

Table of Contents

<i>I. Introduction.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>II. The Four Genres.....</i>	<i>4</i>
1. Rational and Historical Reconstruction.....	4
2. Geistesgeschichte (Canon Formation).....	5
3. Doxography.....	6
<i>III. Critiquing the Four Genres.....</i>	<i>7</i>
1. Historical Reconstruction and Critical History.....	7
2. Rational Reconstruction as Luxury.....	9
3. Geistesgeschichte and the Superior Man.....	10
4. Doxography as Antiquarian.....	11
5. The Purpose of The Historiography of Philosophy.....	12
<i>IV. Nietzsche's Three Modes.....</i>	<i>13</i>
1. Monumental History.....	13
2. Antiquarian History.....	14
3. Critical History.....	15
<i>V. A (The) Fifth Genre – Nietzschean Genealogy.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Bibliography.....</i>	<i>18</i>

Hyder H. Arastu

Professor Manning

Philosophy 6506

9th May 2025

The Fifth Genre of the Historiography of Philosophy: Rationally Reconstructing Nietzsche

I. Introduction

Rorty in his paper titled *The Historiography of Philosophy: The Four Genres* presents us with four ways to 'historiograph' philosophy. The four genres we are presented with are: Historical Reconstruction, Rational Reconstruction, *Geistesgeschichte*, and Doxography.

Of the four genres, Rorty says we must rid ourselves of Doxography while preserving the others. The other three we are to engage in but independently, in this way they will not present an incompatibility. Instead, these will be different ways in which we understand the history of philosophy each with a distinct purpose.

The purpose of the historiography of philosophy is for Rorty to understand it as it benefits our present conversations - a pragmatic approach as is paradigmatic of Rorty. Now, Nietzsche too has a work concerning history titled *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Human Life*, in this he argues for a view of history, one that applies to the history of philosophy, and is distinct from the four genres Rorty proposes. The Nietzschean goal with historiography is to use it to benefit us. To Nietzsche, like 'man', history too is to be 'surpassed'. This Nietzschean thesis is incompatible with Rorty who wishes merely to further conversation in the hopes of 'understanding' history.

As such the Nietzschean view poses a problem to the Rortian thesis in at least one way; Doxography is not the only genre that “must be allowed to wither away” (Rorty 1984: 67). Further that Rorty has not addressed every way philosophy may be historiographed¹. A demonstration of this incompatibility is the goal of this paper. By presenting the Rortian genres and ‘rationally reconstructing’ Nietzsche, I will demonstrate why the Nietzschean approach cannot be classified under any of the four genres.

The purpose of rationally reconstructing Nietzsche is that this is the only way Rorty will approve of bringing a dead philosopher into conversation with him, another dead philosopher of a different age. In this way, by restricting myself to the limits set up by Rorty, I allow myself an acceptable response to his work.

As the reasons why Nietzsche cannot fit into any of the four genres becomes clear, so too will become clear why a fifth genre is necessary. It is at this point that I present Nietzsche’s approach to historiography, the fifth genre.

A question naturally arises concerning the merits of the fifth genre. But the discussion of this is wholly beyond the scope of this paper. The goal of this paper is to assert the existence of a genre Rorty overlooks; the necessity of which is an outcome of Nietzsche’s criticisms of the genres presented by Rorty.

¹ Though Rorty perhaps never explicitly claimed this, it is heavily implied throughout his work that all historiography of philosophy can be classified into the four genres presented.

II. The Four Genres

To begin it would be helpful to lay out the genres Rorty presents us with. Through the course of this section, we acquaint ourselves with these. Considering: what each constitutes, has to offer in isolation, must exist, and the criticisms it is subject to- if any.

1. Rational and Historical Reconstruction

The first of the four genres we consider are rational and historical reconstruction. The two I group together since they stem from a single root, the Skinnerian maxim constraining the pursuit of historical knowledge:

“No agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done.”

(Skinner 1969: 28)

Historical reconstructions are the product of respecting the maxim, while rational ones stem from ignoring it.

A historical reconstruction operates in the terms of the dead thinker, in his linguistic habits as he lived. These are generally universally agreed upon; of a question like “What Locke would be likely to have said to a Hobbes who had lived and retained his faculties for a few more decades”, Rorty says “there is no reason why historians should not arrive at a consensus, a consensus which might be confirmed by the discovery of a manuscript of Locke's in which he imagines a conversation between himself and Hobbes.” (Rorty 1984: 53).

Rational reconstructions of the other hand work in contrast to historical ones, these are the product of ‘re-educating’ dead thinkers; ignoring Skinner’s maxim and putting the dead thinkers into conversation with contemporary thinkers, “we give an account ‘in our terms’” (Rorty 1984:

54). There remains the question “of whether rational reconstructors are ‘*really*’ doing *history*,” (Rorty 1984: 53), this problem Rorty says is only verbal. The reconstructions are anachronistic, and this does not constitute a problem, so long as the reconstructor recognizes that they are anachronistic conducting the reconstruction “in full knowledge of their anachronism” (Rorty 1984: 53). It is perfectly reasonable to ask what an ideal dead philosopher would have said of a question that concerns us today.

2. Geistesgeschichte (Canon Formation)

Speaking of questions, we move to Geistesgeschichte. A ‘method’ Rorty borrows from Hegel which speaks of ‘views’ in certain ages. Geistesgeschichte allows the formation of canons so one can understand what the people at the time were thinking about or talking about, Rorty says,

“it spends more of its time asking ‘Why should anyone have made the question of – central to his thought?’ or ‘Why did anyone take the problem of – seriously?’ than on asking in what respect the great dead philosopher’s answer or solution accords with that of contemporary philosophers.” (Rorty 1984: 57).

Geistesgeschichte is credited for the distinction between the history of science and the history of philosophy since in the latter there is no necessity for the justification of the questions asked but in philosophy these become foundational

Geistesgeschichte Rorty says “is the genre which takes responsibility for identifying which writers are the ‘great dead philosophers’.” (Rorty 1984: 61). To decipher though who counts as one, the approach cannot admit of anachronism as rational reconstructions can.

Geistesgeschichte “has to ‘place’ that vocabulary in a series of vocabularies and estimate its importance by placing it in a narrative which traces changes in vocabulary” (Rorty 1984: 61).

Geistesgeschichte primarily has two functions, revealing the contingency of philosophical problems and placing philosophers within their intellectual and cultural context. Philosophers here are not innovators but only the voice for the thought of their age.

3. Doxography

We move now to the final genre, doxography. Doxography is the genre that Rorty claims “must be allowed to wither away”. He defines it for his use as follows:

“In the sense in which I shall be using the term, doxography is the attempt to impose a problematic on a canon drawn up without reference to that problematic, or, conversely, to impose a canon on a problematic constructed without reference to that canon.” (Rorty 1984: 62)

Doxography is asking the question “What did X think Y is” where Y is ‘the question of philosophy’ in the current canon for every X in an antecedently formulated canon. He provides examples of the imposition of such questions, with Diogenes Laetius asking, “What did X think the good was?” or Heideggerians asking “What did X think being was?”.

These attempts to impose new questions on old canons are the product of “the idea that ‘philosophy’ is the name of a natural kind – the name of a discipline which, in all ages and places, has managed to dig down to the same deep, fundamental questions.”, but since according to Rorty philosophy cannot be a natural kind, such attempts are foundationally mistaken.

Additionally, since Geistesgeschichte as Rorty describes uncovers the contingency of philosophical questions, the notion of philosophy as a natural kind on which doxography rests is wholly incompatible with also doing Geistesgeschichte. As such, if Geistesgeschichte is to be preserved, Doxography cannot be.

Since Rorty himself is dismissive of doxography, this description suffices for the purposes of the current paper, and I will waste no additional time on it.

III. Critiquing the Four Genres

Though Nietzsche does not explicitly address the question of the historiography of philosophy, he does speak at length of history in his work *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Human Life*. We can therefore put Nietzsche into conversation with Rorty on the historiography of philosophy by applying what Nietzsche says of history in general to specifically philosophy. To this end, we will discuss the Nietzschean bearing on each of Rorty's four genres.

1. Historical Reconstruction and Critical History

Historical reconstructions as we have discussed earlier are the product of obeying the Skinnerian maxim. A historical reconstruction aims at understanding a view held by a philosopher by placing the dead thinker in their own context.

Now Nietzsche calls for a *critical* use of history which I take to be incompatible with Historical reconstructions. Nietzsche describes this critical use of history,

“He must have the strength, and use it from time to time, to shatter and dissolve something to enable him to live: this he achieves by dragging it to the bar of judgment, interrogating it meticulously and finally condemning it; every past, however, is worth condemning—for that is how matters happen to stand with human affairs: human violence and weakness have always contributed strongly to shaping them. It is not justice which here sits in judgment; even less is it mercy which here pronounces judgment: but life alone, that dark, driving, insatiably self-

desiring power. Its verdict is always unmerciful, always unjust, because it has never flowed from a pure fountain of knowledge; but in most cases the verdict would be the same were justice itself to proclaim it” (Nietzsche 1874: 21-22)

This condemnation of the past directly contradicts historical reconstruction. Nietzsche argues that history must be understood as it serves ‘life alone’. Of the past he says “human violence and weakness have always contributed strongly to shaping”, and as such not every past can serve life. To be able to live then, some pasts must with ‘strength’ be ‘shattered’ and dissolved’.

Now though Rorty says we should be “willing to say that Aristotle was unfortunately ignorant”, also says that there is “there is knowledge - historical knowledge - to be gained which one can only get by bracketing one's own better knowledge”, and it is this latter idea that is incompatible with the Nietzschean view of history.

Nietzsche calls for a ‘rejection’ of outdated ideas, that they must be ‘shattered and dissolved’, while for Rorty, not only is it adequate to recognize that the ideas belong to the past, but there is ‘historical knowledge to be gained’. It is this sense of ‘historical knowledge’ that Nietzsche would say simply does not exist and even if he were to say such knowledge exists, then he would say that it hinders growth.

Historical reconstructions then, since they do not serve life should not be performed. This is opposed to Rorty’s assertion that they must be preserved.

2. Rational Reconstruction as Luxury

We move now to the second genre, Rational Reconstruction. Rational reconstructions gives us theoretical knowledge, knowledge of what a dead thinker would have said or thought about something. The aim is to make a great dead thinker of the past speak our language.

The purpose of his essay Nietzsche declares in the *Preface*, to show “why knowledge which enfeebles activity, why history as a costly intellectual excess and luxury must, in the spirit of Goethe's words, be seriously hated” (Nietzsche 1847: 7).

To answer the question of whether Rational Reconstruction be allowed to survive, we must be able to tell whether it serves “life and action”. Simply put, there is no specific answer to this, one cannot affirm or deny it since rational reconstruction is too broad a category.

The essay I write at this moment is itself a rational reconstruction of sorts, Nietzsche wrote around a century prior to Rorty. The two almost certainly did not speak with the same vocabularies; in order to have Nietzsche respond to Rorty’s criticisms then, I have imported a new vocabulary onto Nietzsche and made him speak a language foreign to him. A rational reconstruction of this sort I would argue Nietzsche would not object against, it ‘serves life and action’.

But that this particular rational reconstruction is acceptable is not to say that all are – that is the equivalent of saying that since some history should be done, all history should; and Nietzsche is in accord with the former and wholly in disagreement with the latter. There is no contradiction in a rational reconstruction that does not serve life. I could for instance rationally reconstruct Plato and ask what he would say of Descartes, and I might wish to do this wholly out of curiosity, but

such an attempt would do nothing to serve life. It is this kind of rational reconstruction that Nietzsche would frown upon.

3. Geistesgeschichte and the Superior Man

Geistesgeschichte focuses on the spirit of a time. It asserts that there are certain ideas that define ‘moments’ in history, certain canons that revolve around particular questions. That a story can be told from say Descartes to Kant about the attempt to answer a certain question. It focuses on a grander general narrative instead of on the thoughts of a particular thinker. The movement from Descartes to Kant for instance would not credit Descartes, Locke, Hume, or Kant individually, but it is the culmination of a process in Kant that began with Descartes.

Geistesgeschichte aims to tell a story of progress. Nietzsche says “history is written by the experienced and superior man” (Nietzsche 1847: 38), but in Geistesgeschichte, there can be no ‘superior man’. It is only the *Master-Builders* who are to write history, and it is these who decide what history says, there is no grand narrative of progress. Nietzsche says of *The Historical Sense* which I take to encompass Geistesgeschichte, that it,

“rules without restraint and unfolds all its implications, uproots the future because it destroys illusions and robs existing things of their atmosphere in which alone they can live. Historical justice, even when it is practised 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 1847: 38)

To spend your time understanding the spirit of a past moment “undermines the living and brings it to ruin”, instead Nietzsche advocates for (the illusion of) *love* and *creativity*, he says:

“historical audit always brings to light so much that is false, crude, inhuman, absurd, violent, that the attitude of pious illusion, in which alone all that wants to

live can live, is necessarily dispelled: only with love, however, only surrounded by the shadow of the illusion of love, can man create,” (Nietzsche 1847: 39)

There is no reason for understanding what drove the thinkers of a bygone age, except unless it is with the sole purpose of serving life. *Geistesgeschichte* is incompatible with this, it revolves around the notion of moments in the past that lead up to the present, but Nietzsche does not see it this way.

The incompatibility revolves around two primary ideas from Nietzsche: 1. That history is the product of individuals, of *superior men*, genius, but *Geistesgeschichte*’s emphasis on the era and the movement removes entirely the station of the individual. And 2. That even the most pious attempt at history “undermines the living”.

4. Doxography as Antiquarian

Nietzsche’s *antiquarian history* maps on seamlessly to the description Rorty gives of doxography as,

“exemplified by books which start from Thales or Descartes and wind up with some figure roughly contemporary with the author, ticking off what various figures traditionally called 'philosophers' had to say about problems traditionally called philosophical” (Rorty 1984: 21)

That Nietzsche did not define it in terms of ‘canons’ is a product of the grounding for the respective criticisms. Given that the description Rorty gives in his opening section of doxography isolates the same approach to history that Nietzsche speaks of when he speaks of antiquarian history it is not objectionable to equate doxography with antiquarian history, and subsequently to apply the critique of antiquarian history to doxography.

Nietzsche heavily critiques the antiquarian scholar. He describes antiquarian history as:

“the repugnant spectacle of a blind lust for collecting, of a restless raking together of all that once has been. Man envelops himself in an odour of decay; through his antiquarian habit he succeeds in degrading even a more significant talent and nobler need to an insatiable craving for novelty, or rather a craving for all things and old things; often he sinks so low as finally to be satisfied with any fare and devours with pleasure even the dust of bibliographical quisquilia.” (Nietzsche 1847: 21)

The problem with antiquarian history is that it does not seek any progress or action that serves life but is instead a mere stagnation of ideas to the extent that the continued stagnation results in a degradation. Nietzsche continues saying that even if this degradation does not take place, the antiquarian is still a threat since he (the antiquarian historian):

“merely understands how to preserve life, not how to generate it; therefore it always underestimates what is in process of becoming because it has no instinct for discerning its significance” (Nietzsche 1847: 21)

Since this ‘paralyzes a man of action’, doxography too should be discarded. This though is done for very different reasons in the case of Rorty. Rorty discards it since he thinks it to be ‘irrational’, he argues that what doxography does is incorrect in the sense that it makes philosophers say things that they never did. Nietzsche on the other hand says nothing on those lines since his only concern is the inability of doxography to ‘help’ life.

5. The Purpose of The Historiography of Philosophy

The previous distinction brings out a fundamental difference between Rorty’s and Nietzsche’s thought, their goals. The two are similar in the sense that neither thinks there is any ‘objective Truth’, and neither cares for what the ‘correct’ history is.

Both Nietzsche and Rorty in this sense care only for what is to come out of historiography. The difference being that Rorty endorses it so long as it serves 'philosophy' or academia, while Nietzsche only when it serves (human) life.

As consequence of this, the Nietzschean view necessarily runs counter to all the three views that Rorty preserves i.e. none of the four genres that Rorty presents us with is compatible with the Nietzschean notion of 'history for life'.

IV. Nietzsche's Three Modes

An unavoidable question at this point is; if Nietzsche rejects all of the four genres of the historiography of philosophy and yet does not discredit the historiography of philosophy on a whole, then how does the Nietzschean do the historiography of philosophy?

With the criticisms of the genres discussed above, we have come across already two of three 'modes' that Nietzsche discusses: *Antiquarian History* and *Critical History*. Though we have encountered these, we have done so only very briefly, it would thus benefit us to discuss these in greater detail.

1. Monumental History

Let us begin first with the mode we have not explicitly named, *monumental history*. This is the kind of history that has been hinted at though. Monumental history concerns monuments from the past that inspire us to move forward. As the Romans looked back at the Greeks to attempt to emulate them. Since these great things had been achieved in the past, we are assured that they can once again be achieved:

“What is the advantage to the present individual, then, of the monumental view of the past, the concern with the classical and the rare of earlier times? It is the knowledge that the great which once existed was at least possible once and may well again be possible sometime; he goes his way more courageously, for now the doubt which assails him in moments of weakness, that he may perhaps want the impossible, has been conquered.” (Nietzsche 1874: 16)

In this way monumental history serves the man of action, but it is to be practiced in moderation for “monumental history deceives with analogies: with tempting similarities the courageous are enticed to rashness, the enthusiastic to fanaticism,” (Nietzsche 1874: 17) in this way monumental history may become its opposite, instead of the dead pushing us forward, the “dead bury the living”.

2. Antiquarian History

The fault of Antiquarian history we have encountered already, Therefore, here we will speak only of the merits.

Antiquarian history Nietzsche says roots our identity and history belongs to “him who with loyalty and love looks back on his origins; through this reverence he, as it were, gives thanks for his existence.”, he must tend “with loving hands what has long survived he intends to preserve the conditions in which he grew up for those who will come after him—and so he serves life.” (Nietzsche 1874: 19).

It is in this way that Antiquarian history too is capable of serving life even though to engage in it excessively will result in a stagnation and degradation of life.

3. Critical History

The merits of critical history we have acquainted ourselves with in the earlier section where it was placed in opposition to historical reconstruction. We have seen that the superior man “must have the strength, and use it from time to time, to shatter and dissolve something to enable him to live,” here “one puts the knife to its roots, then one cruelly treads all pieties under foot.”

Like the other modes though, critical history too can be ‘disadvantageous’ to human life. Since “It is always a dangerous process, especially so for life itself: and men and ages which serve life by judging and destroying a past are always dangerous and endangered men and ages.”². In doing this we risk destroying the past to the extent that we lose our ‘grounding’. This would run contrary to ‘serving life’, since it can result only in nihilism.

V. A (The) Fifth Genre – Nietzschean Genealogy

So, what is it that Nietzsche advocates for? We have now all the material necessary to piece together what I label the fifth genre of the historiography of philosophy. I label it the fifth in order to allow conversation with Rorty. [Section III](#) has shown us why the Nietzschean approach is incompatible with Rorty’s four genres. [Section IV](#) has described what Nietzsche’s approach to history is, but the three ‘modes’ of philosophy he describes do not constitute distinct genres, instead they all constitute one.

² In this singular instance, I quote the R. J. Hollingdale translation from the Cambridge version of the *Untimely Meditations*, since the Peter Preuss translation published by Hackett was incomprehensible to me:

“It is always a dangerous process, namely dangerous for life itself: and men or ages which serve life in this manner of judging and annihilating a past are always a dangerous process, namely dangerous for life itself: and men or ages which serve life in this manner of judging and annihilating a past are always dangerous and endangered men and ages.”

I credit here Ethan for his help in finding the more comprehensible version

It is the goal of this final section to overview this Nietzschean approach. The fifth genre is implicit in the work we have discussed so far but is given life in Nietzsche's own work. It is most explicit in his *Genealogy of Morals*, an exposition of whose method is what will grant us this final genre. Fortunately, this is made simpler for us since such an exposition already exists.

Rahul Chaudhri describes in his paper *The Troubled Union of History and Psychology in Nietzsche's Genealogy* (2016), the Nietzschean approach to history. Jacob Gustavson in *Nietzsche, and the Significance of Historical Philosophizing* (2023) names Chaudhri's description 'Nietzschean Genealogy'. Since a full exposition of this is beyond the scope of this paper, we will only briefly introduce Nietzschean Genealogy as described by Chaudhri.

Gustavson says "Nietzschean genealogy is one part history and one part psychology, the point must be stressed that it is not history in the conventional sense." (Gustavson 2023: 24), further Jensen (2013) writes

"Nietzsche's unique accomplishment in the philosophy of history was to simultaneously recognize the developmental character of reality and that his own account of it represents a symbolic way of description, a way that admits the anti-realist, perspectival, and historical character of his historiography... Genealogy, as Nietzsche conceives it, is a historically contingent anti-realist representation set within and constructed to convince a specific and determinate type of perspective." (Jensen 2013)

There is no historical truth or falsity within the Nietzschean view, something is objectionable only when it ceases to serve life, he says in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

"We do not consider the falsity of a judgment as itself an objection to a judgment; this is perhaps where our new language will sound most foreign. The question is how far the judgment promotes and preserves life, how well it preserves, and perhaps even cultivates, the type."

This applies throughout the Nietzschean project and the sentiment is echoed in his view of history. Nietzschean genealogy revolves around a 'surpassing' as is the case for the grander Nietzschean project, most explicit in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* where Zarathustra teaches the Übermensch: "Man is something that hath to be surpassed", history too must serve this surpassing; to do this it must serve life.

To meaningfully engage in the historiography of philosophy, one must isolate and only engage that which most benefits life. Now this is not entirely counter to the Rortian project, but is rather incompatible with it.

Bibliography

1. Chaudhri, Rahul. "The Troubled Union of History and Psychology in Nietzsche's Genealogy." *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, vol. 47, no. 2, Summer 2016, pp. 202–211.
2. Gustavson, Jacob. *Nietzsche, and the Significance of Historical Philosophizing*. Master's thesis, Linköping University, 2023.
3. Jensen, Anthony K. *Nietzsche's Philosophy of History*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
4. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Edited by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, translated by Judith Norman, Cambridge University Press, 2002.
5. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. Translated by Peter Preuss, Hackett Publishing, 1980.
6. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann, Vintage Books, 1966.
7. Rorty, Richard. "The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres." *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, edited by Richard Rorty, Jerome B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner, Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 355–394.
8. Skinner, Quentin. "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas." *History and Theory*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1969, pp. 3–53.