowledge is “truth that comes to nothing” (Nietzsche, p33).

Nietzsche shows that what he finds more important in life suffers through the eyes of truth. The question that he should address next is just why this version of life, one full of misleading illusions and biased judgment, is the life we should be striving for. It is not clear from his argument that happiness is best achieved through the literal interpretation of untrue stories.

When people realize that their stories are wrong, they can revise them to make them right, or replace them with better stories. It is not clear exactly why when one studies the world using truth, and thus pure knowledge and justice, they must stop there. Perhaps by using truth, a society can achieve better ethics and aesthetics. Perhaps there can even be a more justifiable happiness that can be felt by a larger percentage of the population, instead of just the elite, whom currently have time to enjoy the freedom of having time and money to take part in such leisure activities as art.