We speak of our hearts, our plans, as if they were our own, and yet there is a power outside of us that tosses us about as it pleases until it lays us in the grave, and of this power we know nothing, neither where it came from nor where it is going.

— Hölderlin, *Hyperion*

"History" is one of the names whereby we refer to that which is larger than that which we define or can know, but which nonetheless defines each of us. It is what exceeds me and my times; yet as defining the context and possibilities that circumscribe what can emerge from out of my times, it summons me to the infinite task of understanding what history itself might be said to be. Precisely this infinite task constitutes the finitude of human life. To take up the question of history is not only to ask about the context within which any time may be understood, it is equally—perhaps even most of all—to address this finitude.

But what is perhaps most striking to one who would ask about how history is spoken of in philosophical discussions that take it seriously is the great variety of the senses of history that one finds. While it is widely acknowledged that "history" belongs to what thinking is called to address, and while it is fair to say that a consciousness of the effective life of history is almost a given in philosophical discussions of the past two centuries, the meaning of "history" is itself
in fundamental dispute and sorely in need of some clarity. Nietzsche's efforts to this end in his *On the Use and Disadvantage of History for Life* makes a significant advance in that direction and is worthy of attention even if it does not find it in this paper.

The ambition of this paper is not so great that it would pretend to bring even a small degree of clarity into these disputes. Rather, the purpose of what follows is simply to call attention to some features of this mosaic we call history that I believe need to receive greater emphasis in discussions that dare to speak of history. If some sense of clarity emerges, then it should be a clarity about the limits of speaking of history at all. What I hope emerges here is a sense of the mystery that the experience of history awakens in us. All of the features of history to which I will refer need to be understood as mementoes of the finitude which is exposed in the question of history. A sensitivity to the force of history awakens us to the point at which we find ourselves experiencing the radical limits upon the power of the present to shed sufficient light to clarify even itself—to say nothing of other times.

More important still: though it is not immediately apparent in every instance, in what follows it is assumed that the question of history is a question that can only receive answers that are ethical or political. The reason is simple and basic: the realm of history, the manner in which the finitude proper to it appears, is human freedom. The field of the question of history is freedom and practical life. This means that in the end, history itself and the histories that are told cannot be understood conceptually or scientifically or as matters of fact. Every particular history, as well as the idea of history as such, needs to be regarded not only as expressing the self-understanding of those who would write it but also as the struggle to actualize freedom.

Consequently, whatever its determinate content, history is one of the ways finite beings express, and struggle to respond to, the ethical and political riddles of shared life in time. Wedded to the past, the stakes of history are nonetheless firmly lodged in the future. The difficulty of coming to terms with history is above all a moral difficulty.

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When one considers the discontinuities of the mind and the discontinuities of the world, it is amazing that anything true has been established at all.

—Leon Wieseltier, *Kaddish*