

Friedrich Nietzsche

# Fate and History

Easter Vacation 1862

If we could look upon Christian doctrines and church-history in a free and impartial way, we would have to express several views that oppose those that are generally accepted. But confined as we are from our earliest days under the yoke of custom and prejudice and inhibited in the natural development of our spirit, determined in the formation of our temperament by the impressions of our childhood, we believe ourselves compelled to view it virtually as a transgression if we adopt a freer standpoint from which to make a judgment on religion and Christianity that is impartial and appropriate to our time.

Such an attempt is not the work of a few weeks, but of a lifetime.

How could one destroy the authority of two millennia and the security of the most perceptive men of all time as a consequence of youthful pondering? How could one dismiss all the sorrows and blessings of a religious development so deeply influential on world history by means of fantasies and immature ideas?

It is entirely impertinent to want to solve philosophical problems over which a conflict of opinion has waged for many millennia; to contest views that, according to the faith of ingenious men, first raised man to the level of true man; to unify natural science with philosophy without even knowing the fundamentals of either; or, finally, to construct a system of reality out of natural science and history even though the unity of world history and its most elementary foundations have not yet been revealed to the spirit.

It is folly and doom for undeveloped heads to venture out into the sea of doubt without compass and guide: most will be driven off course by storms; only very few discover new lands.

Out in the middle of the immense ocean of ideas one often longs to return to firm land. How often has the longing for natural science and history crept over me in the course of my fruitless speculations!

History and natural science, the wonderful legacies of our past, the harbingers of our future: They alone are the secure foundation upon which we can build the tower of our speculation.

How often has our entire previous philosophy seemed to me a tower of Babel. The goal of all great aspirations is to attain heaven, and "the kingdom of heaven on earth" means almost the same thing.

An endless confusion of thought in the people is the bleak result. There will be great revolutions once the masses finally realize that the totality of Christianity is grounded in presuppositions; the existence of God, immortality, Biblical authority, inspiration, and other doctrines will always remain problems. I have attempted to deny everything: Oh, pulling down is easy; but rebuilding! And pulling down seems easier than it is. We are determined in our innermost being by the impressions of our childhood, the influence of our parents, our educations. These deeply rooted prejudices are not so easily removed by reasoning or mere will. The power of habit, the need to strive for higher ideals, the break with all that is established, the dissolution of all forms of society, the question whether mankind hasn't been deceived for two thousand years by a phantom, the sense of one's arrogance and rashness: all struggle against one another in an uncertain strife until, finally, painful experiences and mournful events lead our heart back again to the old childhood beliefs. However, observing the impression that such doubts make on the mind must surely be a contribution to one's own cultural history. It is otherwise unthinkable that something should remain as a result of all this speculation, a result that cannot always be knowledge, but perhaps only a belief that may occasionally stimulate or oppress a moral feeling.

Just as custom appears as a consequence of an era, a people, a direction of spirit, so morality is the result of a universal development of mankind. It is the sum of all truths of our world. Perhaps it means no more in the infinite world than the consequence of our own spiritual direction. Perhaps a universal truth develops out of the results of truth in individual worlds!

We hardly know whether mankind itself is only a stage, a phase in the universal, in becoming; whether it is not merely a voluntary appearance of God. Is man not perhaps the development of stone through the medium of plant or animal? Could it be that perfection is already attained here, that herein lies history? Has this eternal becoming no end? What are the mainsprings that drive this great clockwork? They are hidden. But they are the same in the great clock we call history. Events are its face. From hour to hour the hand moves ahead; at twelve o'clock its course begins anew: a new world-period dawns.

And could one not call immanent humanity each mainspring? (Then both views would be reconciled.) Or do higher considerations guide the whole? Is man only the means, or is he the end?

Ends exist only for us. For us there is change. For us there are epochs and periods. How could we see higher planes? We only see how from a single source, from humanity itself, from ideas formed out of external impressions. We see how these acquire life and form, how they become a common good for all, conscience, a sense of duty. We see how the eternal productive drive shapes them, as raw material, into new ideas. We see how, through struggle, they intermix and how out of this combination new forms emerge. A struggling and undulating of the most diverse currents, ebbing and flowing, all to the eternal ocean.

Everything revolves around one another in monstrous, ever expanding circles. Man is one of the innermost circles. If man wants to estimate the oscillations of the outer circles, he must completely abstract from his own and from the nearest wider circle on to far-reaching ones. To find the common center of all oscillations, the infinitely small circle, is the task of natural science. Because man looks for the center in and for himself, we now know what a unique meaning history and natural science must have for us.

However, as man is carried away into the circle of world history, a contest is generated between the individual will and the general will. Here lies every important, unending problem: the question of justifying the individual to the people, the people to mankind, and of mankind to the world. And here, too, is the fundamental relationship of *fate* and *history*.

The highest comprehension of universal history is impossible for man. But great historians become like the great philosopher-prophets: both abstract from the inner circles to the outer ones. However, the place of fate has not yet been secured. We must cast our eye on human life in order to understand its justification both in regard to the individual and the collective.

What determines our happiness in life? Do we have to thank events whose whirlpool carries us away? Or is not our temperament, as it were, the coloration of events? Do we not encounter everything in the mirror of our personality? And do not events provide, as it were, only the key of our history while the strength or weakness with which it affects us depends merely on our temperament? Ask gifted doctors, Emerson says, how much temperament decides, and what, in general, it does not decide?

But our temperament is nothing other than our mind, upon which the impressions of our relationships and experiences have been stamped. What is it that pulls the soul of so many men of power down to the commonplace, thereby hindering a higher flight of ideas? A fatalistic structure of skull and spine; the condition and nature of their parents; the triviality of their relationships; the commonness of their environment; even the monotony of their homeland. We have been influenced. And we lack the strength to react against this influence or even to recognize that we have been influenced. It is a painful feeling to have given up one's independence through an unconscious acceptance of external impressions, stifling the capacity of the soul through force of habit, and enduring the planting of the seeds of aberrations within the soul and against the will.

On a larger scale we find this repeated in the history of peoples. Many people affected by the same events have been influenced by them in the most diverse ways.

It is narrow-minded, therefore, to want to force the whole of mankind into some specific form of state or society, into stereotypes, as it were. All socialist and communist conceptions lead to this error. Mankind is never the same twice. If it became possible completely to demolish the entire past through a strong will, we would immediately be transported into the realm of autonomous gods, and world history would suddenly be for us nothing but a dreamy self-deception: the curtain falls, and man finds himself like a child playing with worlds, like a child who awakens at the glow of dawn and, laughing, wipes the terrible dreams from his brow.

Free will appears as unfettered, deliberate; it is boundlessly free, wandering, the spirit. But fate is a necessity: unless we believe that world history is a dream-error, the unspeakable sorrows of mankind fantasies, and that we ourselves are but the toys of our fantasies. Fate is the boundless force of opposition against free will. Free will without fate is just as unthinkable as spirit without reality, good without evil. Only antithesis creates the quality.

Fate always prescribes the principle: "Events are determined by events." If this were the only true principle, man would be the plaything of dark, effective forces, not responsible for his mistakes, completely free from moral distinctions, a necessary link in a chain. And it would benefit him not to see through his condition, if he didn't convulsively twitch in the chains that bind him, if he didn't try, with mad desire, to disarrange the world and its mechanism.

Perhaps, in similar fashion, as spirit is only the smallest infinitesimal substance, the good is only the most subtle evolution of evil, so, perhaps, free will is nothing but the highest potency of fate. World history is, then, the history of matter, if one takes the meaning of these words in the broadest sense. For it is necessary that there be yet higher principles into which all distinctions flow together in a great unity, in which all development is in stages: everything flowing into a monstrous ocean wherein once again all the levers of development of the world unite, consolidate, all-one. —