

james singer

The Supra-Historical

Introduction. The main goal of this paper will be to consider what Nietzsche means by the term, *supra-historical perspective*, in the first section in the second of the *Untimely Meditations*¹. To get at the supra-historical, I will first consider two different perspectives of history; the unhistorical, and the historical. I will also consider three different ways of viewing history; monumental history, antiquarian history, and critical history. In conclusion, I will bring up some points that I found problematic or confusing in the course of this exploration.

§1. The Historical and the Unhistorical Man.

The animals live an unhistorical existence. This is something that man desires but cannot do for, “however far and fast he runs, the chain runs with him.” (§1 p.8). Man cannot escape a historical existence. He wishes to ask the animal how he may live in this unhistorical blissfulness but the animal will forget the answer to man’s question before it can utter a response (*ibid.*).

A child can also live unhistorically before it becomes polluted with the, “it was” of the historical man. This understanding brings with it all of the suffering associated with the past, all the struggle, and the boredom (§1 p.9). Man wishes in vain that he may return to the unhistorical innocent existence of the uninfected child.

The historical presents itself as suffering, or is defined as a root of human suffering. Whereas the unhistorical denoted the innocence of the child, and the happiness normally associated with childhood, the historical presents itself as the end of this innocence. The “it was” becomes the beginning of suffering for man (*ibid.*). The historical prevents man from forgetting

¹ All page references will be taken from On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life translated by Peter Preuss (Hackett edition).

and in this sense man remembers because “with the smallest as with the greatest happiness, however, there is one thing which makes it happiness: being able to forget”, or in Nietzsche’s term, to live, even a brief moment, unhistorically (*ibid.*).

The historical is not completely valueless. As cognitive creatures we need the historical as well as the unhistorical. Becoming completely unhistorical is not man’s ultimate goal towards attaining happiness. Within the historical there is something necessary to man’s ability to “urge” herself “towards the future” (§1 p.13).

The historical perspective gives man hope that the future will be better. The goal will bring some sort of happiness, and everything strives towards this goal. The meaning in existence can be found in the progression towards this goal. It is the future that is ultimately desired, the goal. When the process becomes arduous, one only looks towards some end point worth striving towards. This makes the notion of ‘moving forward’ possible for man.

The historical perspective propels one of the types of man who replies, “no!” to the possibility of reliving the past again towards something better, a goal in the future, an endpoint, giving him the courage to engage in life (§1 p.12). The historical man looks to the past to understand the meaning of existence. She tries to see the progression within the past as a mode to understanding the present and the ‘striving towards’.

Man cannot live solely historically in the same sense that she cannot live solely unhistorically. The purely historical would be as detrimental to life as the purely unhistorical. Man must construct a balance between the historical and the unhistorical. Man without history could never progress yet, man with too much history could not progress either.

If man were to live unhistorically like the animal, she would forget what she was about to say and do therefore, the notion of progression brought about by the intellectual nature of

mankind would have never occurred. However, if man were to live a purely historical existence, all spontaneity would be killed. Man would be paralyzed from action by the overwhelming burden of history. The retention of history would make man too constipated to move about.

§2. Monumental History, Antiquarian History, and Critical History.

Within the historical there are three approaches that Nietzsche gives to living historically:

The first approach to living historically is Monumental history. Monumental history looks at the high points of history as its inspiration to move on. The monumental historian looks to the highest points of humanity to reassure herself that man is capable of such greatness and therefore such greatness can again be achieved even in times where progress has seemingly come to an end and man has sunken back into comforting himself by living like the animals (§2 p.17).

The second approach to living historically is antiquarian history. The antiquarian historical approach looks to the knowledge of the past and the knowledge gained from the past solely because it is the past. The antiquarian historian, “with loyalty and love looks back on his origins,” and by doing so this historian, “gives thanks for his existence” (§3 p.19).

The third approach to living historically is, critical history. The critical historical approach judges the past. The critical historian decides what the past has to offer in some sense, he has the power to “shatter and dissolve something to enable him to live” (§3 p.21).

The critical historical approach judges and can destroy the past. In one sense, the critical historian takes the past and decides what is worth retaining and what must be excreted. This historian attempts to strike a critical balance between the historical and the unhistorical by shattering things that are not worth holding onto and embracing that which is worth holding onto.

Within these three approaches to history that Nietzsche lays out, there are uses of each type that promote life, and also the abuses of each type that can destroy life. All three approaches are valuable in their own ways and can enhance life when applied in different ways. All three approaches are also harmful to life and can destroy life when applied in different ways. The goal, when negotiating within these three modes of historical approach, is to strike a balance between the historical and the unhistorical. One must know when to let a historical event slip into the unhistorical and one must know when to retain a historical event.

§3. Towards the Supra-Historical.

The three approaches to history are mostly historical in the sense that each type deals with remembering past events. The historical, is the aspect of human nature which, in the three aspects of historical approaches (or perspectives) are realized. However, the unhistorical plays a part as well. All three historical approaches must know when to view an event unhistorically in some sense. There is a point in each of the historical perspectives where one must let certain aspects of historical phenomena die. This is especially prevalent in the critical historical perspective whereas the historian passes judgment on the historical event and at times must, “shatter and dissolve something to enable him to live”.

These aspects human interpretation of history take history as it comes in a linear fashion and works within history as a progression. For the unhistorical animal, history progresses and each moment comes alive and immediately dies forever. For the purely historical animal, history progresses and accumulates until its burden smothers them or they become so bloated with the historical they explode because they have become unable to excrete.

The monumental historical perspective looks to the great historical figures of the past as stepping-stones through history in a ‘working towards’ some goal or endpoint. The antiquarian historical perspective holds onto all of the knowledge the past gives them solely because it is the past. The antiquarian perspective tries to hold onto, or preserve, the past for herself and for the future. The critical historical perspective passes judgment on history as to whether it is worth holding onto or throwing out. Each of these perspectives have their usefulness and uselessness. Each of these perspectives seem to imply some level of analog progression throughout history.

The supra-historical on the other hand seems to be an attack on the very notion of any type of linear historical progression, “the world is complete and achieves its end at every single moment. What could ten new years teach that the past ten were incapable of teaching!” (§1. p.13). From the supra-historical perspective, history is not a progression towards an end point but rather certain pinnacles of history occur over the slow monotonous movement of non-progressive history. “the *goal of humanity* cannot lie at the end but only *in its highest specimens.*” (§9. p.53). The greatness of ancient Greek culture was not a mere stepping stone for the current pop-culture created by America. The Coliseum and the Parthenon was not a stepping stone to the great stucco strip mall expanse, cookie cutter condominiums, or the suburban wasteland that flattens and homogenizes the American landscape.

§4. Working With the Supra-Historical.

The supra-historical perspective would avoid the present lack of culture while it “clairvoyantly guesses the original significance of the different hieroglyphs.” These hieroglyphs are the “*highest specimens*” above the common herd that, in essence, lives more like an animal rather than a truly human specimen, the “*highest specimens*”. How could one value present

culture over the highest instances of culture in history? How can one see, Thomas Morris' Philosophy for Dummies as a point in progression of Plato's Republic? This philosophical rubbish heap of today is not formed by a progression from the hieroglyphs, or the highest specimen, of the past.

The supra-historical perspective goes against the idea that history is a 'building towards' some end as Hegel envisioned it. In contrast, the supra-historical looks at the whole picture all at once. This perspective sees history as ending at each moment and not as a progression. In contrast, the historical perspective would see the events as a 'working towards'. The process itself becomes important. The future will bring better things than the present has to offer because there is a 'moving towards' something considered as 'the good'. The supra-historical perspective denies that there is a 'working towards' some good.

"Whoever asks his acquaintances whether they would want to relive the last ten or twenty years over again will notice quite readily which of them is prepared for the supra-historical standpoint: they will all of course, answer no!" but it is the historical perspective that would say no! also because there is an idea that the next years will be better (§1 p.13). The supra-historical perspective would answer no! but for her it would be for different reasons. The supra-historical perspective sees history as illuminated by the individuals within history. This perspective views history by the best examples of humanity who do not necessarily get better as history progresses contra Hegel. The supra-historical does not look at some 'end of history' as in Hegel but instead looks at certain peaks of history as ends in themselves.

Nietzsche leaves the supra-historical people to "their nausea and their wisdom" at this point (§1 p.13). What from this rough sketch can one derive from this notion of the supra-

historical perspective? Is it not further pursued in this essay because it does not serve life, and it is supra, meaning over history, over common humanity?

When one looks back to one of the high points of humanity and then turns back to her own times it is not hard to feel supra-historically. What can the current president of the United States say to Caesar or Napoleon if they were to meet? However, this kind of thinking does not support life. Nietzsche may abandon the supra-historical here because its end does not serve life nor does it seem to end life but instead shows the valuelessness of life as such.

Time moves forward but not with a progression towards some great epoché. Instead man is not 'moving towards' or 'becoming' anything essentially better. In fact, when one takes a look around today, life is far worse in many respects than it was in ancient Greek times. Only because technology aids us to live in this sloth like existence do we think of ourselves as better than the ancient Greeks. How can our current heroes, who merely represent a false greatness in a fictional context match up to Plato or Goethe? We regard people who may at one time get to 'play' a dramatized representation of Socrates in a movie as 'great'. How can these people begin to attempt to match up to the true artist or the real individual that they portray in their representations of a false reality?

The hieroglyphs of the supra-historical are the historical points of human greatness beyond that of the monumental historical view. The supra-historical sees the "original significance" as one great theme repeated over the course of time represented in differing light. Amongst a sea of meaningless existence, of the modern man's mediocrity and his subsequent contentment in such mediocrity, the supra-historical-perspective picks out what rises above and transcends common useless existence (§1 p.13).

The common man lives historically but wishes to live unhistorically. This man would like to return to living as animals do. This is his conception of happiness and in being so, the common man lives closer to the animal existence he desires than he does to the hieroglyphs of the supra-historical. The supra-historical perspective on the other hand does not accept this mundane desire. Nietzsche may abandon the supra-historical in the discussion because it does not support life in the common way. The historical and unhistorical are both useful in the balance fashioned between the two, which sets man rolling forward. However, the supra historical asks, “forward to what?” and does not accept that forward is upwards or progressive.

§5. The Historical in the Supra-Historical.

The supra-historical does not see this progression based view as a positive conclusion but rather as man’s inability to achieve greatness. Only the hieroglyphs, the pinnacles of human existence, truly escapes the monotony of human life and ascends far above common man.

In glimpsing at the supra-historical, one is left to ask then, what use is the historical? If the supra-historical perspective lets one see over the heads of the common man so that she can pick out the hieroglyphs of greatness whereas mankind has risen above the common element, is the historical perspective some useful fiction that common man needs to justify his empty existence? Common man looks historically at the world as it unfolds and wishes for a better end to come out of the unfolding. This man sees an end to history that justifies the self in the world, and in this sense, his life becomes meaningful.

What kind of man is the supra-historical person? This question seems to foreshadow Nietzsche’s later thoughts on a man who rises up above all of mankind becoming the overman.

If one is to rise up, one must first see above the heads of all others. Furthermore, the overman must see past the mundane of common human existence.

The supra-historical perspective must be able to exist unhistorically in the sense that, it must not be bogged down by history. At the same time, this perspective must see the hieroglyphs above all other history, and therefore it utilizes a monumental approach to history. The supra-historical perspective must also hold onto the hieroglyphs in an antiquarian fashion. Once one knows of the hieroglyphs in history, one cannot simply throw them out. Therefore, the supra-historical also contains remnants of the critical because this perspective denotes the hieroglyphs in history and judges that they are, in fact, Above all else in history, and worthy of being held.

§6 A Criticism of the Supra-Historical.

One question arises when considering this conception of the supra-historical. Nietzsche later attacks ‘the objective’.

“Those naïve historians call measuring past opinions and deeds by the common opinions of the moment “objectivity”: here they find the canon of all truths; their work is to make the past fit the triviality of their time. On the other hand they call “subjective” all historical writing which does not take popular opinions as its canon.” (§6 p.34).

If there is no “objective” and therefore, what is considered objective is merely the “common opinions of the moment”, how is one to conceive of the true canon of the hieroglyphs? Nietzsche’s own canon is a product of his time and age. At first glance one immediately notices the lack of women and non ancient Greek, non European males. What is this to say of Nietzsche’s own historical perspective? Is it that the supra-historical is unattainable? Or is it that Nietzsche never purported to attain the status he created? Either the above interpretation of

the supra-historical is wrong, or it seems to be the case that the supra-historical is an attempt to salvage the objectivity that Nietzsche later attacks.

Nietzsche seems to be asserting that there are a few rare 'specimen' who rise up above the commonality of man's animalistic existence to attain some truly supra-historical perspective. This person seems to be the overman, or at least must be one of the few to truly transcend the age they live in to see the 'hieroglyphs', or overman, above all other historical phenomenon. In this sense, the supra-historical, the overman, and the hieroglyphs attain some level of objectivity that common man cannot reach.

There is a fine point here that must be struck where one can transcend the false notion of objectivity and dually transcend the subjective inclinations to move themselves towards what Nietzsche would most likely conclude as transcending all definitions. Nevertheless, these men who transcend history as such to become hieroglyphs for the supra-historical are still men that lived and died, and had loves and hates and passions.