

Summer 2012

Nietzsche's "Man of Action"

Michaela Powers

Trinity College, michaela.powers@trincoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/fypapers>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Powers, Michaela, "Nietzsche's "Man of Action"". *The First-Year Papers (2010 - present)* (2012).

Trinity College Digital Repository, Hartford, CT. <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/fypapers/35>

Nietzsche's "Man of Action"

Michaela Powers

Historical thought is typically regarded as a source of pride, a notion that Nietzsche discredits in *Untimely Meditations* by emphasizing the importance of unhistorical thought. Nietzsche writes, "The unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of the individual, of a people and of a culture" (63). Life is in the service of history; the balance he speaks of can only be found if there is a reversal in the relationship between life and history. This balance is made possible with the three species of life used by man in the proper doses: the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical. Nietzsche speaks of an individual using each species, making it apparent that an individual is an essential part of engendering the reversal. The individual is the "man of action" who imitates the past in a monumental way with critical and antiquarian influences, allowing him to achieve greatness that has a lasting positive effect on the nation. He is characterized throughout the work as a strong, progressive, inspired, and unifying force ready to improve the nation's wellbeing. Nietzsche qualifies him as one of the parts necessary to help in the process of achieving the critical goal of the nineteenth century: the reunification of the German culture to make history work for life.

History is comprised of a series of events that assist in defining a person at the present moment. The effect of history is great on man, "it pushes him down or bends him down or bends him sideways, it encumbers his steps as a dark, invisible burden" (61). This burden is something all men experience. It is what differentiates man from animals because animals do not exist in man's imperfect existence of unhappiness and boredom. This existence is a product of historical thought, a necessity of present human nature, where a person depends on history to live within the context of his time. The historical context makes a person remember and makes it impossible to live in an entirely unhistorical manner. Unhistorical living is living in full self-identity in every moment in an honest condition. An unhistorical being resides in a "state of forgetfulness," which "plays in the blissful blindness between the hedges of past and future" (61). A characteristic of humans is the ability to remember and to forget so living in this unhistorical state is impossible as an adult.

The balanced combination of historical and unhistorical can only take place if history becomes a tool for life. We need history to serve "for the sake of life and action, so as not to turn away from life and action, let alone for the purpose of extenuating the self-seeking life and the base and cowardly actions" (59). This reversal can only take place if man sees history in the service of life, which does not mean that life can be taken out of the context of history. Humanity must be thought of historically, a "question of the degree to which life requires the service of history...in regard to the health of a man, a people, or a culture" (67). History pertains to life when observed through the threefold relationship, or the three species of history as Nietzsche refers to them. They are different approaches that must be present in proper doses to begin the break in history that will engender the reversal. Nietzsche writes, "History pertains to the living man in three respects: it pertains to him as a being who acts and strives, as a being who preserves and reveres, and as a being who suffers and seeks deliverance" (67). The three all interact to provide a system of checks and balances so none of the species become too powerful. To emphasize this, Nietzsche writes, "the three species of history which exists belongs to a certain soil and a certain climate and only to that: in any other it grows into a devastating weed" (72).

The effects of an overgrown weed are similar to those of a species of history that is used in excess. A weed is a choking plant that restricts growth by taking an excessive amount of the resource needed for a healthy life. This is much like the excessive use of one of the three modes of history, which will inhibit creative development by taking away the necessary amount of emphasis from the other species. Balance is clearly needed to prevent this from happening and to allow life to flourish.

Monumental history is the first that Nietzsche discusses when outlining his criteria for proper historical thought. He devotes the greatest amount of time to discussing it, showing its dominance in the threefold relationship. Monumental history uses the concept of imitation, or mimesis, where the effects of a past event are imitated and improved upon. It is the “fundamental idea of the faith in humanity,” (68) that the greatness of the past can once again come into being, this time with the failed possibility being actualized. Nietzsche places emphasis on possibility, as it shows there is the possibility for action to occur and cause change instead of simply repeating the past. It is also a means for the removal of the excess of history by imitating a role model of the past. The model must be altered as time leads to change; the exact model of old needs to evolve in the present as “the future could never produce anything exactly similar to what it produced in the past” (70). It is only then that the monumentalist can use the past for the present and he “learns from it that the greatness that once existed was in any event once possible and may thus be possible again” (69). The hope of greatness, like that which occurred in the past, is what drives monumental action. This desire can also have negative consequences if there is an excess of it, then “the dead bury the living” (72). If one does not live in the present moment, instead focusing solely on the past, they will be buried beneath its magnitude. History can swallow the present if too much attention is given to it and not enough to the creation of new history. Present creations are criticized for their lack of imitation of the old, accepted, and revered ways so they are rejected and creation is repressed. Even so, monumental history is necessary if any change is going to be made, especially in terms of the cultural change in Germany. The man of action will make this change by imitating to create, using monumental history in the proper way.

Using monumental history, as well as antiquarian and critical, to create a healthy German culture is an issue that Nietzsche emphasizes. He speaks of a need for “the unity of German spirit and life after the abolition of the antithesis of form and content, of inwardness and convention”(82). The German culture is purely historical as the German people are unable to form a connection between their interior and their reality. Being solely interior makes them unable to recognize their self-identity within the present moment. Nietzsche proposes a solution to this problem, which is to model the German culture off “the original ancient Greek world of greatness, naturalness and humanity” (103). He goes on to say, “But there we also discover the reality of an essentially unhistorical culture and one which is nonetheless, or rather on that account, an inexpressibly richer and more vital culture” (103). This monumental imitation will bring about change in culture and will create a reversal in the relationship between history and life, making it of the utmost importance for Nietzsche. He believes it is partially through the individual that such a change will occur as this is how it has happened in the past. When an individual inspires a group of like-minded individuals, enormous progress is made. It was this way with the great cultural overhauls of past, like the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, when “the culture of the Renaissance was raised on the shoulders of just such a band of a hundred men” (69). This knowledge should motivate the individual as he realizes that just as in the past, all he needs is “no more than a hundred men educated and actively working in

a new spirit to do away with the bogus form of culture which has no become the fashion in Germany" (69). A group of one hundred men of action banded together in the past to create a cultural revolution, which shows that this is possible for Germany in Nietzsche's time. The group of one hundred must be made up of devoted individuals who will properly imitate the Greek culture and improve upon it, which is where the individual man of action is necessary to devote them all to the cause.

The antiquarian approach must also be involved if the reversal in German culture is to be successful. This species has the belief that "by tending with care that which has existed from of old, he wants to preserve for those who shall come into existence after him the conditions under which he himself came into existence – and thus he serves life" (73). The antiquarian is focused on the preservation of history, using what is preserved to benefit those of the present. He can connect with the past of his nation and draw out his existence from beyond his own onto the existence of his people and nation. This allows him to feel a passionate sense of pride for the past and desire to incorporate this pride into the present. An antiquarian conception of the past is "of the greatest value when it spreads the simple feeling of pleasure and contentment over the modest, rude, and even wretched condition in which a man or nation lives" (73). In terms of Germany, an antiquarian approach is necessary to demonstrate the beauty and importance of the Greek culture so the people of the present desire to imitate it. It will allow Germany to take pride in the genuine nature of its own culture and preserve it for future generations. Even with its positive aspects, danger still arises when there is an excess of antiquarian values because "it only knows how to preserve life, not how to engender it" (75). The antiquarian man must be able to distinguish what is valuable of old and infuse it with the "fresh life of the present" (76) to avoid regression and allow progress for future generations.

Also of importance is the critical approach, where the men of the present judge from their current perspective the events of the past. Man seeks to examine and ultimately condemn the events of the past, reducing human history to a series of violent and unjust events. This can make it seem like history is characterized solely by these two traits. Judging the actions of past generations can lead to dangerous implications, as "we are also the outcome of their aberrations, passions and errors, and indeed of their crimes; it is not possibly wholly to free ourselves from this change" (76). Condemning those of the past generations for their violence only implicates the present generation, as they are a product of those they critique. The only way to escape this cycle is to instead acknowledge human nature as violent and try to reverse it. Nietzsche says the critical man must help society "confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge, 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" (76). The second nature must be replaced by the true first nature, for "every victorious second nature will become a first," providing consolation to the critical man (77). This consolation is what is most critical to the Germans, as they must judge the Greeks and recognize their faults; the Germans and the man of action can then fight against the elements that constitute the second nature in an effort to implant the first nature.

The individual who uses the three species in an effort to reestablish German culture is the man of action, an essential part of the process reversing the relationship between history and life. The man of action is first referenced during the characterization of the monumentalist because "if the man who wants to do something great has need of the past at all, he appropriates it by means of monumental history" (72). Nietzsche states "Among the feeble and hopeless idlers, among those around him who seem active but are merely agitated and bustling, the man of action avoids

despair and disgust by turning his gaze backwards and pausing for breath in his march towards the goal” (68). Here the man of action is seen as a progressive man, looking at the past for guidance while moving forward to his goal. His goal is the only thing he is focused on; it is what drives him in his march and gives him the strength and courage to continue forward. It is said that “his goal...is happiness, perhaps not his own but often that of a nation or of mankind as a whole; he flees from resignation and needs history as a specific against it” (68). This end is similar to that of Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*, as he says “though it is worthwhile to attain the end merely for one man, it is finer and more godlike to attain it for a nation or for city-states” (310). The idea of happiness for the nation as an end is not one that is new, but is clearly important as both philosophers emphasize it. The man of action will use the Greek system as a model for imitation in order to solve the cultural divide present. This allows the nation to once again be healthy and he can use his own power for the happiness of the whole.

The Greek model provides the man of action with inspiration to imitate by the greatness of the individuals it produced. He “needs models, teachers, comforters, and cannot find them among his contemporaries,” (67) so he must look to past men of action for inspiration. This man uses history to his advantage, looking at role models of the past and drawing from them to further the success of his fight. He is using history for the purpose of life as “he finds inspiration to imitate and do better” (68). He is using the past to find possibility and then actualizing this possibility through his creative action to improve present life. The past must be taken into account as the spirit allows the man who is “gaining strength through reflecting on past greatness” to be “inspired with the feeling that life of man is a glorious thing” (69). The emphasis on inspiration is great, as the idea of inspiration is equal to making progress. Then, “he goes his way with a more cheerful step, for the doubt which assailed him in weaker moments, whether or not he was perhaps desiring the impossible has now been banished” (69). The overwhelming task seems more possible when the man of action realizes he has inspiration from the past to guide him. Not only does the man of action need to have those of the past to look to for guidance, he also needs the other men like him in the present to assist him in achieving his goal.

The individual is only one of many parts that will make this change possible; one individual man of action working alone cannot change an entire culture. It is essential to recognize he is a small piece in the historical scheme and he cannot accomplish the change on his own. He must be placed into the historical context, as well as the present context, to see his role in the overall process. Historically, there are countless others who have engendered cultural change; the men of ancient Greece are an obvious example of this. Not just one man is credited with the change; there are countless poets, sculptors, tragedians, and other artists who have led to it. The man of action can be placed into this larger context, one of many summits of creation in the large mountain range that constitutes history. When placed in the present context, the man of action is only one of a group that makes up the mountain summit itself. The hundred men Nietzsche often refers to is a group of men of action all working towards the same goal - the reversal of culture. He writes, “With a hundred such men – raised in this unmodern way, this to say to become mature and accustomed to the heroic – the whole noisy sham-culture of our age could now be silenced forever” (95). They can be successful if they act as proper men of action, but even if the men are all working together, the conditions must be correct with the right amount of monumental, historical, and critical thought being used to employ the past for the sake of the future.

Working with others equally devoted to accomplishing the goal provides the man with inspiration and makes him hope to inspire those in the future so the chain of monumental action can be continued. His motivation comes in part from the knowledge he will inspire others like he was inspired. The only reward that seduces him is "the expectation of a place of honour in the temple of history, where he in turn can be a teacher, comforter, and admonisher to those who come after him" (68). His fame is not celebrity, but he has the knowledge that his accomplishments will live past his death through the lives of others following his teachings. The man of action realizes he cannot engender change after he dies because he is unable to act when deceased. Nonetheless, the effects of his change can live on and inspire others. He knows that if he acts in a creative manner, "one thing will live, the monogram of [his] most essential being, a work, an act, a piece of rare enlightenment, a creation: it will live because posterity cannot do without it" (69). This makes him an artist since he is leaving behind a piece of himself for the critical man to judge and the antiquarian man to revere, while the future monumental man uses him as a resource for learning how to create everlasting greatness.

For the monumental man of action "the great moments in the struggle of the human individual constitute a chain" and "this chain unites mankind across the millennia like a range of human mountain peaks" (68). The past is a series of individuals who are the peak of human greatness; they are the great men of each era. As each era passes, there is a new group comprised of individuals who work together to change mankind. Though there are countless great men in all the eras combined, there are only a few of them in each specific era. They are beacons in the darkness for man that "shall be for [him] still living, bright and great" (68). The man of action hopes to be one of the men that are part of the next sequence in this chain of individuals by creating something great that is entirely new. This break in history will allow him to rise above and become another summit in the mountain. This must be higher than the plane of common action that is the result of no new creation since the mountain summit comes from a new way of thought that is a break from the norm. "For the commandment which rules over him is this: that which in the past was able to expand the concept 'man' and make it more beautiful must exist everlastingly, so as to be able to accomplish this everlastingly" (68). The other men, represented by the peaks of the mountains in the past, were able to leave an everlasting, indelible mark on the face of humanity by establishing a great creation. The man of action wants to make sure this greatness is preserved, like an antiquarian man, but he also uses this everlasting greatness to assist him in creating new greatness. He once again uses the past as a foundation that he will build upon for the sake of greatness, in such a way that his greatness becomes monumental as well. Then, he will become part of the "the hard relay-race of monumental history through which alone greatness goes on living" (68).

The present conditions are not in the right state for the change, so he must first overcome these to become part of the mountain range. He is plagued by difficulties as the "instinct of the nation no longer comes out to meet him" (82) with his desire to act and construct a new culture. He recognizes that he must first "render aid, that higher unity in the nature and soul of a people must again be created, that breach between inner and outer must again vanish under the hammer blows of necessity" (82). The man of action sees this as a necessity in the situation and he is aware that the culture of the present is not as unhistorical as the great cultures of the past. As Nietzsche writes, "out of a vigorous need there will one day arise a vigorous deed" (82). The need is clearly recognized, as Nietzsche is writing an entire work on his desire for change because of such great need. It is up to the man of action to do what he does best: act to perform the deed. The deed itself is the unification of the German interior and exterior as "a culture has to

6 Michaela Powers

be in reality a single living unity” (80). To make this possible, the man “should venture to reflect on how the health of a people undermined by the study of history may be again restored, how it may rediscover its instincts and therewith its honesty” (80). By providing him with a model for monumental action, a people to judge from a critical perspective, and a culture to revere in an antiquarian manner, Nietzsche combines the historical and unhistorical to give the man of action a way to help unify the German culture through past greatness.

Bibliography

Friedrich, Nietzsche. *Untimely Meditations*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Print.