

Interpretation

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- 359 *Rodrigo Chacón* Philosophy as Awareness of Fundamental Problems, or Leo Strauss's Debt to Heidegger's Aristotle
- 379 *W. Julian Korab-Karpowicz* Why a World State Is Unnecessary: The Continuing Debate on World Government
- 403 *Laurence Lampert* Reading Benardete: A New *Parmenides*
- 425 *Ronald Beiner*
431 *Charles U. Zug* **An Exchange:**
Nietzsche's Final Teaching
by Michael Allen Gillespie
- 439 *Michael Allen Gillespie* On *Nietzsche's Final Teaching*: A Response to My Critics
- 447 *Charles U. Zug* Developing a Nietzschean Account of Musical Form: A Rejoinder to Michael Gillespie's Response
- 451 *José A. Colen* **Review Essay:**
What Is Wrong with Human Rights?
La loi naturelle et les droits de l'homme
by Pierre Manent
- 471 *Marco Andreacchio* **Book Reviews:**
For Humanism, edited by David Alderson and Robert Spencer
- 475 *Bernard J. Dobski* *Tyrants: A History of Power, Injustice, and Terror*
by Waller R. Newell
- 483 *Jerome C. Foss* *James Madison and Constitutional Imperfection*
by Jeremy D. Bailey
- 487 *Raymond Hain* *The Virtue Ethics of Levi Gersonides*
by Alexander Green
- 493 *Richard Jordan* *Public Intellectuals in the Global Arena: Professors or Pundits?*, edited by Michael C. Desch
- 501 *Mary Mathie* *Fate and Freedom in the Novels of David Adams Richards* by Sara MacDonald and Barry Craig
- 507 *Tyler Tritten* "Philosophie und Religion": Schellings *Politische Philosophie* by Ryan Scheerlinck

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On Nietzsche's Final Teaching: A Response to My Critics

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Interpretation is central to the scholarly enterprise. Interpretation, however, depends upon the acceptance of certain hermeneutic principles. Most scholars imagine that a text is a form of communication and that understanding the meaning of a text thus entails not just understanding the words on the page but also the author's intentions. This, however, is not always the case. For those concerned with holy scriptures the human author is nothing more than the conduit for a divine logos whose intention is beyond our ken. For radical deconstructionists, by contrast, the intention of the author is irrelevant, since the text is merely a worldly object whose meaning we constantly invent and reinvent as we will. For those who do imagine that the composition of texts is intended to convey meaning across space and time, there are still a number of hermeneutic questions that have to be answered. How do we determine an individual author's intentions? Are these a reflection of the author's character and life experience? And if so, how are these to be determined? What role does the author's historical context play in helping us to understand his or her intentions? And how do we determine what this context is? Is the author, for example, as many in the Cambridge School imagine, strictly circumscribed by his immediate historical circumstances, or does he, as many of the followers of Leo Strauss imagine, rise above his time to address perennial questions, conversing not only with his lesser contemporaries but with the great minds of ages past and ages to come? And since even the most brilliant authors live in specific times surrounded by those who subscribe knowingly or unknowingly to traditional values, how can we know whether or to what extent an author speaks openly or esoterically?

The hermeneutic path that I have sought to follow, as Zug recognizes, falls between the Cambridge and the Straussian schools. I am convinced that few great thinkers are completely constrained by their immediate circumstances, but I also do not believe that they can ever entirely transcend these circumstances. And even if they are able to rise above the perspectives and prejudices of their age, they are still ultimately constrained by the conceptual vocabulary available to them. What they intend is thus not something we can know a priori nor is it something that can be understood merely by an examination of their historical circumstances. Interpretation thus requires an examination not merely of their published works, but also of their letters, their *Nachlass*, the accounts of friends, and so forth, as well as a general and at times comprehensive knowledge of their times and the dominant questions of the intellectual traditions within which they worked. Interpretation also requires that a scholar accept nothing at face value, always cultivating a healthy hermeneutic suspicion, yet also always seeking to piece together the various bits of information to form some vision of what an author intended. It is not an easy task and perhaps the most we can ask is an honest effort to do one's best in the recognition that one's best may still not be enough. And what a scholar should hope for from his fellow scholars is a similar honest effort to assist in making his interpretation clearer and more accurate. I am thus especially grateful to both of my reviewers for their candid and helpful critiques of my book. Scholarship at its best is not an individual but a collective enterprise, and both Zug and Beiner exemplify a generosity of spirit in their reviews that reflects their dedication to our common endeavor.

Interpreting the work of Friedrich Nietzsche is difficult for many of the reasons stated above, but the difficulty is exacerbated by three additional factors. First, his texts were altered and his biography distorted by his anti-Semitic sister in ways that fundamentally misrepresented his intentions. Second, these distortions played an important role in the initial interpretations of his thought and in the use made of his thought by National Socialism. And third, in reacting against these early textual distortions when the truth eventually came out, later scholars often careened in an opposite direction, portraying Nietzsche as a thinker of democracy and radical liberation. This problematic reception of Nietzsche's thought has in my view led many scholars to treat the secondary elements of Nietzsche's thought as essential and to overlook and neglect what he himself considered to be his deepest and most fundamental thought. Both Zug and Beiner take seriously my efforts to discover the genuine Nietzsche long hidden under the accretions of past scholarship and

ideology, although they remain skeptical about whether I have proven my case, and whether I have been sufficiently critical of Nietzsche.

Zug applauds my efforts to provide a comprehensive interpretation of Nietzsche's late thought as an (anti-)metaphysics in the initial chapter of the book, but he is disappointed with my failure to lay out this interpretation systematically in the remaining chapters, leading him to conclude that my title is misleading and that the book is more a collection of essays than a comprehensive account of Nietzsche's final teaching. He is correct that the book is a collection of essays, as I note (and as he notices) in my preface. That said, I think the essays do present an argument about Nietzsche's final teaching as a whole. I take his real complaint to be that I should have written a different book that fulfilled the promise of the title and first chapter more systematically. That is fair enough, and it is clear to me from his comments that I should have explained more fully and clearly why I did not do this, and why I have come to believe that such an account cannot succeed.

At the core of my book is an attempt to reconstruct from both Nietzsche's published works and his notes and letters, the remarks of his friends, and so forth a great project that he did not and perhaps could not complete, but a project that guided almost everything he did over the last seven years of his productive life. That my account of what Nietzsche intended may be more systematic than he was ever able to achieve or that he ever even wanted to achieve, as Zug suggests, may also be the case. But it is sometimes the task of the scholar to see the whole of a thinker's life work in ways that the thinker himself in the throes of passion and continuing thought could not see so clearly himself. Could I have done a better and more systematic job in laying out all of the nuances of Nietzsche's final teaching? Perhaps, although I am not sure that it would have been true to Nietzsche. It is important to remember that while I sketch out the project that he imagined he would complete, he never did actually complete it. Consequently, the attempt to be more systematic in my analysis that Zug would like to see, would not only have overtaxed what Nietzsche actually did do but may also have even further concealed the fascinating perplexities and paradoxes of Nietzsche's thought that Zug worries I have already obscured.

My book could have been more systematic if I had confined myself to Nietzsche's published works, but such a book in my view would have been redundant, since Laurence Lampert long ago completed this task in a way that I believe is unlikely ever to be equaled. I hoped instead to make clear the hitherto unrecognized philosophical and moral meaning of the titanic

thought that lies at the center of Nietzsche's final teaching, the thought of the eternal recurrence of the same. Some readers will certainly conclude that I dwell too often on this doctrine, since it comes to the fore in one way or the other in each of the essays in the book, but over time I have come to believe that it is not only Nietzsche's most important thought but also one of the most important thoughts for us as well, since it encapsulates the cataclysmic conclusion to the modern project.

Zug and Beiner would also like a more systematic account not just of Nietzsche's late work but of the eternal recurrence in particular, one that delineates its nature, its consequences, and its deficiencies. I sympathize with their dissatisfaction on this point. I can say in my defense only that having read almost everything Nietzsche wrote about the doctrine and a great deal of what scholars have written about it, I am not convinced that a comprehensive account is possible or even desirable. It was certainly not something that Nietzsche ever worked out to his own satisfaction.

I do want to disagree with Beiner's suggestion that the idea itself is thoroughly implausible if not manifestly wrong. He suggests that this doctrine was already refuted by Nietzsche's friend Deussen and more fully in the early twentieth century by Georg Simmel. For a long time I accepted their arguments as definitive, and I thus should have been more forthcoming in explaining why I now do not take them to be pertinent, let alone dispositive. These arguments and most other purported disproofs of the doctrine rely on mathematical notions of infinity, claiming that Nietzsche is wrong to assume that, in a universe of finite matter/energy and infinite time, repetition is inevitable; they adduce cases of the motion of multiple related objects moving at differential speeds that will never return to their mutual starting position. While these arguments are correct mathematically, they do not demonstrate that Nietzsche's doctrine is incorrect. There may be no end to the sequence of the integers, for example, but the integers are ultimately only symbols that are dependent on the existence of the matter/energy states within which they are constructed, and should these matter/energy states cease to be, the integers would cease to be as well. The real question is then whether the number of possible matter/energy states in our universe is finite or infinite. Contemporary cosmologists differ on the answer to this question and it is not one that I or, I suspect, Zug or Beiner is qualified to answer. Therefore, I am no longer convinced that the mathematical disproofs of the doctrine alone can be dispositive.

Moreover, for Nietzsche—and I would argue for us as well—it is not essential that there be an actual eternal recurrence for the idea to be of utmost importance. The modern world rests on two great pillars, the belief that every event is determined by an antecedent cause and that humans are free beings who do not merely behave but who act freely and are thus morally responsible. As Kant pointed out in his discussion of the antinomies, however, these two assumptions are contradictory. Many of the greatest nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers (beginning with Kant) sought to resolve this contradiction. The inadequacy of their solutions has repeatedly led to the denial of one or the other of the sides of the contradiction from thinkers such as Fichte or Sartre, who sought to show that the supposed necessity of nature is derivative from freedom, to Schopenhauer and contemporary materialists, who argue that human freedom is merely an illusion. Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal recurrence examines what it would mean to assert the truth of both freedom and necessity, or to put it another way, how alone it would be possible for human beings to act as if they were free in the face of the necessity that science sees determining the motion of everything in our universe.

In Nietzsche's view, the acceptance of the assertion that a universal natural causality controls all human and nonhuman motion leads to fatalism and despair, paralyzing the will of those who can comprehend it and engendering in them a nihilistic recognition that their lives have no meaning, purpose, or goal. Ordinary humans may live blissfully unaware of this fact but as a result will be spiritually impoverished "last men," to use Nietzsche's terminology. To overcome this nihilism and free oneself from despair it is necessary for the best to will the eternal recurrence, which means *to will everything good and evil that ever has or ever will occur*. This is Nietzsche's deepest and most horrifying thought. In this way, though, it is possible for the will to free itself from fatalism and nihilism and become capable of action. The actual recurrence of all things and the persistence of the ego that Beiner (following Simmel) points to is thus not essential to the existential and psychological liberation that Nietzsche believes the doctrine makes possible.

Nietzsche is convinced that only this great act of will can redeem humanity from a yawning spiritual abyss and, as I have tried to show, all of his other key concepts—the *Übermensch*, the will to power, the necessity of cataclysmic wars, the inevitable destruction of European values, and a monstrous logic of terror—all follow from this abysmal idea. Thus, unless one recognizes the centrality of this idea, one cannot understand Nietzsche's late thought. But while I believe that the consequences Nietzsche sees following

from this doctrine are possible, I do not believe that they are necessary or even probable. What he imagines to be inevitable in fact rests on a very narrow understanding of human nature that I call into question in my comparison of Nietzsche to Dostoevsky and Plato. Here I agree with Beiner, for example, that Nietzsche too easily believed that a new Dionysian religion could come into being and reshape humanity in the same way Christianity had in the Roman world. That said, I must admit that I am struck by the rise of powerful political religions in the first half of the twentieth century and the rise of much more bellicose forms of existing religions in the second half of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, which are shockingly reminiscent of Nietzsche.

Zug and Beiner also do not believe that I am sufficiently critical of Nietzsche's apparent effort to replace rationalist logic with music and poetry, and they do not think I am tough enough on Nietzsche for his contributions to Fascism and National Socialism. Let me take these objections in that order.

Nietzsche was certainly not the first to criticize European rationalism, which had been under assault since at least the thirteenth century and had been driven by critique to move from a defense of substantial forms, to mathematical laws of nature, to dialectical reason, to analytic philosophy, and finally to a pragmatic syncretism. All have failed to eliminate skepticism. That does not mean that rationalism should not be defended, but simply that Nietzsche's making of an attempt to find another foundation for reasoning is far from new or unique. Moreover, as I tried to make clear, although obviously insufficiently, Nietzsche's goal from the time of the *Birth of Tragedy* was not to eliminate discursive reason but to combine it with music. Here he imagines as his hero a "Socrates who practices music." In this sense he should not be counted as defending poetry or music against philosophy, nor as a "friend of Homer" or, for that matter, of Wagner, but as someone who tried to combine the logic of music with that of philosophy.

In this context, his use of musical forms, and of the sonata form in particular, is of real importance. Here I have to disagree with Zug that many works could be interpreted as employing sonata form. The sonata has a very specific form and structure. Nor would I agree with either Zug or Beiner that Nietzsche's turn to music is merely a rhetorical ploy or a literary parlor trick. Western music developed a logic of its own that is related to the logic of words but is still quite different, aimed less at moving the mind than at moving the passions, which Nietzsche believes are finally more fundamental than reason. He has no problem with rational demonstration and indeed his texts are

filled with arguments that aim at just that, but he also wants to enthuse and inspire his readers. But from both reviewers' remarks, I have to conclude that I did not sufficiently demonstrate the connection of Nietzsche's musical and discursive logic. Here I have perhaps spent too much time in the company of musicologists and did not give a clear enough explanation for those not immersed in the technical aspects of music. More is clearly needed.

Second, both Zug and Beiner suggest that I do not adequately condemn Nietzsche for providing Fascism and National Socialism with intellectual fodder for their rapacious ideologies. This is a more complicated issue. Nietzsche in my view was thoroughly opposed to both the anti-Semitism and the spirit of revenge that permeated, and in a sense defined, National Socialism. Contrary to Holub and Beiner, I am thus unwilling to let Nietzsche's sister off the hook. I am convinced that Nietzsche's attacks on anti-Semitism and his friendship with numerous well-known Jews would have made him anathema to the National Socialists if his sister had not concealed these facts and portrayed him as an anti-Semite. But, of course, on such a point there is obviously room for disagreement.

That said, I do not mean to exonerate Nietzsche for his promotion of violence. He was certainly no pacifist or liberal. In fact, he foresaw wars that were at least as violent as those of the twentieth century, and he was convinced that such wars were the inevitable consequence of the collapse of European/Christian morality. Moreover, he believed that such wars were necessary to create a new race of hardened *Übermenschen* to revitalize European civilization. I clearly do not believe that on this point he was correct and I am convinced that the outcome he envisaged might well have been worse than what did in fact occur, but I do not believe it would have been either Fascism or National Socialism.

My goal in the end was not to defend Nietzsche nor for that matter to condemn him but to present him as he intended to appear and to suggest that while we may learn a great deal from him, we need to be vigilant that we are not carried away by his seductive ideas and rhetoric. When Yeats first encountered Nietzsche in English translation, he spent two years reading everything he could get his hands on, enthusiastically characterizing him as "the Enchanter." A century filled with horrors later, we need to be a bit more circumspect in confronting his thought. My sincere thanks to both of my reviewers.