



Friedrich Nietzsche
(1844 – 1900)

What Nietzsche Means to Philosophers Today?

K&K: What do you take to be the morally and politically most offensive passages in Nietzsche's writings? How do you interpret them? Do you think they are representative of his general attitude toward morality and politics?

Richard Rorty: I am most offended by the passages in which Nietzsche expresses contempt for weakness, and especially by the passages which argue that there is something wrong with Christianity because it originated among slaves. So it did, but those slaves had a good idea: namely, that the ideal human community would be one in which love is the only law. So it would. One can separate this Christian ideal from the *ressentiment* characteristic of the ascetic priests, but Nietzsche never made that distinction.

Paul Patton: Some of his remarks about women are among the most offensive of Nietzsche's writings. I take these to be in-

dications of the extent to which he was a man of his time who could not see beyond the existing cultural forms of the sexual division of humankind. Like the vast majority of nineteenth century European men, Nietzsche could not divorce female affect, intelligence and corporeal capacities from a supposed 'essential' relation to child-bearing. His views on women are representative of his attitude toward morality and politics in the sense that they are in tension with possibilities otherwise opened up by his historical conception of human nature. For example, at times he recognizes that supposedly natural qualities of women or men are really products of particular social arrangements. We can conclude from this, even if he could not, that these qualities are not natural but open to change. In this domain as in other of his social and political views, he was not able to foresee some of the ways in which the very dynamics of human cultural evo-

lution that he identified could lead us into a very different future.

Teodor Münz: Some chapters in the works: Will to Power, Beyond Good and Evil, and The Antichrist are relevant here. In them, Nietzsche outlines his philosophy of revaluing all values, and his philosophy of the superman. I cannot identify with his emphasis on physical violence, ruthlessness, lies, systematic selection of humanity, with his thesis that the „majority of people have no right to existence, but are a burden for the higher“, or with his racism and with other „virtues“ such as the means for achieving the power of strong individuals over the weak. I think that these views are key to, and representative of, his conception of morality and politics.

František Novosád: Especially in the last phases of his development, Nietzsche appears to have lost his sense of proportion, particularly in relation to Christianity and the conceptual formations he considered to be derived from Christianity. His analysis of them quickly changes into criticism and condemnation. The typical book from this period is The Antichrist. In this book, Christianity is presented exclusively as a religion of resentment, as a sublimation of the anger of the powerless, as the poison that destroyed ancient culture and which is now destroying modern Western society. Nietzsche formulated the majority of his “offensive” statements precisely in the context of his analysis of the impact of Christianity on the mentality of the modern person. I think there is no special reason to interpret these passages from Nietzsche’s works, or give them justifying explanations. He thought what

he wrote. When he said that: “The weak and unsuccessful have to perish ... and it is necessary to help them perish”, this was what he thought. Obviously, we find many passages in his works in which he considers the pre-conditions and possible - perhaps also unwanted - consequences of his views. We could play endlessly the game of balancing the offensive and stimulating passages in his texts, if we had enough patience. Extreme statements, or pushing of a view to the extreme, are, however, one of the basic principles of Nietzsche’s method. Until the end of his life he had an adolescent taste for provoking people, for striking at what we usually consider obvious. Without these passages that are so offensive to the ear of the humanistically thinking person, we would not have the other passages, where Nietzsche brings to the surface long hidden truths, or breaks age-old taboos of thought. I think that Nietzsche’s analysis of resentment needs to be put in more historically adequate proportions. Resentment is really an effective historic and social force, but it certainly cannot entirely explain Christianity and it is certainly not found only in Christianity. In reality, every society has its “underside”, and the mentality of this underside has a magical attraction for almost every society, so that it can very easily come to the “top”. Nietzsche was one of the first to realize that the mentality of the “underside”, of the lumpenproletariat, was becoming the prevailing mentality in European societies. I don’t know if it would have pleased him that his most enthusiastic readers or “half-readers” were found among the lumpen-aristocracy. Today’s liberal democracies have abandoned social education and so actually opened the space for fanatics or for lumpenbourgeois,

lumpenaristocratic and lumpenproletarian nihilism.

Jan Sokol: Nietzsche was a great man and deserves a just assessment. He was solitary, sensitive and extremely deep, perhaps also something of a victim of romanticism. His illnesses and failures must have played a role in his decision to „philosophize with a hammer“. Nietzsche is to be read by mature, discerning people: he provokes, offends and strives to arouse the reader to think for himself. And we cannot hold him responsible for what we know today, but he could not have known. In spite of this, he wrote things, which one reads with horror: about the “too many”, who should be swept away by whirlwinds. – Also, some of his statements about the Jews are disturbing – that cannot be denied. But it is very difficult to find his overall position. It is carefully hidden in the depths of an injured romantic heart, and can be read only between the lines.

Leslie Paul Thiele: To read through Nietzsche’s corpus and not find something that would be offensive to virtually every imaginable group or personality is not to have read his work carefully. Ruffling feathers - and occasionally plucking them out - became an art form with Nietzsche. That is not to suggest that he did not mean every word he wrote. But he may not have believed wholeheartedly in his “truths” long after announcing them. Rather, as a consistent perspectivist, he meant what he said, but felt no need to corral all of his opinions and sensibilities into an enduring, coherent, and homogeneous moral stance or political platform.

With that said, I might pick Nietzsche’s

statement from *Beyond Good and Evil* as particularly troubling: “A people is a detour of nature to get to six or seven great men. – Yes: and then to get around them.”¹ Nietzsche certainly knew better than to have made such an irresponsible remark. It marks an offensive lapse in intellectual probity and invites mischief of all sorts. What an abominable slur on nature!

After all, Nietzsche understood, better than most that nature was above teleology. It has no designs, no destinations, and therefore can make no detours - to get to a half-dozen great men, or beyond them.

K&K: To what extent do you think Nietzsche is responsible for the appropriation of his ideas by the Nazis? Do you think that Nietzsche’s politics can and/or should be divorced from his philosophy?

Rorty: I think Nietzsche is guiltless of encouraging the Nazis. No thinker can afford to worry about what use will be made of his ideas in the future. Nietzsche, like Heidegger, is useless as a commentator on the political situation of their times. Neither had political opinions worth taking seriously.

Patton: I do not believe Nietzsche bears any personal responsibility for the appropriation of his ideas by Nazism. I do believe that his work included much that lent itself to the crude biopolitical interpretation of ‘higher men’, but the same is true of much late nineteenth century social thought influenced by Darwinism. On

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1972), p. 81.

the one hand, the conditions of possibility of theories of racial hierarchy are deeply rooted in European culture and the disastrous effects of such thinking are not confined to the Holocaust: they include, for example, the devastating consequences of European colonization in many parts of the world. On the other hand, Nazis alone bear responsibility for the manner in which they put such theories into practice. To the extent that Nietzsche was often incapable of pursuing the implications of his historical and naturalistic understanding of human nature and human culture beyond the polemical struggles and social forms of the European society of his time, I do think his own politics should be distinguished from his philosophy. Or, to put it another way, his philosophy does provide significant and under-utilised resources for a different approach to politics and the political organization of society.

Münz: Nietzsche is not responsible for the appropriation of his ideas by the Nazis. He only proclaimed his philosophy. On the other hand, the Nazis adopted his ideas when they wanted to take revenge on the world for their humiliation during and after the First World War, and to gain world domination. At the same time, Nietzsche scorned the Germans much more than he exalted them. I do not think that his expressions about politics are an organic component of his philosophy. If we could separate them, the purely philosophical part would remain great. It has not lost its value until today.

Peter Bergmann: Nietzsche was among the most historically minded of philosophers. He famously contextualized

his predecessors, beginning with Socrates. He himself can be seen as the philosopher of the later Bismarckian era. He went mad the year Hitler was born. Insofar as the crack-up of the Second Reich explains the catastrophe of the Third Reich, the question of Nietzsche's posthumous influence is a legitimate one. Had he lived as long as his sister he would have experienced the onset of the Third Reich. He was not a marginal figure. He was trained in Prussia's elite academy, volunteered in the Franco-Prussian War, and gained early notoriety as a champion of Wagnerian cultural nationalism, only to reverse himself. He became an aristocratic radical struggling to disassociate himself from his anti-Semitic publisher and his demagogic brother-in-law.

Alan D. Schrift: This is a complex question which has broad hermeneutic implications. On the one hand, Nietzsche chose to write in a style that invites misunderstanding – his use of metaphor, dissimulation, and hyperbole in particular, all make it easier for his words to be taken to mean something other than what he might have intended (assuming that one can know what he intended in any definitive way, which I think is not the case). That said, there is no question in my mind that the Nazis willfully misappropriated Nietzsche's language and engaged in a level of textual and editorial corruption to allow Nietzsche to apparently say anti-Semitic comments that he never in fact said. As I have argued in print, Nietzsche says some things that are hostile to Jews. But they pale in comparison to his criticisms of anti-Semites and anti-Semitism. And I think that when read in context,

many of his most anti-Semitic comments are in fact rhetorically placed to situate Christianity as the most rotten of “Jewish” fruits.

On the question of whether Nietzsche’s politics can or should be divorced from his philosophy, this presumes that we know what his politics were. In some passages, he is quite sympathetic to democracy, for example, while in other passages he is critical of democracy. In his criticisms of democratic mediocrity, he shares a concern with some of the great advocates of democracy, including Jefferson, Madison, Tocqueville, Emerson, and Mill, all of whom were concerned about a possible “tyranny of the majority.” The US Senate and “Electoral College” were both created because the founders of the US Constitution had concerns about giving the “masses” direct political power, and their reasons were quite compatible with Nietzsche’s critique of the democratic/socialist/Christian “herd.”

Novosád: There is not a more poisonous question than that of the relationship between Nietzsche and Nazism. Whoever has at least a secondary school level of knowledge of the history of Europe in the last two centuries knows that fascism and Nazism were not the “implementation” of Nietzsche’s ideas, and that Nietzsche’s was not the official philosophy of the Third Reich. Another thing is that there really were a lot of eloquent professors of philosophy, who put their knowledge of Nietzsche’s works at the service of the regime. I consider another question more legitimate: that of the degree to which Nietzsche’s thinking helps us to interpret fascism and, actually, also communism.

The 19th century appeared to be a century of stabilization, with scientific, industrial and social progress. However, Nietzsche and before him also Marx guessed, or actually knew, that Europe was really a powder keg and one spark was enough to bring a series of catastrophes to humanity.

Sokol: He is, but also he is not, responsible. It appears today that he should have paid attention to what he wrote. But behind all his tough and vicious words – he himself was a shy, warm-hearted and quiet person, who was called the “hermit” by his neighbors in Sils Maria – you can find him being horrified to see the abyss to where the civilized humanity was heading. And it is the misfortune of fervent critics that they are often misused. As far as I can judge, Nietzsche actually had no coherent political position and did not at all realize – in a way perhaps similar to Marx, for example - what damage radical philosophical views could cause if implemented into real politics and tailored accordingly. That is a burden that all “aristocrats of thought” must bear. Only in one place, I think in On the Genealogy of Morals, he utters, just in passing, the following about his critics: “You don’t like the government – but do you think that you at all deserve it?” He means that we should – especially the critics – keep remembering sometimes what a blessing almost any government is for us, especially if we realize that for its creation we did almost nothing, hence hardly deserve it. This is truly a major political idea forgotten since the time of Hobbes or Burke.

Thiele: To the extent that politics is equated with statecraft, there can be little doubt as to Nietzsche’s attitude. The

state he considered to be a threat to the (development of the) higher individual, and the higher individual to be a threat to the state. True greatness is apolitical or even anti-political. Nietzsche claims to have written his works in a way that made them unlikely to be exploited for political purposes, neither useful nor pleasant to read for the masses or for political parties.

² But exploited they were, presumably not by the “rightful readers” for whom Nietzsche explicitly wrote.³

Obviously, Nietzsche’s audience was larger and less worthy than expected. But what would it mean to hold him responsible for the scurrilous uses to which his writings were put? We might want to investigate, following Nietzsche’s recommendation, the psychological effect and purpose of this moral accounting. Why do we feel the need for laying of blame and for such retroactive shop-keeping? Nietzsche has much to teach us here.

Perhaps we are simply saying that things might have gone better in the 20th Century had Nietzsche been more prudent? That may be true, though there is no way of really knowing it. But would we be willing to trade in Nietzsche with all his fecund outrages for a kinder, gentler variety of man? Would a Nietzsche of moderation who pulled his punches and was politically savvy even be recognizable as Nietzsche?

It might be more psychologically reassuring for us if Nietzsche was understandable as a fellow democrat, liberal, or pacifist. But to achieve such a reading would

bowdlerize Nietzsche almost as badly as did the Nazis in painting him as an anti-Semitic, war-prone, Teutonic nationalist. Nietzsche is Nietzsche; his works were written as a justification of his being so. I’m not against a reader holding a writer responsible for her words, just as long as playing at judge does not keep him from reading seriously.

K&K: Is Nietzsche’s critique of egalitarianism useful and/or relevant to contemporary debates about liberal democracy?

Rorty: Nietzsche’s critique of egalitarianism is unoriginal and uninteresting. Experience has shown that high culture, and the expression of individual genius, remains possible even in mass democracies, countries in which the rulers are chosen by the mob. None of the 18th- and 19th century predictions that mob rule would result in the vulgarization of thought and life have come true.

Patton: Nietzsche’s critique of egalitarianism is extremely relevant to contemporary debates about liberal democracy. On the one hand, there is no consensus among contemporary theorists of liberal democracy with regard to the answer to Amartya Sen’s question: ‘equality of what?’ On the other hand, liberal democratic theory has little to say about the many ways in which people are unequal, or about the kinds of political relationships that ought to obtain between unequal beings (humans as well as other animals). Liberal democracy tends to ignore differences of personality, taste, values, cultural outlook and behavior that affect the capacity of an individual

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, all too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 327-328.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1968), p. 114.

to 'expend all its power and achieve its maximal feeling of power' (GM III: 7). It tends to extrapolate from the political equality of persons to the moral equality of their respective conceptions of the good, subject of course to the proviso that they do not infringe certain minimal standards of avoidance of harm to others or 'reasonableness'. It thereby leaves out of account the important differences between ways of life and character that materially affect the capacity of individuals to make use of their freedom, except insofar as these can be attributed to circumstances for which they are not responsible, in which case compensation in some form may be due. Beyond that, people's choices are their own responsibility and liberalism makes no judgment on the value of particular choices or grounds for choice. The presumption of equality allows liberal democratic government to avoid taking responsibility for choices that may be destructive, harmful or disabling for individuals.

By contrast, Nietzsche's historical conception of human nature as a complex biological and cultural phenomenon (expression of will to power) allows him to draw qualitative distinctions between different ways of being and acting. A crucial element of his understanding of human nature is the *feeling of power*. This feeling of power is an essential aspect of human agency as it develops over time. The layers of feeling and interpretation in every human action imply a complex relationship between the increase or decrease in the power of an individual and his or her resultant feeling of power. As the long history of magical, superstitious and religious practices shows, there is no nec-

essary connection between a heightened feeling of power and actual increase of power. Nietzsche's hypothesis in On The Genealogy of Morals (GM) is that those activities which have hitherto most contributed to a heightened feeling of power - all forms of activity directed towards the Good as this, is defined by the slave moralities of Christianity - do not enhance but may even undermine the power of the 'type man' (GM Preface 6). And because what is experienced as diminished feeling of power (suffering) may in fact be a means to the enhancement of an individual's capacities, Nietzsche insists upon the importance of suffering and on the shortsightedness of those who advocate the elimination of suffering in all its forms (for example, Beyond Good and Evil 225).

By failing to see the possible asymmetry between increased *feeling* of power and increased *actual* power, Nietzsche's critics fail to see that his qualitative distinctions between stronger and weaker forms of life, active and reactive forms of will to power, do not imply that human nature necessarily involves hostile forms of exercise of power over others. Thus, while in Daybreak (18) he points out that one of the most common ways to achieve the feeling of power throughout history has been the forms of cruelty practiced upon others in the course of entertainment, punishment or homage to the gods; in The Gay Science (13), he suggests that doing harm to others is a lesser means of producing a feeling of power in oneself than are acts of benevolence towards them. In other words, the desire to hurt others is a means of obtaining the feeling of power characteristic of relatively weak human beings. In so far as the history of

culture has involved a history of cruelty towards others, it is because it has been overwhelmingly a history of slavish type of human beings whose primary mode of acting is reactive and negative.

Enhancing one's feeling of power by assisting or benefiting others is a characteristic of relatively strong or 'noble' types. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE), the noble types are defined by their power over themselves rather than by their power over others: "In the foreground, there is the feeling of fullness, of power that wants to overflow, the happiness associated with a high state of tension, the consciousness of a wealth that wants to make gifts and give away. The noble person helps the unfortunate too, although not (or hardly ever) out of pity, but rather more out of an impulse generated by the over-abundance of power" (BGE 260). There are many ways of assisting or benefiting others that may enhance the feeling of power of those assisting, at the expense of the feeling of power of those assisted. Christian charity is one of Nietzsche's favored examples, but a modern secular equivalent is the varieties of passive welfare payment or what Aboriginal people in Australia call 'sit-down money.' The difficulty for the higher type endowed with the 'gift-giving' virtue, exemplified by the figure of Zarathustra, is to find ways of enhancing the power of others that also enhance their feeling of power rather than that of the one giving.

In *Daybreak* (23), Nietzsche suggests that it is precisely the weakness of human beings that has made the feeling of power one of the most subtle human capacities: '... because the feeling of impotence and fear was in a state of almost continuous stimulation so strongly and for so long,

the *feeling of power* has evolved to such a degree of *subtlety* that in this respect man is now a match for the most delicate gold-balance. It has become his strongest propensity; the means discovered for creating this feeling almost constitute the history of culture.' The history of political culture understood in these terms has much to offer contemporary liberal democratic theory. It allows us to see that the traditional accounts of the basis and extent of political authority appeal above all to the fear and impotence of the individuals who make up the political community. It allows us to raise different questions about the nature of political authority and institutions in a community of sovereign individuals. Because Nietzsche's critique of modern egalitarianism is directed above all at the cultural and psychological dimensions of personhood, it is not inconsistent with a commitment to strict equality in relation to the legal and political dimensions of personhood. But it does provide support for a kind of moral perfectionism that is otherwise absent from contemporary liberal democratic theory.

Münz: Even if it is little considered today, it was important for the development of liberal democracy, because democracy must respect some sort of "egalitarianism", for example, equal laws for all, equal rights, equal opportunities and so on, which Nietzsche attacked as a expressions of the self-interest of the weak, of slaves, thrown to the margin by life. However, he also pointed to important things, from which it was possible to learn. He says, for example, that "we are already accustomed to *teaching* about the equality of man, but not to actual equality." That is an observa-

tion which liberal democracy must constantly think about.

Schrift: I address this in the previous answer. But to be more specific, I think his critique of egalitarianism—which he shares with Plato, I might add—is quite relevant to the current debate about democracy in the US. It might be argued that democracy is no longer working in the US, in part because the polarization of the right and left is allowing an extremely small number of voters to in fact determine which party is in power. I myself question whether the fact that George W. Bush was re-elected in 2004 after having arguably lost and then stolen the election in 2000, and having invented an excuse to pursue a military venture that has proved disastrous for both the Middle East and the US, and which put the US at odds with the rest of the civilized world, is evidence that Nietzsche was correct in his criticism of egalitarianism.

Bergmann: Nietzsche was anti-liberal to the point of malice, not so much in the sense of wanting to thwart democracy's rise, but rather by assuming the stance of a post-democratic critic anxious to undermine its hegemony. The triumph of the people and the new woman were at hand or so he claimed. Bismarck and Wagner, in their different ways, marginalized the liberal tradition of 1848. Nietzsche's reaction expressed the eclipse of German liberalism in his lifetime. In 1888 he mourned the death of the last hope of German liberalism, Emperor Frederick III.

Novosád: It is necessary to make some distinctions here. Still, the fact is that

Nietzsche identified the danger of a certain type of egalitarianism, namely egalitarianism nourished by resentment. Something like the “slave mentality” really exists and in very cultivated forms. It really is a poison that disintegrates any culture.

Sokol: It seems to me that Nietzsche does not criticize egalitarianism, but rather a sort of shapelessness, comfortableness and inability to stand on one's own feet and think with one's own head. At first sight Nietzsche sounds authoritarian, yet in *Zarathustra* he says: “Poets lie too much – and Zarathustra is also a poet.” He provides no explanations, makes no doubt about his own position and rams his arguments left and right. But in fact, he desperately waits for somebody somewhere to stand up and begin to defend all those glorious values – yet there is silence. “Everything deserves to perish,” everything is in vain, but not to Nietzsche. True, it is hardly possible to derive from his work any political philosophy, but it is priceless as a shocking wake up call during indolent times and among indifferent people, who have no idea what is happening to them and what is in fact coming to engulf them. Nietzsche is not a good adviser or a teacher, but rather an eschatological prophet. The fact that much of his prophecy has been fulfilled is not entirely his fault.

Thiele: To the extent that the belief in equality ends the struggle for growth, Nietzsche argues, it constitutes “a principle *hostile to life*, an agent of dissolution and destruction of man, an attempt to assassinate the future of man, a sign of weariness, a secret path to nothingness.”⁴

4 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 76.

Obviously, liberal democracy cannot look to Nietzsche as its founding father or cheerleader. But it may find in him a worthy critic. And, in some respects, we liberal democrats can best appropriate Nietzsche as an internal critic.

In *Human, All Too Human*, we read that “Everyone has his good days where he discovers his higher self; and true humanity demands that everyone be evaluated only in the light of this condition and not that of his working-day un-freedom and servitude.... Many live in awe and abasement before their ideal and would like to deny it: they are afraid of their higher self because when it speaks it speaks imperiously. It possesses, moreover, a spectral freedom to come or to stay away as it wishes; on this account it is often called a gift of the gods, whereas in reality it is everything else that is a gift of the gods (of chance): this however is man himself.”⁵ Such lines might have been written by Emerson, Thoreau, or Whitman, the American theorist-poets of democratic culture. To celebrate the best in the human experience is implicitly to redeem the ideal, if not the practice, of democracy. And if the practice of liberal democracy and egalitarianism has us assuming the worst rather than the best in human being, then Nietzsche’s critique offers a useful tonic.

All too often, we organize ourselves politically - in campaigns, parties, policies, and institutions - based on the lowest level to which people in their working-day un-freedom and servitude will stoop. A politics that appeals to the least common

denominator is certainly not everything democracy might be.

K&K: How do you understand Nietzsche’s conception of the “Death of God”? Are his attacks on monotheistic religions, and all those ideologies which claim to take God’s place still tenable today?

Rorty: I think Nietzsche was right that human life would be better if we could get rid of God – of the idea of a superhuman power that deserves our respect and obedience. It would make for greater human happiness if we all believed that we owe respect to nothing except our fellow humans. I see the rejection of metaphysics (a rejection common to Heidegger) as owing a great deal to Nietzsche, and as a praiseworthy intellectual movement.

Münz: I understand it very broadly, like other expressions of his thesis on the need to revalue all values. For him, the death of God does not mean only atheism, but everything connected with the old theistic way of thinking, including pre-Nietzschean atheism. It is necessary to give up not only God, but also the old metaphysics and rationalism, while turning to sensualism, not scorning life but affirming it. It is necessary to reject the old Judeo-Christian morality and even the old theory of knowledge, according to which an outside reality, independent of us, whether God, matter or anything else, is knowable. Nietzsche was influenced by Darwin here. Nietzsche went to the opposite extreme in morality and politics. I think that his attacks on monotheistic religion are still topical. Let us mention the

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, all too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 19.

difficulties the world is having with Islam today. And, were not Hitler and Stalin worshipped like gods? People's tendency to worship human gods is still very much alive.

Schrift: I certainly hope his attack on religion, and monotheistic religions in particular, are still tenable today, as I agree with much of his critique, which shares many points with the critiques of Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud.

The “death of God” can be understood in several ways.

- As the loss of faith in a personal, creator-God which Nietzsche felt was the inevitable response of post-Enlightenment, post-Darwinian culture.
- As a rejection of the absolute foundation of traditional morality.
- As the “essence” of Christianity, as Feuerbach would put it.

Bergmann: Nietzsche's atheism was couched in the language of regret: God is dead; we have killed him; nihilism, alas, is our fate; let us be strong and go forward, etc. It was coupled with the sense that the eclipse of Christian culture was creating a vacuum that would breed new fanaticisms. In this sense he attacked nationalism as a new secular religion.

Novosád: It is impossible to give a brief answer to this question. It involves a very complicated philosophy of history, or a judgement of the history of Western civilization. With some simplification, it is possible to suppose that what Nietzsche wanted to say with his conception of the “death of God” is that religion and especially Christianity had lost its real, formative strength. In the Euro-Atlantic region,

religion had become a matter of culture, tradition or mere ornament. From the end of the 18th century, Christianity only reacted to new historical tendencies and it reacted only with several decades of delay. The fact that the ideologies that claimed to replace Christianity have failed one after the other does not provide convincing evidence of the strength of Christianity, but only of the weakness of its opponents. When I speak of the weakness of Christianity, I have in mind Christianity as a force shaping society, not Christianity as the faith of an individual.

Sokol: I began to read Nietzsche only as an adult, but at first sight it was clear to me that he is speaking from horror and dismay. The “death of God” comes from Hegel and, of course, from Christian theology. Such a terrible sentence – and all act as if nothing has happened. “We have killed him”, Nietzsche adds, but “can we afford it?” All pretend to be Christians but, in fact, they care about nothing, take nothing seriously, and only remain content and idle because they are doing just fine. Would Nietzsche's blasphemy at least wake them up? One aphorism has the title: “How did the true God become a sham” -- Christianity tamed God until he became something nebulous, demanding nothing from anybody. That is the “death of God”, according to Nietzsche. And to him, anyone not disturbed by this, is a “nihilist”. I am afraid that this is *status quo* today - not as a “criticism of God”, (that would be utter nonsense) but of human indifference and apathy. Albeit, lacking these, all the religious and pseudo-religious ideologies would lack their main ingredient – malleable human material.

Thiele: Nietzsche offers us two choices: we can pursue an active nihilism, or we can accept a passive nihilism. The latter ensues from a “hatred against life.” The former arises out of a gratitude for life. The latter nihilist is the last man, the murderer of God, whom Zarathustra accuses: “You could not *endure* him who saw *you* – who saw you unblinking, and through and through, you ugliest man! You took revenge upon this witness.”⁶ Though seldom recognized for this role, Nietzsche sets himself the task of hunting down the murderer of God. Once he is tried and convicted, Nietzsche hopes to elevate in his stead the active, creative nihilist. This life-affirming nihilist manages to confront worldly suffering without slandering worldly life.

To explain away suffering as punishment for sins committed, or as a promissory note to be redeemed for happiness in an afterlife is, effectively, to deprecate life. Life is growth, and growth is self-overcoming. Shedding old skin is not painless.

Nietzsche did not claim responsibility for the death of God, but he showed us how to celebrate the wake. The Nietzschean project was to establish a passion for growth and greatness in a world without gods. That project requires us to engage in the art of judgment. It requires judgment in the absence of final adjudicators sporting white beards. It requires judgment without the benefit of a god’s eye view from which our verdicts might be rendered with certainty.

The question Nietzsche posed (but often failed to exemplify himself) is how

do we cultivate the art of judgment while simultaneously counteracting the resentment, projections, fears, and ego-investments that make us (morally) judgmental? Yes, this challenging project of cultivating judgment is particularly necessary today, in an age of rising fundamentalism and intolerance.

How do we learn to judge well without undermining our gratitude for worldly life? No small feat. One worthy of the gods.

K&K: How do you understand Nietzsche’s project of the revaluation of all values? Do you think that it commits him to moral and cultural nihilism? In particular, what do you make of Nietzsche’s critique of “herd values”?

Rorty: I think that “transvaluation of all values” is too ambitious a slogan. We do not need a revolution in our moral thinking. We have been making great moral progress in recent centuries by piecemeal reforms. To further such reform is our best hope for the future.

Münz: To put it simply, I understand it as an attempt to install the opposite of what was and still is: to install the truth according to Nietzsche. Nietzsche was a psychoanalyst. He immersed himself in the human interior. He sought the foundations of the old moral values and found them mostly in the sublimated effort of the “herd” to gain power over the strong individuals. In contrast to them, he attempted to establish his true values: the morality of the master. I think that this does not place him in a position of moral and cultural nihilism. He did not only say “No”, he did

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1969), p. 276.

not only demolish, he also built. He established his own philosophy. It is possible to speak of nihilism only from the point of view of the old world-view, which he really endeavoured to entirely demolish.

Bergmann: Nietzsche was the culture hero of modernism, a cultural revolution comparable to the Reformation or the Enlightenment. His critique of herd values is reflected in the posture of the avant-garde: elitist to the present, democratic to the future. Nietzsche exalted the superman who scorned the mass, but he also played the role of a Zarathustra bringing the flock a new gospel affirming life.

Novosád: Nietzsche is least original where his criticism of herd values is concerned. If we look at the work of any important 19th century thinker, we find criticism of herd values, of pseudo-individualism, of levelling or of alienation. What needs to be noted here is that criticism of herd values should not turn into an expression of resentment on the part of those who regard themselves as the representatives of a higher culture. We can consider it almost self-evident that we live in an age of the “revaluation of all values”. Even Christianity is participating in this revaluation. In spite of its real or supposed conservatism, even the Catholic Church is different, very different from what it was in the 19th century. For Nietzsche, nihilism is the problem not the solution. He actually has no solution. What he considers as a solution – the idea of the superman – is actually a phantom, an illusion. He rightly considers that the quality of individual social formations can be measured according to the conditions

they create for the “success of individuals”, but he does not offer any criteria, which would enable us to decide, who “succeeded” or who was successful – Nietzsche or Gandhi.

Sokol: To regard Nietzsche as a nihilist is a mistake, an unobservant reading. He was rather an excessively sensitive person horrified by a world where nothing has rules and stands for nothing. Indeed, a „nihilist“ is a curse word thrown at others. Nietzsche occasionally calls even himself a nihilist, but for an entirely different reason: everybody has a mouth full of values, but in reality they all behave like cattle, like a well-fed „herd“. What they call „values“ are only wooden idols which overthrow themselves. People do not seek any “values”; rather they follow the others like the herd. It is also true today that only what is rare, difficult, risky and demanding has value, and we all avoid these things. We prefer to wait for how things turn out.

In one matter Nietzsche, like Heidegger, may be mistaken. It is, in fact, extremely difficult for us today to step courageously out of the “herd” (Heidegger’s “das Man”, or in present-day terms “the mainstream”). For a person to dare to do this, he needs at least the hope that failure will not mean personal catastrophe. The economy is well equipped for this: it has “limited liability companies”, insurance and bankruptcy regulations. But in the realms of morality and of personal evaluation, the person has lost, together with Christianity, such concepts as repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. Without them, it is difficult to risk losing – especially when, as Pascal says, we do not lack much.

Thiele: Nietzsche wrote: “My philosophy aims at an ordering of rank: not at an individualistic morality. The ideas of the herd should rule in the herd – but not reach out beyond it.”⁷ Revaluing all values is not rejecting all values. When Nietzsche reevaluates our moral habits, he underlines how they become obstacles to freedom when they serve as final destinations. But that is not to reject their uses and benefits. They can be well exploited ... as stepping stones.

The highest in rank give evidence of a constant striving for excellence. This striving produces endemic change in the individual who is involved in the project of overcoming himself. Just as there is a role for personal habits, and for a need to go beyond them in all self-overcoming, so there is a need for herd values, and a need to go beyond them. Herd values, which I understand to be moral habits conducive to a common life, are precious achievements that contribute to our personal and social constitutions. Though Nietzsche is often read as advocating their wholesale abandonment, I believe he understood the need to build upon them.

“Let us live above ourselves,” Nietzsche advocated in a letter, “in order that we may be able to live with ourselves.”⁸ To live above oneself is to rise above the habitual and herd-like. But, in the end, the goal is to live with oneself, including all those personal and social habits that make one a unique individual and human

being. The purpose of human life is not the establishment of a utopia in which the victorious forces of radical individualism and free spiritedness have eliminated all herd values and personal habits. Life has no purpose but itself. The battle between individual spirit and herd-like habits is not a prelude to some future state of tensionless existence. The good life is a life of daily struggle with the habitual and herd-like in each of us, a struggle that does not deprecate what it seeks to surpass. Such deprecation would constitute a defamation of life.

I’ve written about Nietzsche in terms of the politics of the soul.⁹ The basic assumption is that anything Nietzsche says about external, worldly politics is a reflection of his hopes and fears concerning his own internal constitution. Likewise, the psycho-spiritual self-overcoming that he charts with such acuity in his writings, find their models in worldly power struggles. So, my claim here is that the order of rank that Nietzsche celebrates is meant to be achieved first and foremost within one’s own soul. In this internal constitution, Nietzsche acknowledges, herd values have their place. Like personal habits, they serve as stable foundations that allow for the flight of free spirit. Take away the tarmac, and you never get off the ground.

K&K: What do you think is the relevance of Nietzsche’s attacks on nationalism today?

Rorty: I do not think Nietzsche’s criticisms of nationalism are of any particular importance. Nationalism is a very

7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 162.

8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe Briefwechsel*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1975-1984), letter of March 11, 1882.

9 Leslie Paul Thiele, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul: A Study of Heroic Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

bad thing, but we learn what is dangerous about it by studying history, not through philosophical reflection.

Münz: I think they are still relevant. Nationalism is still alive, especially in today's "mixing of races", which Nietzsche foresaw. He also perceived the process of the "origin of the European", in which he saw anti-nationalist tendencies, but he pointed out, rather perceptively, that this levelling and averaging of people could stimulate the origin of an "exceptional person with the most dangerous and captivating qualities", because the newly created slaves would need a master. With a little ill-will, we can see in this the origin of Nazism; or rather, the Nazis could also adopt this idea and call themselves the master race.

Schrift: I think Nietzsche's attack on nationalism is very relevant, especially in terms of the new project of the EU. I think his call for "good Europeans" is based on ideas that current thinkers, trying to escape the legacy of the European nation-states, would do well to explore.

Bergmann: Nietzsche invoked the good European at the nadir of European cosmopolitanism. He was a defeatist toward the Bismarckian project of German ascendancy and skeptical about the United States (one fragment contained the phrase "No American future!") He reflected the Europeanism of the modernist movement of which he was leading figure.

Novosád: As far as I know Nietzsche's work, the criticism of nationalism, of national limitations, of German limitations, may be the most positive thing in

his instructive texts. I even think that Nietzsche's considerations of the genesis of nations and of modern nationalism still have relevance today. Today we understand better his thesis that nations are not fixed natural phenomena, but human creations.

Sokol: On the one hand, these attacks confirm that Nietzsche was not a conventional chauvinist or racist in today's sense. On the other hand, it seems to me that he very much under-estimated nationalism and regarded it with contempt. He did not worry about where it was actually going and what it was expressing, why it was so strong in precisely his period. It did not occur to him that it could become a substitute "value" for the shapeless "herd" and cause so much havoc. Therefore, we do not get very far with Nietzsche in this area.

K&K: What do you think Nietzsche's attitude would be to the way in which liberal democracy has evolved in the last century? Do you think that his pessimism about the future of "democratic man" were unjustified?

Rorty: Nietzsche never let himself be bothered by the facts, so a resuscitated Nietzsche probably would not have been willing to listen to people pointing out that democracy has done pretty well in the century since his death. I do not think there is such a thing as "democratic man". Democracy is a way of ordering human affairs -- the best way so far invented. But this way of ordering affairs does not presuppose, nor does it create, a particular kind of human being.

Patton: Nietzsche would be highly critical of the manner in which liberal democracy has evolved into a form of government of the many by the few on the basis of fear, moral panic and crude forms of economic self-interest. He might even argue that the egalitarian approach to ends and ways of life serves a political purpose in helping to maintain a predominantly passive and compliant population. But whatever the limits of this egalitarianism, it sustains forms of political freedom that allow for the development of critical responses. There are signs that liberal democracy too will evolve in ways that encourage more active and responsible citizenship. To the extent that liberal democracy allows for the further evolution of the human animal along with its cultural and political forms, there are grounds for optimism about the future.

Münz: I think he would criticize it more as the further decline of the contemporary person, and so, he would point to an even greater need for the superman. Or, he would re-emphasize the importance of personalities of the past he considered to be great and strong, such as Napoleon, Cesare Borgia and others. At the same time, Nietzsche might consider that democracy also enables the growth of great personalities. This would come about as a result of natural selection. Liberal democracy also respects the natural inequality in the abilities of individuals. But it does so on the basis of entirely different assumptions than those accepted by Nietzsche. Nietzsche's pessimism about the future of democratic man may have been unjustified. Life developed in a direction that Nietzsche did not foresee – partly through

the efforts of “the people”, not through the *dictates* of individuals like Nietzsche, Franco, Hitler or Stalin.

Schrift: Here I have to repeat my earlier point: the fact that Hitler was popularly elected in Germany, or the fact that George W. Bush was re-elected in 2004 after having arguably lost and then stolen the election in 2000, and after having engaged in a series of policy decisions that were unwise, indeed largely “un-American,” and also to a great extent known to have been based on lies and ideological commitments that had little connection with the geo-political realities of the day, points to the fact that Nietzsche's pessimism about “democratic man” might be more than justified.

Bergmann: Nietzsche's pessimism proved prescient, but his prophecies presumed the forces of his time, nationalism and socialism, and they played themselves out in the twentieth century. We live in a post-Nietzschean century.

Novosád: I am not sure that Nietzsche really understood the political processes of his time. When we look more closely at his texts - which, at least nominally, relate to his time - we find that they are mostly variations of ancient texts. Nietzsche's criticism of democracy is only a recycling of the views of Plato and Aristotle. It is not a result of original analyses of the political development of modern society. He did not read newspapers, he read Plato. He remained a follower of Plato as far as social views were concerned (although he considered himself to be, and actually was, an opponent of Plato's ontology and episte-

mology). This appears to be the source of his view that the cultivation of one group is possible only at the expense of the enslavement and barbarization of another group. This is why he considered the idea of equality to be an obstacle to the formation of “successful personalities”. He could scarcely imagine the combination of liberalism and democracy. It is quite possible that he would not have rejected this combination, but would have accepted it as a possibility. Nietzsche saw democracy only as the spread of a consumerist approach to life. He remained blind to the possibility that democracy could further one’s capacity to make decisions about what style of life to adopt.

Sokol: Nietzsche was a conservative romantic who attached great importance to his honor, level of thinking, education and so on. As an aristocrat, he despised the uneducated rabble (*der Pöbel*), just as Hegel had done. His attitude to democracy is similar to that of Plato and Hobbes: the majority cannot be right. However, the modern state is faced with a different problem: how to maintain civil peace in a society, where people have so little in common. All we have are our rights and with that, all is going well for us. He certainly did not share the generosity with which democracy grants an equal voice to all. In other words, he did not accept and understand that completely basic axiom, which I know from Thomas Aquinas: that good tends to spread more than evil. Somebody who does not accept this must have the same reservation towards democracy and freedom as Hobbes, Bentham or Nietzsche.

The word “pessimism” fits Schopenhauer, or today perhaps Mary Midgley,

who preaches that man must reconcile himself with the world as it is and simply abandon responsibility for society and for the future. This is at best a sort of comfortable, and – forgive me – “Buddhist” way. But this is certainly not Nietzsche’s case. Wherever he attacks or assaults, it is always in the secret hope that somewhere he will find somebody who will bravely stand up for all those values and prove that they are not dead. Therefore, he was most depressed by those adherents, who rode after him and parroted his attacks, but without his deep anguish. For him, that is the worst expression of nihilism: “Alles ist wert zu Grunde gehen”, everything deserves to perish. Certainly Nietzsche considered the state of the world to be bad, but he never came to terms with this even slightly, and when his hopes were not fulfilled he fell into despair, and finally he broke down. This is substantial evidence, not of his having found the truth, but of his sincerity, and even of his love for humanity. He allegedly broke down because of his empathy for a horse. Fortunately, he was no Superman, but an ordinary mortal, who may have taken too much responsibility upon himself. It could be said that, for all those around him who so skillfully evaded responsibility (whether they pretended the world to be driven by scientific or else by historical necessity), the catastrophes came with the 20th century.

But as I said, no sound political philosophy can be derived from Nietzsche, only an entirely bad one. Nietzsche is a good teacher only to those who stand up to him. He longed in vain for such disciples throughout his life.