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Major: *History*

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The Age of Uncertainty: Reconsidering Friedrich Nietzsche's Place Within Modern European Intellectual History

ABSTRACT

Orthodox narratives of modern European intellectual history chronicle the development and challenge, but sustained dominance, of philosophical rationalism in the 18th and the 19th centuries, and see this worldview as being absolutely rejected by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in the 1870s and 1880s. Nietzsche's rejection of rationalism is said to have ushered in an "age of uncertainty," but this view of Nietzsche's importance is perhaps simplistic, as it might deny the existence and importance of other philosophers whose critiques of rationalism temporally preceded or directly informed Nietzsche's philosophy. This project will explore the ideas of three 19th century philosophers - Julius Bahnsen, Søren Kierkegaard, and Arthur Schopenhauer - in relation to Nietzsche's philosophy, and will thereby consider whether the age of uncertainty began earlier than is typically thought.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

I have always been fascinated by history, and I think it is fair to say that it is one of my true passions in life. My interest in history began, as for many others, with books, documentaries, and films about wars and warriors. When I was younger, I read books that recounted stories of mythological proportions about knights and battles, and went to my grandma's house to watch documentaries about historical wars. Eventually, this interest shifted in focus from the history of warfare to intellectual history (the history of ideas), principally because my older brother and his friends spent much of their time talking about socialist philosophy. That led me to read the works of leftist thinkers such as Peter Kropotkin and Murray Bookchin, in whom I found critical frameworks for understanding history and social relations. Reading these authors began a seemingly unstoppable process of philosophical reflection within me.

It was in this context that my high school history teacher Mr. Guilford introduced me to the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. I took his AP European history class in my junior year, and in it we were given an overview of European history from the late medieval period to the present day that included a particular emphasis on cultural and intellectual history, something that I had never encountered before. In his class, we learned in comparatively great detail about the characteristics of European intellectual movements from the pre-modern thought of Thomas Aquinas to Nietzsche's existentialism, and furthermore the manner in which these movements interacted with one another. Although much of the class was devoted to lectures that provided us with background information, the real heart of the class was the readings we conducted of the aforementioned European intellectuals, which served as my first

exposure to intellectual history's unique methodology. I was wholly captivated by the questions raised by these thinkers, especially those emerging from Nietzsche's idea of the death of God, and likewise by the fashion in which the field of intellectual history explored these kinds of questions.

I additionally think that my familiarity with the field of intellectual history was a large part of why I was accepted to the Honors program at Elon, and has likewise played a key role in shaping my academic interests here. I was interviewed during the selection process by Dr. Carignan, and we clicked over our shared interest in intellectual history. I was later admitted to Elon as an Honors fellow, which in turn directly enabled me to take the next step in my intellectual journey: enrolling in Carignan's HNR 137 European Intellectual History class in Spring 2021. Carignan's class, particularly through the narrative structure it used to recount European intellectual history, cemented for me the monumental importance of Nietzsche's ideas for thinking about history and reality in broader terms. The class accomplished this by emphasizing the specific manner in which Nietzsche fit into the trend of the destruction of previously-held "philosophical certainties" - the questioning of the extreme faith in progress and rationality that many possessed - by some intellectuals in Europe at the close of the 19th century. It appears to me that the enormous implications of this loss of certainties have been potentially overlooked by many, and thus deserve further academic examination.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Focus:

When scholars study European intellectual history, they typically view the Enlightenment of the 18th century as "mark[ing] the passage from a supernaturalistic-mythical-authoritative to a naturalistic-scientific-individualistic type of thinking" in the European intellectual consciousness, and therefore consider the Enlightenment to delineate the beginning of *modern* European intellectual history (Baumer 141). In short, they view the Enlightenment as a movement of intellectuals who had a shared faith in the capability of the human intellect to rationally comprehend and categorize reality, and additionally in the power of humans to socially reorganize the world in a "positive" manner (140). Although this world-spirit of constrictive quantification came to be challenged by Romantic philosophers of the early 19th century (Turner 78), the essential optimistic rationalism of the Enlightenment was never eradicated from the European consciousness, and was instead merely qualified by challenges from such Romantics as Thomas Carlyle (Baumer 270) and Friedrich Schelling (281) to include a greater emphasis on dynamic notions of change (283).

It was in this context that scholars traditionally regard Nietzsche as formulating in the 1870s and 1880s his *absolute* philosophical rejection of the Enlightenment rationalist spirit, ushering in an "age of uncertainty." Whereas many intellectual historians paint the picture of a solitary Nietzsche standing alone in his rejection of Enlightenment rationalism (Megill 1985, Turner 2014), some others, such as Franklin Baumer, construct narratives that emphasize Nietzsche's dialogic interplay with European philosophy before him. In Baumer's dialogic narrative, Nietzsche is depicted as the ultimate self-realization of the preceding intellectual movements. Baumer sees Nietzsche as turning the rationalist methodology of the Enlightenment against itself to realize - with a profound sense of nausea and horror - that all epistemic and moral systems, whether deriving their authority from a mystical God or from the idea of a rational

human consciousness, were irrational constructions divorced from any semblance of a transcendent truth (Baumer 370). In essence, Baumer views Nietzsche as using the scientific method to realize that “science, no less than religion, metaphysics, and art, rested on fictions ... it could produce power, but not truth” (374).

However important Baumer’s dialogic conception of Nietzsche might be, his narrative still does a great deal to emphasize Nietzsche’s seminal and seemingly single-handed role in creating an age of uncertainty in the 1870s and 1880s, and for that reason there are opportunities to complicate it. Such a complication could be achieved by examining Nietzsche’s relation to a number of other mid to late 19th century philosophers, particularly Julius Bahnsen, but also perhaps Søren Kierkegaard and Arthur Schopenhauer. Bahnsen, a contemporary of Nietzsche, has - with the exception of two academics from the discipline of philosophy: Frederick Beiser (Beiser 2018) and Harry Slochower (Slochower 1932) - been unjustly ignored in the English-speaking world. Bahnsen, who originally considered himself a disciple of Schopenhauer (Beiser 8), was a German philosopher whose principal idea was that of the "Realdialektik," a paradoxically systematic method of understanding which asserts that irreconcilable contradiction is the fundamental property of the entirety of reality (Slochower 373). Such a philosophy necessarily denies any possibility for a rational understanding of the world or a rational solution to life’s problems, as it posits the existence of a reality “divided against itself” (373), and therefore rejects the Enlightenment worldview in much the same way as Nietzsche's philosophy does. Owing to his neglect by academics and the vast importance of his ideas in recognizing the “deep humiliation of thought” (43) - in recognizing the impossibility of rationally understanding the world - Bahnsen merits consideration when rethinking the importance of Nietzsche in periodizing the age of uncertainty.

Similarly, the role played by Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard - both of whom temporally preceded Bahnsen and Nietzsche - in undermining the 19th century European faith in reason deserves reconsideration. In the case of Schopenhauer, perhaps his greatest contribution to the assault on rationalism was his idea of the irrational "will" that underlies the human process of aimless and endless striving (Wicks section 4. para. 3-7). Schopenhauer might prove particularly interesting to consider in light of Baumer’s periodization of him; Baumer discusses Schopenhauer in his chapter on Romanticism (Baumer 286), but his characterization of Schopenhauer’s extremely pessimistic philosophy contrasts sharply with those he constructs of other Romantic thinkers. Kierkegaard, meanwhile, puts forth in his 1843 "Fear and Trembling" the idea of an “absurd” philosophy of “faith” that championed the necessity of confronting “life’s horror” by actively forsaking rational thought (Kierkegaard 79).

Another facet that my project might explore is how practitioners of intellectual history have turned the implications of the Nietzschean “use of reason to ... discredit the rational” against their own field (Turner 244). They have reflexively challenged the “precritical conception of “facts” as the indubitable, atomistic baseline of history,” the mindset which believes the task of the historian to be the chronologically-organized recitation of supposedly-objective facts (LaCapra 75). The historical process has come to be viewed as discursive and fraught with contradictions, contradictions such as the tension between texts and their context and likewise between the desires of different academics to reduce texts to their context and vice versa (McMahon and Moyn 33). These contradictions perhaps illustrate that, as Hayden White claims, “discourse cannot be governed by logic alone” (LaCapra 81), and it is in this methodological sense

that a reconsideration of Nietzsche's place within intellectual history - and in relation to other thinkers - is additionally necessary.

Scholarly Process:

My project will investigate whether the label of the "age of uncertainty" that is typically bestowed upon the 1870s and 1880s within intellectual history discourse needs to be pushed back, that is, needs to be seen as occurring earlier, in light of the existence of other anti-rationalist philosophers, some of whom preceded Nietzsche temporally. I will likewise investigate whether Nietzsche's philosophy still deserves to be regarded by academics as particularly representative of the trend of the destruction of rational certainties, meaning the destruction of the dogmatic faith that many European intellectuals had in the power of the human intellect to comprehend and change reality for the better. My project will therefore undertake a consideration of the similarities and differences of these four thinkers' philosophies, and furthermore will explore the potential connections between these thinkers in terms of their intellectual genealogy.

In support of this line of questioning, I will read a selection of original works from the aforementioned philosophers, such as the preliminary choices below:

- Bahnsen's 1872 "On the Philosophy of History," which explicitly details his philosophy as it relates to history (Beiser 25). This work would need to be read in its original German, as there are no English translations of Bahnsen's works available.

- Nietzsche's 1885 "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," a collection of parables that expounds his mature philosophy (Megill 34, 61). This work could be read in its original German.

- Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling," which discusses his individualist-existentialist conception of faith that unequivocally rejects the use of reason and that purposely separates itself from socially-ordained morality (Kierkegaard 80, 82).

- Schopenhauer's "The World as Will and Representation," which explains his theory of the irrational striving will that underlies all reality (Wicks section 4. para. 3-7).

I will additionally read secondary source descriptions of these thinkers' works, and use both these primary and secondary sources to situate their philosophies within the field of modern European intellectual history. This situation will look like an in-depth reading of existing works about modern European intellectual history (for example Baumer 1977, LaCapra 1985, McMahon and Moyn 2014, Megill 1985, Turner 2014), and a consideration of how exactly these four philosophers' ideas - as interpreted from the primary and secondary sources - fit into the chronological and methodological narrative depicted in these works. In short, my project will seek to unearth what their philosophies can tell us about when the loss of rational certainties occurred in the European consciousness, and what the consequences of this loss of certainties are for the study of history and for how we should live our lives.

Proposed Products:

- Approximately 60 page Honors history thesis
- Article submission to an undergraduate research journal, such as the Crimson Historical Review, a journal that publishes undergraduate history research
- NCUR presentation(s)
- SURF presentation(s)

FEASIBILITY

Perhaps the biggest challenge that my project could face is the proficiency in advanced German language skills that some of my primary sources will demand. For my project I am considering reading Bahnsen's "Zur Philosophie der Geschichte" and Nietzsche's "Also Sprach Zarathustra" in their original German, both of which are fairly advanced texts. This will require an advanced knowledge of the German language which I do not currently possess. However, I will be studying abroad this coming Fall in Heidelberg, Germany, and I believe that the rigorous academic program there, in combination with the effort I put into learning the language both there and at home, will greatly improve my already intermediate German language capabilities. Additionally, as someone who intends on being a double major in history and German studies (pending the approval of the Independent major committee), I will continue to take German courses here at Elon that will help in me in reaching the required level of proficiency in the German language.

Another potential obstacle to my project's completion is the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia. Although only Russia and Ukraine are currently engaged in open hostilities, the involvement of the European Union, and therefore of Germany, may eventually lead to a military conflict between the European Union and Russia. If this were to occur, I would most likely not be able to study abroad in Germany, as Germany, and the United States for that matter, would be at war with Russia.

TRAVEL OUTSIDE THE US

PROPOSED TRAVEL: Heidelberg, Germany

I will be studying abroad in Heidelberg this Fall (Fall 2022 - September through December), and would like to visit some of the historical sites and museums related to my project that are located in the German-speaking world, such as the Nietzsche House i

GEC PREASSESSMENT: GREEN

Since Daniel was approved in November he has not returned to his My Elon Global portal to complete post-decision elements. Not time sensitive now but will be soon.

Assessed by: Rhonda Waller

BUDGET

Primary source books: \$300

- Bahnsen's "Der Widerspruch im Wissen und Wesen der Welt" - \$50
- Bahnsen's "Wie ich wurde, was ich ward" - \$25
- Bahnsen's "Zur Philosophie der Geschichte" - \$10
- Kierkegaard's "The Sickness Unto Death" - \$25

- Kierkegaard's "Practice in Christianity" - \$45
- Kierkegaard's "Philosophical Fragments" - \$40
- Nietzsche's "Also Sprach Zarathustra" - \$5
- Nietzsche's "Die fröhliche Wissenschaft" - \$15
- Nietzsche's "Beyond Good and Evil" - \$20
- Schopenhauer's "The World as Will and Representation" - \$45
- Schopenhauer's "On the Suffering of the World" - \$10
- Schopenhauer's "Essays and Aphorisms" - \$10

Secondary source books: \$270

- Alan Megill's "Prophets of Extremity" - \$35
- Franklin Baumer's "Modern European Thought" - \$15
- "Nietzsche's Personal Library" (Hardcopy) - \$220

Excursion to the Nietzsche House in Sils Maria, Switzerland: \$775

- Train/bus tickets from Heidelberg to Sils Maria: \$120
- Ticket to Nietzsche Colloquium: \$55
- Staying in the Nietzsche house/or hotel for four days: \$300
- Food: \$300

Heidelberg Study Abroad Other Expenses: \$1500

- Round trip plane ticket to Germany: \$1500

2023 NCUR trip to Eau Claire, Wisconsin: \$1150

- Conference registration: \$150
- Airfare (roundtrip RDU to CHI to EAU): \$450
- Hotel for 5 nights: \$350
- Food: \$200

Attending the North American Nietzsche Society (NANS) Fall 2023 Convention: \$1010

- Membership fee for NANS: \$10
- Round trip plane ticket (location TBD, prices estimated off of last known location): \$400
- Hotel for 3 nights: \$450
- Food: \$150

2024 NCUR trip: \$1000

- Conference registration: \$150
- Airfare (location TBD): ~\$450
- Hotel for 5 nights: ~\$250
- Food ~\$150

Tuition: \$14,000

- Junior Fall: \$3500
- Junior Spring: \$3500

- Senior Fall: \$3500
- Senior Spring: \$3500

Total: ~ \$20,000

PROPOSED EXPERIENCES and PRODUCTS

	Experiences	Products
Summer 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - SURE research about Juilius Bahnsen with Dr. Carignan - Read intellectual history literature - Begin reading primary source material 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intellectual history literature review
Fall 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Study Abroad in Heidelberg, Germany - Visit Nietzsche House in Switzerland - Nietzsche Colloquium in Switzerland - Accrue experience with German language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Initial planning of article for undergraduate research journal
Winter 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continue reading primary source material, especially German sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drafting and submission of article for undergraduate research journal
Spring 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NCUR presentation - SURF presentation - Take 2 hours of HNR 498 research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Article for research journal published
Summer 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review and re-read intellectual history literature - Review and re-read primary sources in order to qualify understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Begin initial planning and drafting of main thesis using journal article as basis for expansion
Fall 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Take 2 hours of HNR 498 research - Take HST research methods course - Attend North American Nietzsche Society Conference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Complete thesis draft done
Winter 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Re-reading relevant texts for revising thesis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Draft revisions
Spring 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Take 4 hours of HNR 498 research - Another NCUR presentation - Another SURF presentation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Final revisions, completion, and defense of thesis

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