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Editorial

# Why Nietzsche Today?

**Béla Egyed**

**S**ince the publication of his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche's writings have been a source of heated controversy. For over a hundred years he had his fair share of admirers and critics. By some he was hailed as a critic of a decadent civilization, by others he was dismissed as an irresponsible nihilist. In the last few decades, however, mainly in response to Heidegger's monumental Nietzsche study, attention has shifted from what actually Nietzsche said to the underlying philosophical themes that might have motivated, or even mitigated, what was said. Thus, while it can be said that in the last few decades the tone of Nietzsche commentaries has been generally favorable, there are still those who resist what they see as attempts at "domesticating" Nietzsche. And, if we are to learn anything from Nietzsche today, these criticisms must be heard, even if they cannot all be accepted. Most of the contributors to this issue are largely favorable to Nietzsche's point of view. Some of them even address, if only implicitly, criticism leveled at Nietzsche. So, in order to indicate what is at stake in Nietzsche's writings, it will be useful to review some of the most serious objections made against them.

## **On the Question of Morality:**

1) According to some critics, it is not clear what Nietzsche means by the "re-valuation of all values". Does he intend to replace old values by new ones? And if so, by what criteria could these new values be deemed superior to the old ones? – they ask. At times Nietzsche suggests that *life* will provide criteria for evaluation. But, then, the question is: "What are the criteria for evaluating life itself?"

2) The previous point touches on Nietzsche's "perspectivism" (the view that there is no one absolute standard i.e. that all judgments are made from specific perspectives.) And the common objection to this is, to ask: "Why, then should Nietzsche's perspective be taken seriously?"

3) Combining Nietzsche's attacks on "pity" and "compassion" – two key concepts of Judeo-Christian morality - with his doctrine of "will to power", some critics see a dangerous invitation to disregarding the welfare of others.

## **On the Question of politics:**

4) Some of Nietzsche's interpreters are willing to endorse his "ethical perfectionism". But they strongly oppose what they see as his "political perfection-

ism". Whatever shape such perfectionism might take – they say – it would lead to the kind of totalitarianism that has become discredited in the last century. Nietzsche's praise for the (Hindu) Law of Manu (the strict separation of castes) and his advocacy of "breeding" have provoked the sharpest criticisms of his politics.

5) Most readers, even those who are generally favorable to his views, regret Nietzsche's contempt for democratic politics. In their view, Nietzsche might have produced a useful internal criticism of liberal democracy if he had not been captive to some untenable political assumptions.

6) Most scholars condemn the way in which Nietzsche's views have been misappropriated by the Nazis. However, some suspect that - in spite of his virulent opposition to anti-Semitism – his pagan elitism, his critique of a "degenerate" culture, and his doctrine of the Overman were ready made for appropriation by the Nazis. For these scholars, even if Nietzsche despised anti-Semites, and would have despised the Nazis, he is, to some extent, responsible for the way in which his views have been abused.

These are serious criticisms. At the very least, they point to just how dangerous Nietzsche's views can be at the hands of those who are not yet ready to hear them. Still, even though some of the essays and comments that follow do provide answers to the objections just mentioned, let me give my reasons for thinking that in spite of all the criticisms leveled against it, Nietzsche's *oeuvre* can serve us as a useful guide today:

As it was for Nietzsche, for us the greatest danger is the pervasiveness of a "bar-gain basement" popular culture. We are

invited by it to live in false hope, thinking that our gravest problems – about the environment, about shrinking resources, or about armed conflicts – can be addressed by "hand-me-down" moral and political slogans and methods. Nietzsche was angry – and, so should we be – not so much with the fact that those in power make bad choices, but with the fact that there are no viable choices from which to choose. Nietzsche was desperate – and, so are we – about the prospects facing the earth. But he did not give up hope altogether – nor should we. We can hope with him, and at times against him, that a new way of thinking – a new way of being – will still be possible in the future.

The Journal in front of you is divided into three parts. First, there is a list of replies to questions sent out by Kritika to specialists in philosophy and political theory. Second, there are a large number of quotations about Nietzsche by well known writers and philosophers. Some of these provide important insights into Nietzsche's philosophy. Others reveal more about their authors than about Nietzsche himself. Third, there are four essays covering different aspects of Nietzsche's thought. Horst Hutter examines the different methods Nietzsche used in his project of "self-overcoming". Alan Schrift explores the way in which Nietzsche has influenced post-modern thinking, in particular Derrida's, on the question of "authorship" and "authority". György Tatár explains Nietzsche's teaching of "Eternal Return" as a response to the "Death of God". Béla Egyed offers a reconstruction of Nietzsche's political thinking, and offers a hypothesis about how a politics of Will to Power might be actualized.