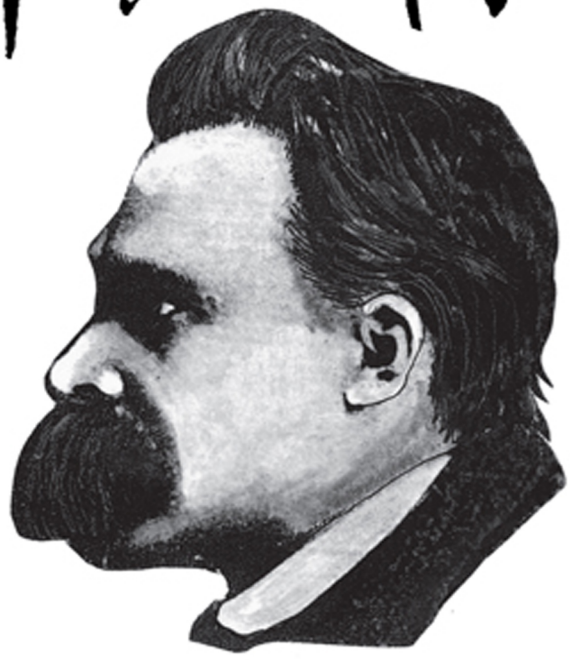
Nietzsche

A RE-EXAMINATION



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Polity Press

First published 1994 by Polity Press
in association with Blackwell Publishers.

Editorial office:
Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Marketing and production:
Blackwell Publishers
108 Cowley Road
Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

238 Main Street
Cambridge, MA 02142, USA

ISBN 0 7456 1290 3
ISBN 0 7456 1291 1 (pbk)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library and the Library of Congress.

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Ehrhardt
by Best-set Typesetter, Ltd., Hong Kong
Printed in Great Britain by Hartnolls Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall
This book is printed on acid-free paper.

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For Rebekka, Jacob, Kayla,
Isaiah, and Albert

Preface

No thinker in the history of modern philosophy has launched as radical an assault upon Western values as has Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Therein lies his importance as a philosopher – in challenging the religio-moral and intellectual foundations of Western society. On the whole, his challenge may be characterized as negative and critical, in that it aims to tear down the old table of values. Nietzsche's negative influence has left its mark not only on contemporary philosophy, social theory, literary criticism, and other academic areas, but on attitudes in everyday life as well.

What I have tried to accomplish in this book is a careful examination of Nietzsche's writings with the aim of laying bare what I regard as the problems, ambiguities, and defects in his work. Nietzsche, as we shall see, rejects both reason and metaphysics, thus leaving only taste as the criterion by which to choose between moralities, socio-political systems, and other human products and values. For Nietzsche, there are only moralities but no Morality, no trans-historical or universal truths. And since Nietzsche views reason and dialectics as manifestations of the "slave morality," and refuses to acknowledge the efficacy of reason in the pursuit of truth, the character of his utterances is essentially assertive. Nietzsche thus denies that a philosopher's primary responsibility is to provide sound arguments for what he or she believes. Nietzsche admires and prefers the "master morality," but this is, for him, a purely personal, "aesthetic" preference. Hence, the manifold and diverse values one finds in any complex society are, for Nietzsche, relative and ideological in the strict sense.

Although there may be some overlap with other studies in my exposition of Nietzsche's philosophy, I believe my work also contains distinc-

tive elements. For example, I give considerable attention to Nietzsche's sociological or social-psychological theory of *ressentiment* and the inversion of values. Nietzsche himself provides only the briefest outline of this theory with regard to the two classical cases with which he is most concerned, the Jews and the Greeks. I therefore develop and apply his theory in chapters 4 and 5, clarifying his meaning and illustrating the sociological fruitfulness of the theory. However, I also hasten to remind the reader that the social origin of an idea or value has no necessary implications for its validity.

Another distinctive element may be found in the discussion of Socrates and the proto-Nietzscheans (chapter 7). As the heart of Nietzsche's philosophy was anticipated by Callicles and Thrasymachus, I thought it would be interesting to hear how Socrates grapples with their arguments based upon the state of nature. Similarly, the excursus on Max Stirner and Karl Marx (chapter 8) enables us to see how Marx – a materialist like Nietzsche – counters the views of the boldest of Nietzsche's precursors in the modern era.

Like Callicles before him, Nietzsche bases his critique of democracy on what he perceives as the rule of nature in which the strong dominate the weak. He believed he was following Darwin in this respect but failed to realize that his understanding of Darwin's theory was one-sided and erroneous. The consequences of Nietzsche's error are discussed in "Darwin *contra* Nietzsche" (chapter 9).

Nietzsche was born in 1844 and died in 1900 – or for all practical purposes in 1890, since he spent the last ten years of his life totally incapacitated by his insanity. And although the issues he raised permits us to regard him as a twentieth-century philosopher, there is a sense in which his philosophy bears the stamp of the European nineteenth century – a century which, when compared with the twentieth, appears rather peaceful and civilized. If, therefore, Nietzsche had lived to see the totalitarian, genocidal regimes of the twentieth century, one wonders whether he would have proclaimed "God is dead!" as loudly and consistently as he did while ignoring the dangers of that proclamation. It was Dostoevsky who so brilliantly and dramatically addressed the question Nietzsche effectively ignored: "If God is dead, is everything permitted?" This is the subject-matter of what I call "Dostoevsky's Challenge" (chapter 12).

Finally in the light of my criticisms of Nietzsche's protagonist, Zarathustra, and the extreme poverty of his affirmations, I confront this spokesman for the "master morality," this yearner for the coming of the superman, with the Hebrew prophets of social justice, the classical representatives of the "slave morality." In that way we see clearly the choice that lies before us.

1

Introduction

The mature Nietzsche, as is well known, looked upon Christianity as a major source of the decadent and anti-life outlook of the West. Although we shall make no attempt to explain Nietzsche's philosophical ideas psychologically, it is noteworthy that he had spent the first five-and-a-half years of his childhood in a parsonage, and his subsequent childhood years in a home characterized by the kind of piety one might expect from the nature of his family background.[1] His father and his grandfathers on both sides had been Lutheran ministers, and indeed Nietzsche was the heir of a long line of Lutheran pastors reaching back to the early seventeenth century. Little wonder that early interpreters of Nietzsche rarely resisted the temptation of treating his mature philosophy simply as a violent repudiation of his religious upbringing. In any event, this upbringing together with his later theological studies imparted to him a firsthand knowledge of Scripture, both the Old and New Testaments.

Nietzsche ceased to be a believing Christian while still in his teens. In 1862, in an essay called "Fate and History," he set down the grounds for his doubts, stating that history and science are the only reliable means of pursuing truth and knowledge. It was no later than that date that Nietzsche abandoned his faith and adopted an extreme skepticism in which he proposed that an openness to divergent views is itself desirable. "Strife," he wrote, "is the perpetual food of the soul."[2] "Strife" is a translation of *Kampf* which alternates with *Krieg* and *Streit*, the German words Nietzsche employs throughout his mature writings to denote a state of active and aggressive struggle as opposed to peace and repose.

When Nietzsche enrolled in the university in Bonn, he eventually chose to study classical philology under the tutelage of the distinguished Friedrich Ritschl, who was greatly impressed with the young man's brilliance. Yielding to the powerful convention among university students, Nietzsche joined a dueling fraternity and promptly acquired a dueling scar, the prestigious sign of noble manliness. Manliness presupposed another kind of experience: on a brief trip to Cologne, a cab driver brought the young Nietzsche to a brothel where it is almost certain he contracted syphilis, the cause of the insanity to which Nietzsche fell victim during the last ten years of his life.

It was during his stay at Bonn that Nietzsche abandoned the study of theology, a discipline, he decided, devoted to the investigation of a primitive superstition, namely Christianity. He now declared himself to be a "free thinker"; but, in contrast to his atheistic predecessors from the time of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Nietzsche held that "freedom" meant not only throwing off a yoke but taking on a new and heavier one in its place. He had no patience for the so-called "liberal-minded" unbeliever who thought he could deny the existence of a divine Lawgiver but nevertheless accept the validity of the Law handed down by human beings. Nietzsche now began to sense that, insofar as God had ceased to exist as a reality for humanity, life as such was deprived of its traditional meaning. In such circumstances, humanity was liable to disintegrate and degenerate under the impact of its basic meaninglessness.

Although Nietzsche distinguished himself early as a brilliant young philologist, he held a rather modest view of the importance of that subject and often even deprecated it as the study of dead books. That attitude turned him away from philology and toward philosophy, where he discovered Schopenhauer and was for a time dazzled by him. At about the same time (1866) Nietzsche read Friedrich Albert Lange's *History of Materialism*, a work that influenced him profoundly, pushing him further in the direction of philosophical materialism. By now Nietzsche had left Bonn and followed Ritschl to Leipzig, where the young classical philologist so impressed Ritschl that the latter successfully recommended him for a vacant professorship at Basel University when Nietzsche was only 24 years of age. Ritschl then also expedited for Nietzsche his doctorate at Leipzig without an examination or any other formality. In November 1866 the University, at Ritschl's urging,

designated Diogenes Laertius as the subject for a philological essay contest, and the prize was awarded to Nietzsche.

The Leipzig years (1865–9) also witnessed the emergence in Nietzsche's writings of at least two notable ideas which eventually contributed to the formation of his mature views. Following an intensive study of Homer and Hesiod and the role of the mythical "contest" in Greek culture, Nietzsche began to recognize just how central the concept of *agon*, or competition, was in the development of Greek culture.

Nietzsche remained at Basel for 10 years and when he left in 1879, at the age of 34, he had never been away from the classroom environment for more than a few months at a time. It was during the Basel years that he had met Richard Wagner, whom he idolized for a time as a creative genius of the "higher type." The notion of a "higher type" becomes in due course a chief element of Nietzsche's theory that Christianity and other ascetic, repressive, and enervating facets of Western culture cater to the weak and mediocre, thus obstructing the emergence of "higher specimens". For Nietzsche, the primary aim of a healthy and robust culture ought to be the fostering and nurturing of higher specimens of all sorts, an aim to which all else ought to be subordinated. It seems that what at first impressed Nietzsche most about Wagner, besides his bold experimentalism in music, was that he appeared to be the precise opposite of the bourgeois man for whom Nietzsche had acquired so much disdain. Wagner was a cultural rebel, an out-and-out Bohemian. As R. J. Hollingdale has observed, "From *Tannhäuser* onwards his operas reveal an unmixed contempt for normal standards of behavior and there is no Wagnerian hero who does not flout them."[3]

Wagner himself also broke standards, most notably in his outlandish and conspicuous dress and in his Bayreuth project, which was widely regarded as the undertaking of a megalomaniac for whom the existing opera houses were inferior and inadequate. Nietzsche's temporary intoxication with Wagner was strengthened by their joint admiration of Schopenhauer; but when Nietzsche broke away from Wagner in 1876 he also parted ways with the philosopher. Hollingdale has suggested that the fundamental difference between Nietzsche's mature theory and that of Schopenhauer is that Nietzsche had by this time rejected metaphysics in all its forms; but one needs to add that Schopenhauer's "will to live" is the precise opposite of Nietzsche's "will to power." Schopenhauer had

proposed that the cause of suffering is intensity of will; the less we will, the less we shall suffer. He reaches this notion through love, which is always sympathy for the pain of others. Inspired by the Nirvana myth, Schopenhauer notes that sympathy can go so far as to take on the suffering of the whole world. In the good man, however, knowledge of the whole quiets all volition, and his will turns away from life and denies his own nature. The good man will practice complete chastity, voluntary poverty, fasting, and self-torment. Nietzsche, in contrast, rejects and despises asceticism. Nietzsche now saw himself as a fully consistent materialist whose "will to power" was an induction from observed phenomena, not a metaphysical postulate. Hollingdale acknowledges, however, that Nietzsche occasionally speaks of the "will to power" and the "eternal recurrence" as if these concepts were ultimate realities, a problem to which we shall return. On the whole, however, it is true that Nietzsche's thought-experiments in the form of aphorisms are secular. The most famous formulation of his "this-worldly" orientation is, of course, "God is dead." This is intended to include everything that has ever been subsumed in the concept of "God": other worlds, ultimate realities, "things in themselves," and valetudinarian "wills to live" of the kind Schopenhauer had proposed.

It was during his Leipzig and Basel years that Nietzsche had occupied himself with the peripheral figures of Schopenhauer and Wagner, whose thoughts belong, strictly speaking, to the nineteenth century. Nietzsche's mature thought, in contrast, is in the mainstream of Western philosophy; and though he died in the year 1900, he must be considered a twentieth-century philosopher because he raises key issues with which every thinking person ought to be concerned, the decline and loss of faith and the moral crisis that this implies. As Nietzsche's mature philosophy bears no trace of the influence of either Wagner or Schopenhauer, we can turn our attention to the several problem areas with which Nietzsche was preoccupied and which formed the central questions he addressed in his mature works: the nature of the Greek foundations of Western society, the "inversion of values", the nature and consequences of the Christian faith, and the implications of Darwin's theory of evolution by means of natural selection. In the present Introduction, we shall merely touch upon these problem areas, reserving for

the body of this work a fuller exposition of Nietzsche's views and a critical response to them.

By the time Nietzsche had carefully read and pondered *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, the validity of Darwin's theory appeared to him to have been demonstrated. Nietzsche accepted the fundamentals of the Darwinian thesis that humanity had evolved from earlier animal forms in a purely naturalistic manner, through chance and accident. Earlier evolutionary theories had still left open the possibility of a "purpose" in evolution; but Darwin had mobilized massive evidence in support of his view that "higher" animals and humans could have come into being entirely by fortuitous variations in individuals. Before Darwin had presented his convincing hypothesis, it was not too difficult to discern some directing agency in the unfolding of natural and, for some, even historical events. After Darwin, however, that became increasingly difficult. The need for a conscious, creative principle, force, or being seemed unnecessary, since what had formerly appeared as order could now be explained as random change. Hence, for Nietzsche, natural selection was a process free of metaphysical implication. Nietzsche now denied the existence of order in the universe, with the possible exception of the astral constellation in which we live, where a temporary order made possible the formation of organic nature. "The entire character of the world," he wrote, "is . . . in all eternity chaos, not in the sense of an absence of necessity, but of an absence of order, arrangement [*Gliederung*], form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other terms there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms. . . . Let us beware of saying that there are laws in nature. There are only necessities: there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses" (*The Gay Science*, aphorism 109).[4] It is in this general context that we encounter the first occurrence of Nietzsche's most famous epigram: "God is dead: but given the way of humanity, his shadow will remain on the walls of caves for thousands of years. And we – we still have to conquer his shadow as well" (108).

Nietzsche's view of the world as chaotic was certainly reinforced by his reading of Darwin, and the chaotic nature of the universe remained a basic element of his philosophical outlook. The Darwinian theory complemented and confirmed a view of reality which Nietzsche had

already begun to form in his youth. From the time of his reading of F. A. Lange's *History of Materialism*, Nietzsche had come to regard all metaphysical ideas as mere ideas and nothing more. There was no such thing as a supersensible reality with which humans could somehow get in touch; and if earlier conceptions of biological evolution had still allowed for the role of a divine agency in earthly matters, Darwin had put an end to that once and for all. A conscious, directing agency was an unnecessary hypothesis.

For Nietzsche, then, the logical consequences of Darwin's theory were no less than revolutionary: God was no more than an idea in the minds of human beings. Any "higher" attributes one may discern in human beings are, in reality, attributes which they had acquired in the course of their descent from other animals. Human beings possessed no means of communicating with any so-called transcendental power, and they were no different, fundamentally, from any other creature. And if God was a mere idea, then it certainly could not give meaning to the universe. Darwinism therefore implied for Nietzsche that the planet Earth was devoid of any transcendental meaning. Nietzsche thus regarded his own era as "nihilistic": all traditional values and meanings had ceased to make sense, and philosophy was in a state of crisis, faced as it was with an inherently meaningless universe. The various solutions offered from the time of Plato were inadequate.

Nietzsche's intimate knowledge of Greek culture helped him develop at least one idea with which to begin his project of providing secular guidelines for a new and meaningful outlook in life. From the time of his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, he continued to propose that Greek cultural development, the Greek creative genius, was bound up with the Apollinian-Dionysian duality, involving perpetual strife between the two principles. The driving force behind the culture of Hellas was the contest, *agon*, the striving to surpass. The creative force is passion, but a passion harnessed and directed. Dionysus is the explosive, ungoverned force of creation while Apollo is the power that governs him. Is there then a vital connection, Nietzsche now asked himself, between the Darwinian view of intraspecies behavior and the genius of the Greeks? Interpreting Darwin in his own distinctive way, Nietzsche proposed that human qualities are of a twofold character, manifesting, to be sure, a capacity for high and noble powers, but also for cruel, murderous, and

destructive ones. The Greeks certainly demonstrated a capacity for brutality, and yet they were also creative and humane; they were the inventors of philosophy, science, and drama. The Greeks were not simply beautiful and creative children, as some earlier scholars had portrayed them; they were a cruel, savage, and warlike people who constructed an extraordinarily valuable culture by governing and redirecting their passions and impulses. In this light it is clear that it was not Wagner and Schopenhauer but Darwin and the Greeks who were the starting point of Nietzsche's mature philosophy. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche also examines the role of Socrates, who is driven neither by Dionysus nor Apollo, but by something "new" – reason and dialectics – which represses the Dionysian passions and gradually causes the deterioration of Greek art and drama. In his first book, as in his later works, one discerns in Nietzsche a highly critical attitude towards the Platonic Socrates. This is a problem to which we shall need to return.

If for Nietzsche the universe was chaos and the traditional metaphysical meanings imposed on that chaos were useless for the provision of meaning, then what was needed was a new, secular, and truly convincing organization of the chaos. One of his chief early ideas in this regard seems to be Apollo's victory over, or control of, Dionysus. In his mature philosophy, however, Nietzsche attempts to go beyond this, and his organizing of the chaos leads to the chapter on "self-overcoming" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where the central Nietzschean idea "will to power" is first described:

> And life itself told me this secret: "Behold," it said, "I am *that which must always overcome itself*. . . . There is much that life admires more than life itself; but out of that very admiration speaks the *will to power*." That is what life once taught me; and with that I shall yet solve the riddle of your heart, you who are wisest. . . .
>
> And whoever would be a creator in good and evil, verily, he must first be a destroyer who breaks values. Thus the highest evil belongs to the highest goodness: but that is creative.

The single goal of humanity must be the creation of its highest specimens, the superman (*Übermensch*). Zarathustra spoke thus to the people:

> *I teach you the superman.* Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?. . . . The superman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will assert: the superman *shall be* the meaning of the earth! I urge you my brothers, *remain faithful to the earth*, and believe not those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes! Poison-mixers they are, whether they know it or not. (Part I, 3)

Nietzsche never defines the term "power," nor does he let us know, precisely, the nature of the superman's mission. At times self-mastery appears to be simply the means of achieving the highest aesthetic goals; but at other times self-mastery appears to be political – the means by which the "higher types" will dominate the "herd." Does Nietzsche write from a strictly aesthetic standpoint, as some scholars have argued, or from a political standpoint as well? And if from the latter, has he faced the Hobbesian problem of what occurs when two or more individuals desire the same apparent good, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy? These questions will demand our attention in the following chapters.

Meanwhile, however, we need to say a word about Nietzsche's style of thinking and writing. Nietzsche was a "peripatetic" philosopher, though not in the sense of having been a disciple of Aristotle, whom he nevertheless admired greatly. Nietzsche was peripatetic in the literal sense of the word, since most of his work was not only thought but written down in small notebooks during his long walks in solitude. On such occasions he might even have thought aloud with accompanying gestures. This strong habit of his certainly helps us understand why virtually all of his writings take the form of aphorisms, some longer than others – perhaps a few pages – but most of them short paragraphs or even sentences. But there is another more deliberate reason for Nietzsche's employment of aphorisms. Since he viewed the system-building philosophies of the past as defective, he regarded his own task differently. The point was not to erect a new system – a futile enterprise in all circumstances – but to expose the flaws of the old and propose a few affirmative guidelines in the form of thought-experiments. The aphoristic "method" certainly served Nietzsche well in expressing his ideas succinctly and epigrammatically. But there is also a disadvantage to this method, as is illustrated, for example, in his aphorism on Aristotle. He salutes and honors him, but