

# “Marx and Nietzsche on History: Theory, Application, and Comparison”

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## Overview

This paper compares and contrasts the role of “history” in the philosophical thinking of two 19th-century continental philosophers, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. It does so in three parts. First, it notes the way each philosopher understood the term “history”. Two works from the relatively early life of each philosopher, Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and Nietzsche’s *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1873)<sup>1</sup>, primarily inform this investigation. The second part of this paper applies this definition to their respective later works, Marx’s *The German Ideology* and Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The final portion of this paper engages in a comparison of the two conceptions in search of significant similarities and differences.

## The Theory of “History” for Marx and Nietzsche

Marx’s conception of “history” blends Hegelian vocabulary with radical new ideas. Marx, like many of his contemporaries, draws largely on Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s thinking. He expressed this influence explicitly in his early collegiate years, noting in a letter to his father that he had “got[ten] to know Hegel from beginning to end.”<sup>2</sup> Marx displays this hybrid technique in the introduction of his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* when he says, “It is the *task of history*, therefore, to establish the *truth of this world*. It is the immediate *task of philosophy*, which is in the service of history, to unmask human self-alienation in its *secular form* now that it has been unmasked in its *sacred form*.”<sup>3</sup> This excerpt maintains

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<sup>1</sup> Chronology in Kaufman’s *The Portable Nietzsche* on pg. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Tucker at pg. 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 54. Emphasis in original.

the Hegelian language of history as something that progresses toward a goal, but the tethering of the “task of history” to the “truth of this world” represents Marx’s unique emphasis on the observable, scientific sphere of existence.<sup>4</sup> He would later concisely summarize this doctrine of action in his final thesis on Feuerbach, famously claiming that, “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world. The point, however, is to change it.”<sup>5</sup> Understanding Marx’s conception of history merely as a task is not enough to fully understand the term; in that since, Marx is merely copying the Hegelian model. A uniquely *Marxist* understanding of history emerges in Marx’s distinction that “history” rejects the notion of the spiritual -- the Hegelian realm of *geist* -- as actual; Marx consistently rejects such an understanding and insists that the task of history (as with all conceivable affairs) takes place wholly within a secular, materialist<sup>6</sup> framework.

Marx expands upon this conception of history in his 1844 manuscript. He identifies the totality of history as progressing towards its inevitable conclusion, communist society. His remark that “Communism is the riddle of history solved,”<sup>7</sup> mirrors the form of Hegel’s interpreting history as leading towards *something*, but Marx replaces Hegel’s spiritual realization of *geist* with the worldly communist utopia. Hegel’s subjective relationship to history, his claim that he has discovered and explicated the true meaning of history in a manner which goes *outside* the historical, also finds a parallel image in Marx’s thinking. Marx and Hegel clearly differ in their evaluation of history’s source and final goal,<sup>8</sup> but they share an identical surety in that such

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<sup>4</sup> This was, for Marx, of course the only sphere of existence.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 145. Emphasis in original.

<sup>6</sup> I recognize that this term is problematic since Marx doesn’t consider himself a materialist in the same sense as Lucretius or others concerned with purely physiological reality, but I think the term serves a valid purpose here in distinguishing Marx’s solely physical rendering of the totality of reality from Hegel’s partially spiritual one.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 84.

<sup>8</sup> I.e., spirit discovering itself and a perfect reason for Hegel; consciousness reacting to the material world (the only world) and communist society for Marx.

a source and -- more importantly in contrast to Nietzsche -- such a *final goal* exist. Ironically, Marx mirrors Hegel in implying that he is the first man to see history for what it really is. This being the case, Marx speaks of history in two senses. Beyond the “actual” sense of history hitherto discussed, there exists the “the comprehended and known process of coming-to-be. That other, still immature communism, meanwhile, seeks an historical proof for itself... amongst disconnected historical phenomenon.”<sup>9</sup> The *Economic and Philosophic Manuscript’s* identification of history as the force eventually leading towards the overcoming of human estrangement with the advent of communist society transcends this variety of history. Marx revises the definition of “history” in a manner strikingly similar to Hegel in form and drastically different in substance.

Not surprisingly (given his 19th-century German context), Nietzsche also explicates his conception of history through reference to Hegel. He differentiates himself from Marx by abandoning the basic tenant of Hegelian thinking, namely the progressive movement of history towards some higher end. Nietzsche does not see history as *the* essential tool of achieving the highest good, and one need not go further than the title of his treatise on history to find his belief in history’s subservience to something else (life). In the preface to that work, he blatantly declares, “Our need for history is quite different from that of the spoiled idler in the garden of knowledge... That is, we require history for life and action, not for the smug avoiding of life and action... Only so far as history serves life will we serve it.”<sup>10</sup> This empowered departure from Hegelian thinking influences everything from the most general fundamentals to the innermost specificities of Nietzsche’s rendering of history’s possible advantages. In the latter half of the

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<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 84. emphasis removed.

<sup>10</sup> *On the Advantage and Disadvantage...* at pg. 7.

essay, Nietzsche explicitly attacks Hegel, saying, “There has been no dangerous charge or turn in the German education of this century which has not become more dangerous through the enormous influence... of this philosophy, the Hegelian.”<sup>11</sup> It merits reiteration that this rejection of the Hegelian conception of history does not mean that Nietzsche sees no value at all in history, though. As both the work’s title and the selection above suggest, Nietzsche clearly sees some sort of possible ration of history as necessary for the fullest realization of life. With regards to the specific proportion of each, Nietzsche prescribes an equal portion of the historical and the unhistorical as “necessary for the health of an individual, a people and a culture.”<sup>12</sup> This departure from Hegel’s progressive rendering acts as the fundamental component of understanding Nietzsche’s definition of history. Everything, including history, only obtains true value through its positive relationship with life, and Nietzsche’s “life” lacks the progressive character which Hegel ascribes to it.

After establishing this fundamental distinction from Hegel, Nietzsche delves into the intricate defining of history. He does this by going on to recognize three distinct types of history: monumental, antiquarian, and critical. He identifies both the advantage and danger to life of each respective type in line with his reasoning presented above. The first of these has the advantage of reminding the living that “the great which once existed was at least possible once and may well again be possible sometime.”<sup>13</sup> The antiquarian variety of history, the history of reverence, serves life in its capacity to “[tie] even less favoured generations and populations to their homeland and its customs.”<sup>14</sup> In contrast to this restorative function of the second variety, the third variety of

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<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 47

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 16.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 20.

history, critical history, helps man “shatter and dissolve something to enable him to live.”<sup>15</sup>

Applied as to evoke the proper result, these three categories comprise of the totality of “history” as it might advantage life.

Nietzsche’s understanding of history also relies upon a bifurcated definition of non-historical perspectives, “the antidotes to the historical.”<sup>16</sup> He identifies two: the unhistorical and the superhistorical. The unhistorical simply lacks the capacity for historical understanding. An unhistorical being “appears at every moment fully as what it is and so cannot but be honest.”<sup>17</sup> The superhistorical involves going beyond the historical and acknowledging that “the past and the present is one and the same, that is, typically alike in all manifold variety and, as omnipresence of imperishable types, a static structure of unchanged value and eternally the same meaning.”<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche opens and closes his essay on history with a discussion of these two “antidotes.” In doing so, he implicitly reiterates his conception of history as something needing constant monitoring so that it does not impede life.

### **Application of History for Marx and Nietzsche**

Marx realizes his conception of history outlined in the *Manuscripts* in *The German Ideology*, one of the latest and most complex works from his early period. Though Marx discards some Hegelian vocabulary and replaces it with his own renderings, Hegel’s influence -- both through that which Marx purposefully discards and that which he willingly adopts -- still comes through strongly in this piece.<sup>19</sup> In the first subsection of part A (a portion appropriately labeled

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<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 62.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 9.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 13.

<sup>19</sup> Though I recognized this on my own reading, I am grateful to Tucker’s introduction at page 146 for priming my mind to search for such nuances.

*History*), Marx engages in direct historical inquiry of his own in order to fully flesh out his philosophical thinking. Working under the guidelines explored in the previous section, he investigates Germany's past "[i]n direct contrast to German [Hegelian] philosophy which descends from heaven to earth... ascend[ing] from heaven to earth."<sup>20</sup> He identifies the connections between several circumstances arising from natural needs and their historical consequences. Basic needs such as eating and drinking lead to "the production of the means to satisfy [those] needs," constituting "[t]he first historical act."<sup>21</sup> In a series of progressive responses, other circumstances resulting from the family and society give way to the inevitable materialistic circumstances that follow.<sup>22</sup>

In a manner that exemplifies the Neo-Hegelian framework explained above, Marx follows this application of history through until he arrives at its support for the inevitability of communist society. He explains, "Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things."<sup>23</sup> After Marx has applied his "materialist dialectic" view of history to his understanding of the facts of the world, communist society comes not as *a* result of history, but as *the* result of history. For Marx, this society represents a sort of overcoming of history in that history's progression carries on no further. Man finds absolution from estrangement in communist society. Since Marx's depiction of history centers largely around estrangement, Marx's applies the totality of history up to his life to discover the logical end of history: the forthcoming inevitable installation of universal communist society.

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<sup>20</sup> Tucker at 154.

<sup>21</sup> Tucker at 156.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 157-159.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 162. Emphasis in original.

Nietzsche's self-purported magnum opus, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, came over a decade after his meditation on history.<sup>24</sup> It explores several critical doctrines that largely define his later period: the death of god, the overman, and the eternal recurrence.<sup>25</sup> The specificities of Nietzsche's vocabulary shift to accommodate these new articulations, but the general character of his earlier thoughts on history appear intact and inform these new concepts in important ways. For example, the essential statement that "god is dead" connotes obvious historical undertones. Zarathustra expresses surprise at the possibility that the "old saint in the forest has not yet heard... that *God is dead!*"<sup>26</sup> For Zarathustra, the death of god is historical in the sense that he knows of its truth and finds the fact inescapable, but the old saint has not heard of such death nor has reason to give up his sincerely held beliefs. Interestingly, Zarathustra does not tell the saint his conception of the truth (i.e., that god is dead). This episode gives an example of an instance where history would subvert life and should therefore be avoided. Zarathustra knows this, and Nietzsche has him make his choice from the perspective of *life*. The doctrine of the overman also draws upon Nietzsche's conception of history in its harkening back to his concept of the superhistorical. In the section after the encounter with the saint, Zarathustra proclaims, "I teach you the overman, the overman is the meaning of the earth! I beseech you... *remain faithful to the earth*, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes!... Despisers of life are they."<sup>27</sup> Just as superhistorical forces such as art might overcome the historical, the overman will overcome man. They also share in their effect to mitigate that which might "despise" life.

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<sup>24</sup> I once again rely on Kaufman's chronology at page 21.

<sup>25</sup> The "will to power" is of course another doctrine that could apply here, but, for brevity's sake and because I feel the other three are better explored in explicit terms in *Zarathustra*, I will not discuss that here.

<sup>26</sup> *The Portable Nietzsche* at pg. 124.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 125.

Additionally, the superhistorical finds another late-period doctrinal sibling in Nietzsche's conception of an "eternal recurrence." The importance of history inarguably becomes minute at best when a true understanding of reality dictates that "[e]verything goes, everything comes back; eternally rolls the wheel of being."<sup>28</sup> *Zarathustra* seems fundamentally compatible with the conception of history found in Nietzsche's meditation, but the eternal recurrence arguably pushes such compatibility towards (if not past) its breaking point.<sup>29</sup>

### **Concluding Summary of Comparisons and Contrasts**

Even though Nietzsche and Marx clearly display differing conceptions of what exactly constitutes "history," both thinkers have much to say about the subject and integrate their thoughts into many essential components of their most vital doctrines. The two thinkers share in their conception of physical reality constituting the whole of reality. Both philosophers criticize Hegel, but the two criticisms take radically different forms. Marx willingly adopts the dialectical form of Hegel's argument (albeit with substantial adjustment). Nietzsche rejects the progressive thrust of Hegelian historical thinking. Consequently, Marx sees history as a progression towards a positive end, i.e., communist society. Nietzsche sees some positive value in a narrowly-tailored, partially historical perspective, but he also views every moment as an opportunity to embrace superhistorical being and realize that history finalizes within every moment. Marx suggests that something like a superhistorical status will apply to all men once communist society is instated across the world. Marx finds explicitly integrating history into philosophy as more vital than Nietzsche given the historical nature of the crux of Marx's central

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<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 329.

<sup>29</sup> I'll also be the first to admit that I don't claim mastery over Nietzsche's conception of the eternal recurrence. But I do think my statements make sense in light of my relatively new and shallow exposure to the concept.



argument. That being said, many of Nietzsche's central claims contain rich historical subtext. A reading of his important later works, such as *Zarathustra*, is consequently best served with the conception of history outlined in the meditation in mind.

Taken as a whole, this investigation has revealed that Marx and Nietzsche share some perspectives, disagree on a few fundamental questions, and ultimately reach drastically different conclusions despite their relatively identical chronological and geographic context. Despite these differences, it might be said with more certainty than anything else at all that the two men share one thing in common: an inspiring love for and contribution to the pursuit of philosophy, a love that has earned them the rank of first-class philosopher and ensured their prominent place in human history.