

Questioning Authority: Nietzsche's Gift to Derrida

Alan D. Schrift

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The question of authority and its legitimation is a central issue in Nietzsche's writings, and one to which insufficient attention has been paid. Whether he is dismantling the authority of the moral-theological tradition, deconstructing the authority of God, or excising the hidden metaphysical authority within language, Nietzsche's refusal to legitimate any figure of authority remains constant. This holds for his own authority as a writer, the authority of his "prophet" Zarathustra, and the authority of the *Übermensch*.¹ As he remarks apropos moral authority, "in the presence of morality, as in the face of any authority, one is not *allowed* to think, far less to express an opinion: here one has to *obey!* As long as the world has existed no authority has yet been willing to let itself become the object of critique" (*Daybreak*). Because authority demands

obedience, a philosophy of the future will necessitate a critique of authority. If values are to be transvalued, obedience to the previous values must be undermined. The whole Nietzschean project of genealogy directs itself toward deconstructing the foundations of the dominant values of modernity, which is to say that Nietzsche's project of a transvaluation of values presupposes a delegitimation of the existing (moral) authority.

While the question of authority may not have been sufficiently attended to in Nietzsche's writings, it has been a central question in the work of Jacques Derrida. Here, as elsewhere,² we can see, both in broad outline and with a certain degree of specificity, how Nietzsche's ideas are developed in Derrida's thought on literary authority and its relation to the deconstruction of the subject. While the critique of the subject in recent French thought is most closely identified with the

1 For an interesting demonstration of Nietzsche's authorial self-deconstruction, see Daniel W. Conway's excellent essay "Nietzsche contra Nietzsche: The Deconstruction of Zarathustra" in *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: Essays Pro and Contra*, ed. Clayton Koelb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 91-110.

2 I discuss some other ways in which Derrida appropriates Nietzschean themes in the first chapter of my *Nietzsche's French Legacy: A Genealogy of Poststructuralism* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 9-32.

work of Michel Foucault, Derrida also addressed the question of the authoritarian domination that accompanies the modern concept of the subject. Derrida develops his deconstructive critique of the subject as a privileged center of discourse in the context of his project of delegitimizing authority, whether that authority emerges in the form of the author's domination of the text³ or the tradition's reading of the history of philosophy. In fact, as Derrida himself noted in an interview published in *Positions*, from his earliest published texts, his project of delegitimation was an attempt "to systematize a deconstructive critique precisely against the authority of meaning, as the *transcendental signified* or as *telos* . . ."⁴

In Derrida's reading of Nietzsche, the deconstruction of authority emerges alongside his logic of undecidability. Derrida often "uses" Nietzsche as a paradigm of undecidability to frustrate the logocentric longing to choose between one or the other alternative within a fixed binary opposition. A case in point is Derrida's 1968 lecture "The Ends of Man." At the conclusion of this lecture, Derrida brings this logic of undecidability to bear on the two strategies that have appeared in connection with the deconstruction of metaphysical humanism. The first strategy, which Derrida associates with Heidegger, proceeds by means of a return to the origins of the metaphysical tradition and

uses the resources of this tradition against itself. In adopting this strategy, "one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating, *relieving* [*relève*] at an always more certain depth that which one allegedly deconstructs."⁵ The second deconstructive strategy, which Derrida identifies with French philosophy in the 1960s, affirms an absolute break with tradition, seeking to change ground in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion. However, such a strategy fails to recognize that one cannot break with the tradition while retaining its language. The inevitable consequence of this blindness to the powers of language is a naive reinstatement of a "new" ground on the very site one sought to displace.

When applying these deconstructive strategies to Nietzsche and the "end of man," two very different interpretations result. For Heidegger, Nietzsche emerges as the last and consummate metaphysician, in whose writings the end of man appears as the culmination of metaphysical voluntarism. The *Übermensch*, as pure will, thus assumes for Heidegger the form of a metaphysical repetition of humanism. For the French, as perhaps is most clear in the case of Foucault's *The Order of Things*, Nietzsche emerges not as a repetition but as the first break from modernity. In his final reference to Nietzsche in *The Order of Things*, Foucault couples Nietzsche's death of God with the end of man, an end which is marked by the laughter of the *Übermensch* at the going-under of the last man. Recalling that in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* ("The Ugliest Man"), God is reported to have died of pity upon encountering the last man, Foucault writes:

3 Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Archeology of the Frivolous: Reading Condillac*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1980), p. 49. This is also, of course, part of what is at issue in Derrida's playful treatment of Nietzsche's "forgotten umbrella" in *Spurs*.

4 Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 49.

5 Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man" In *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 135. (Translation altered.)

Rather than the death of God-or, rather, in the wake of that death and in profound correlation with it – what Nietzsche's thought heralds is the end of his murderer; it is the explosion of man's face in laughter, and the return of masks; it is the scattering of the profound stream of time by which he felt himself carried along and whose pressure he suspected in the very being of things; it is the identity of the Return of the Same with the absolute dispersion of man.⁶

Derrida, on the other hand, warns that we must refrain from choosing one strategy rather than the other. The two strategies supplement one another, and we are now at a point where there is no question of a simple choice between them. In other words, contrary to the exclusive disjunction characteristic of the metaphysical faith in opposite values (cf. *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 2), we must choose *both at once*, thereby effecting a change of ground while returning to the origins. To do so is to effect a change of *style* in philosophical writing. Derrida marks this change of style when he confronts Nietzsche's position on the "end" of "man," a position he finds equivocal. That is to say, there is more than one "end" of "man" in Nietzsche. Insofar as style is always *plural*,⁷ to read Nietzsche's texts requires that we be prepared for multiple

readings. In the case at hand, we find that there are at least *two* ends of man: the end as *eschaton* (the last) and the end as *telos* (the goal). And Nietzsche confronts us with these equivocal ends at the conclusion of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where we find (the last) man meeting his end in the choice between the two goals: higher man (*höherer Mensch*) and the *Übermensch*. This equivocation on the "end" of "man" points to Derrida's own view of the undecidable place of the subject within philosophical discourse. But, unlike Heidegger and the Foucault of *The Order of Things*, Derrida refuses to do away with the subject. Instead, he seeks to situate the subject. As he puts it – in a different context – "I believe that at a certain level both of experience and of philosophical and scientific discourse, one cannot get along without the notion of the subject. It is a question of knowing where it comes from and how it functions."⁸

Nietzsche's critique of authority is implicit in his method of genealogy: a search for, and critique of, "origins". And a number of his texts show the way in which he attempts to deconstruct his own subjectivity as well. As we saw above, Nietzsche noted, in the Preface to the second edition of *Daybreak*, that "in the face of any authority, one is not *allowed* to think, [instead] one has to – *obey!*" Elsewhere, in the two volumes of *Human, All-Too-Human*, for example, Nietzsche cautions against confusing the work with its author. Once the text has been written, it

6 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1973), p. 385. Gilles Deleuze makes a similar point, coupling the death of God with the dissolution of the Self, in *Différence et répétition* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), pp. 81ff [English translation: *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 58ff].

7 See Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 135, and *Spurs*, *passim*.

8 Jacques Derrida, from the discussion following "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), p. 271.

lives a life of its own, and by bringing the text into the public domain the author relinquishes all authority over what it is to mean. "When his book opens its mouth," Nietzsche writes, "the author must shut his" (*Assorted Opinions and Maxims* 140; cf. also *Assorted Opinions and Maxims* 157; *Human, All-Too-Human* 197, 208).

Throughout his writings, Nietzsche continues to question the privileged position of the author within the space of interpretation. In the third chapter of *Ecce Homo*, entitled "Why I Write Such Good Books," he openly acknowledges and affirms the consequences of the self-deconstruction of his own literary authority. In the opening sentence, Nietzsche separates himself from his texts: "I am one thing, my writings are another." From here he proceeds to confront the question of "being understood or *not* understood." In the pages that follow we find Nietzsche proudly proclaiming a number of reasons for his writings not being understood, reasons that reflect the problematic relation of the author to his text.

Ultimately, nobody can get more out of things, including books, than he already knows. For what one lacks access to from experience one will have no ear. Now let us imagine an extreme case: that a book speaks of nothing but events that lie altogether beyond the possibility of any frequent or even rare experience—that it is the first language for a new series of experiences. In that case, simply nothing will be heard, but there will be the acoustic illusion that where nothing is heard, *nothing is there...* (*Ecce Homo*, "Why I Write Such Good Books," 1)

This extreme position indicates that there are different ways in which one's

writings are not understood. To understand Nietzsche's writings, as Nietzsche understands them, one would have to be Nietzsche. Yet such an understanding would not, in his view, even be desirable. One might recall here Zarathustra's remark to his followers:

An experimenting and questioning was my every move; – and verily, one must also *learn* to answer such questioning: That however – is my taste:

– not good, not bad, but *my* taste of which I am no longer ashamed and which I have no wish to hide.

"This – is *my* way, – where is yours?" thus I answered those who asked me "the way." For *the* way, that does not exist. (*Zarathustra*, "On the Spirit of Gravity," 2)

Nietzsche does not lament the lack of an identical reproduction of meaning in his readers. Instead, he takes pride in the fact that his contemporary readers "lack the ears" to hear what speaks within his text and he absolves himself of responsibility for having caught no fish with the bait his writings set out.⁹ To be caught by Nietzsche's fish hooks, to experience his writings in the affirmative sense, would result in the reader's being incited to act, to take action toward a transvaluation of values. This does not mean that one must duplicate the Nietzschean transvaluation, however. Instead, Nietzsche invites his readers to bring their own perspectives to the task of transvaluation and he recognizes that whatever he has written will be transformed in the process of perspectival appropriation. As an author, Nietzsche

9 Cf. *Ecce Homo, Beyond Good and Evil* 1: "From this moment forward all my writings are fish hooks: perhaps I understand how to fish as well as anyone?... If nothing was caught, I am not to blame. The fish were missing..."

thus relinquishes his position of authority in favor of a position more conducive to provoking healthy performative responses on the part of his readers. In the concluding section of *Beyond Good and Evil*, one finds Nietzsche expressing a fear that his writings are becoming truths. The reason for Nietzsche's concern is that the communication of truth runs counter to his conception of his function as an author insofar as all truths, including his own, if they are accepted *as* truths, can only serve to inhibit the healthy response of transvaluation that his writings seek to "communicate."

Nietzsche's self-deconstruction of his own authorial-authoritarian subjectivity provides the link between his critique of the traditional view of interpretation and the post-modern critique of the philosophical subject. In emphasizing the dynamic character of the interpretive process, Nietzsche rejects the view of interpretation as a relationship between a subject and an object. For Nietzsche, both "subject" and "object" are themselves already interpretations (cf. *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 12: 7[60]; *Will to Power*, 481), and when he writes that "one may not ask: who then interprets?" (*Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 12: 2[15]; *Will to Power*, 556), it is only because such a question already mislocates the process of interpretation. Likewise, one may not ask "what then is interpreted?" Interpretation is not grounded in either the subject or the object; it exists in the *between*, in the space that separates them. Within this space, subject and object can function only as limits, and the attempt to focus the interpretive process in the direction of either will serve only to obscure the dynamics of

this process and put an unjust end to its interminable play.

When, for his part, Derrida appeals to Nietzsche and the play of interpretive forces, he indicates a means of escape from the closure of authority by adopting a style of writing that affirms multiplicity, play, and difference rather than the traditional logocentric values of subjectivity, univocity, autonomy, and self-identity. The similarity of style in their respective critiques thus betokens a basic similarity in the way they try to subvert the notion of authority. Nietzsche opposes the "tyranny of the true" (*Daybreak*, 507) and he expresses concern that his writings take the appearance of proclamations of truth (cf. *Beyond Good and Evil*, 296). Likewise, Derrida is sensitive to the tendency to privilege undecidables and reify them into foundations for a new philosophical system. For this reason, he moves from one to another, utilizing each for a particular, *strategic* purpose and then leaving them behind. These undecidables have the power to subvert, but they lack the power to command and they can exercise no authority.¹⁰

In *Of Grammatology*, when Derrida deconstructs the writer as a sovereign subject in command of the reserve within language, or when he fractures the "subject of writing" in his discussions of Freud, a Nietzschean "subject" emerges. The classical subject, as a privileged center, thus disappears within the system of relations which is writing (*écriture*): "The 'subject' of writing does not exist if we mean by that some sovereign solitude of the author. The subject of writing is a *system* of relations between strata:

¹⁰ Cf. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 22.

the Mystic Pad, the psyche, society, the world.”¹¹ In dispersing the subject within a system of textual relations, Derrida adopts a Nietzschean strategy of refusing to hypostatize the subject. For Nietzsche, this refusal is grounded in the affirmation of a multiplicity of perspectives, of seeing the world with new and different eyes that animates his philosophy of will to power as active force within the infinite play of becoming. For Derrida, the refusal is grounded in his account of the infinite iterability of the mark and in a theory of contextuality that views the person writing or reading as always already inscribed in a textual network that cannot and will not be dominated absolutely.

What links these two refusals is the emphasis on fluidity of relations, as both Nietzsche and Derrida view the classical concept of the subject as functioning in a way that engenders separation and fixation. In Nietzsche's case, it is the play of relations of forces and the accumulation of power within this play that is blocked by the hypostatization of the subject: the concept of the subject performs only a *preservative* function and to enhance one's life within the innocent, infinite play of becoming, one must refrain from conceiving the subject as a static, enduring substance (cf. *Genealogy of Morals*, I, 13). In Derrida's case, it is the relational “system” of writing/play that resists the classical notion of a subjectivity that functions as a center and limit to this play/writing. Derrida himself acknowledges Nietzsche for pointing the way to an affirmation of the decentered play of writing that disrupts the metaphysics of presence which guides the logocentric tra-

dition. Nietzschean affirmation is “the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation.”¹² Grammatology, the “science” of writing, therefore, will not be a science of man. “Man,” the name bestowed on the subject as center, as the full presence of consciousness in being, must be decentered if there is to be a logic of the *grammē*, which is to say “man” must be deconstructed, must be allowed to play. In Derrida's call for play, we can hear the echo of Zarathustra's final and most important lesson for the higher men in the fourth book of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in which he continues to invite them to learn to play as Zarathustra understands play, that is, to learn to laugh and dance. Zarathustra himself learns this lesson during the Ass Festival, as his companions teach him that he is perhaps succumbing to their entreaties to exercise his authority over them through his teachings. But insofar as the higher men cannot accept Zarathustra's ultimate renunciation of his authority over them, insofar as they cannot hear him when he says “I am a law only for my kind, I am no law for all” (*Zarathustra*, “The Last Supper”), he must leave them behind. And so *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* ends, with Zarathustra alone again, having again renounced his position of authority, a troubling renunciation which has been repeated through the writings and throughout the career of Jacques Derrida, and has continued to frustrate those who have looked to Derrida for clear marching orders on the way toward developing a post-modern politics.

11 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 226-227.

12 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 292.