

# Interpretation

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Lise van Boxel, *Warspeak: Nietzsche's Victory over Nihilism*. Toronto: Political Animal, 2020, 281 pp., \$24.99 (paper).

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Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* is a warlike book. Its subtitle is *Eine Streitschrift*—writing that quarrels or fights. In Nietzsche's retrospective assessment of the book in *Ecce Homo*, he says that the “very disagreeable truths” it contains are visible only after “perfectly gruesome detonations” of artillery shells explode into “thick clouds” of battlefield smoke.<sup>1</sup>

It is fitting that a book of such spiritual violence is, by Nietzsche's own account, a book that can be painfully difficult to understand. He tells us in *Ecce Homo* that *On the Genealogy of Morals* is “uncannier than anything written so far,” and that it is “*calculated* to mislead.” The book speaks the language of war, which is often and of necessity the language of misdirection and motion.

*Warspeak*, by the late Lise van Boxel, marshals invaluable intellectual reinforcements for war-welcoming readers of Nietzsche's famous and famously difficult polemic. It features a careful reading of *On the Genealogy of Morals* that takes up the problems of the book's spiritually searing third essay titled “What Is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals?” In keeping with Nietzsche's well-known aversion to scholars, scholarly writing, and professorial pretension, *Warspeak* is written in a spirited style that eschews academic conventions.<sup>2</sup> It features no footnotes, a modest fifty-two endnotes, and no bibliography. The book's form is unapologetically Nietzschean insofar as it does not “engage the

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<sup>1</sup> *Ecce Homo*, “Why I Write Such Good Books,” *Genealogy of Morals*.

<sup>2</sup> Consider “We Scholars” in *Beyond Good and Evil*.

scholarly literature” on Nietzsche. Instead, it puts readers into direct conversation with the man himself.

*Warspeak* argues that the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* presents a battle plan for Nietzsche’s fight against the nihilistic tendencies of modern man. The cause of these nihilistic tendencies is traceable genealogically to the establishment of what Nietzsche calls “the ascetic ideal.” This ideal has exerted tremendous cultural and spiritual influence on the human species over millennia, and has expressed itself in beings as diverse as artists, philosophers, scholars, scientists, women, priests, saints, and the deformed. Each instantiation of the ideal promotes its own version of a self-hating and life-loathing morality of suffering that is refined and typified by the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. Each instantiation also considers the changing and perpetually becoming world in which we live to be a valueless world when compared to a supposedly truer other-world or after-world of absolute being and truth.

Together, ascetic morality of self-hatred and ascetic rejection of the becoming world have compelled mankind to turn on itself in exhaustion. According to van Boxel, the kind of nihilism Nietzsche confronts in *On the Genealogy of Morals* is not the kind of nihilism that maintains nothing is true. The ascetic priest claims to have privileged access to truth. Instead, the kind of nihilism Nietzsche confronts is a more profound and gruesome variant that exhibits weariness with human life, devaluation of the human world, and despair about the future prospects and possibilities of the human race (87). The morality of ascetic nihilism has so exhausted humanity that, although we have not stopped willing altogether, we have been genealogically cultivated to will the nothing, the non-self, and the non-world.

Over the course of millennia, humanity’s internalization of the ascetic ideal has affected our inner lives to such an extent that, in van Boxel’s view, it has altered human physio-psychology. This alteration is possible because so-called human “beings” change and become new in response to internal and external pressures on their bodies and bodily souls. The story of this change is the story of human genealogy. Generations of ascetic spiritual pressures have stunted or inverted the growth and development of the human species.

In van Boxel’s view, this devolution of the species is most perceptible only after we see that for Nietzsche, philosophy *is* genealogy, and genealogy *is* psychology. This is why the first and foundational chapter of *Warspeak* is titled “Philosophy Is Genealogy Is Psychology.” Here van Boxel follows

Nietzsche's subtle autobiographical and philosophic cues to argue that the human "being" (and every other "being" for that matter) is no "being" at all, but rather a growing and developing becoming. "To see a being as Nietzsche sees it," van Boxel writes, "is to see its history, its genealogy" (1). Every living "being" has a history that informs what it has been, what it is, and what it can become in the near future. The human being is the human becoming.

The historical growth and change of the human animal takes place in the realm of our ever changing physio-psychology. The inner life and body of the Greek warrior, one could say, is decidedly not the inner life and body of Christ. In light of Nietzsche's insight that our physio-psychologies evolve, knowledge of the human "being" (a task for philosophy) becomes identical to knowledge of human historical development (a task for genealogy), and that historical knowledge manifests itself in the realm of the changing human body and mind (physio-psychology).

Much of the rest of the first chapter is devoted to showing or attempting to show how Nietzsche's genealogical psychology can be deployed to unwind the ascetic "moral-theological prejudice," or the prejudice that there is a God who is purely good, and who maintains a morality of opposite good and evil valuations. If the authority of ascetic morality depends on the existence of an unchanging God of pure goodness, then the existence of that God must be refuted by any thinker like Nietzsche, whose task is to overcome the nihilism that ascetic morality produces. One difficulty with such a refutation is that opposite values and the rational patterns of thinking and speaking that arise from them cannot be utilized in any authoritative way to disprove the authority of opposite values themselves. It is debatable whether van Boxel and her Nietzsche succeed in their attempt to unwind the moral-theological prejudice, but her rigorous and careful approach to the problem adds new layers to Nietzsche's analysis of it that will benefit even the most seasoned readers of his books.

The second and third chapters of *Warspeak* are titled "The Genealogy of Morals Begins" and "The Slave Revolt in Morality." These chapters address the substance of the early essays of *On the Genealogy of Morals* in preparation for van Boxel's deep analysis of the third essay. Just as morals have shaped and continue to shape human physio-psychology, human physio-psychology in turn has shaped and continues to shape morals. Conceptions of the good arise from the bodies of those that conceive them. Understanding the human good is therefore a physio-psychological, and hence genealogical, task. Different physio-psychologies produce different moral valuations because thinking

itself is “a shape of the motion that is life” (35). Original concepts of the good grow proactively from human creators who possess the maximum degree of vigor the human form can support. In van Boxel’s language, these moral creators are warrior types who possess “super abundant vitality.” They say “Yes!” to what they are. “Every concept of the good that super-abundantly vital human beings generate out of their physio-psychology,” she says, “articulates something of the growth of the most vital form of the human being at a given epoch of our human evolution” (41).

Likewise, concepts of evil originate in human physio-psychology. But instead of springing from proactive and superabundantly vital bodies and minds, concepts of evil spring reactively from physio-psychologically degenerated and sick bodies and minds. These sick priestly types envy and eventually come to resent the superabundant vitality of their vigorous warrior counterparts. Their envy of the warrior’s vital standard is important because it indicates that the priests *agree* with the super-abundantly vital warriors about the desirability and goodness of super-abundant vitality (108–9). This agreement compels the priestly types to forge a new moral order that relocates the source and standard of vitality (in their case immortal life instead of vigorous mortal life) in a transcendent world of being that exists outside of our becoming world, and that is overseen by an unchanging rational God. This dialectical movement, which van Boxel treats with remarkable care, is what Nietzsche calls the “slave revolt” in morality. The slave revolt marks the moment that reason and deliberation become forces in human affairs. Both are born of the vital impotence of the priestly types who cannot exert their wills immediately or openly in their moral war with the warriors. The “bad conscience,” formed through the priestly types’ will to power turned inward (for lack of ability to exert it against the strong) is the priestly types’ greatest creation. Once the priestly moral notion of “bad conscience” worms its way into human genealogy, asceticism and nihilism arise from self-cruelty.

The central chapter of *Warspeak* is titled “Warspeak.” It reveals the manifold ways that *On the Genealogy of Morals* constitutes a “counterattack” against the ascetic moral offensive that reoriented humanity by a polestar that lies outside of the bodies and world we inhabit. “The slave revolt has been so successful,” van Boxel says, “that the human being is now in danger of devolving, perhaps irreversibly” (83). In her view, modernity has not yet recognized the full scope and urgency of this threat. The war Nietzsche wages against the slave revolt is war’s peak—the profoundest war a human being can wage. Although van Boxel uses the term “counterattack” at least four times

in her description of Nietzsche's fight against the slave revolt and its ascetic ideal, she does not explicitly address whether or how the reactive character of this counterattack differs from the reactive character of the morality it seeks to overturn. One is compelled to say that Nietzsche has a bad conscience about asceticism, and that the war described in *Warspeak* is a reactive war meant to restore the sovereignty of proactivity. He is not merely attacking the ascetic ideal in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he is incorporating elements of it into the future he is forging through battle.

To overcome the problem of the ascetic ideal and the human decline it engenders, Nietzsche thinks that humanity must evolve a life-affirming positive ideal firmly rooted in this world. Our willing of nothing must be transformed by a counter-ideal that induces the willing of life and the maximization of human potential. Unlike the ascetic ideal, this counter-ideal will incorporate the full panoply of human experience instead of castrating certain elements of it. Nietzsche becomes the warrior for this ideal partly because of his unegoistic love of man, and partly because of his egoistic concern that the pervasive sight and influence of the degenerating human being threatens to transform him into a nihilist (83). According to van Boxel, Nietzsche also seeks to express his own superabundant vitality by creating a life-promoting counter-ideal that can augment the human species. The limits of this augmentation, and thus the limits of human "nature," are unknown in van Boxel's telling. Our genealogy "tethers us like a ribbon to our past" and determines certain aspects of our future possibilities, yet "the future itself is unknown and unlimited" (95). The human being itself was once an unforeseeable future.

Chapters 5 and 6 of *Warspeak*, titled "Mind Matters" and "The Warrior's Riddle," illustrate the ways that Nietzsche determines the content of his counter-ideal. This ideal takes a variety of forms as he mixes traits of the highest human types in his genealogical laboratory. Initially, the counter-ideal takes the form of the "warrior-philosopher" typified by Schopenhauer. In Nietzsche's view, Schopenhauer is ferocious enough to fight the ascetic ideal, yet the type he represents is not the final form of the counter-ideal because the warrior-philosopher still suffers from various aspects of the asceticism he fights. The warrior-philosopher nevertheless remains a promising start because, unlike the disembodied ascetic philosopher, he has aesthetic discernment and appreciation for beauty and can see the world from the perspective of red-blooded and passionate human life. In fact, the warrior-philosopher's aesthetic sense is so strong that he often seeks transcendent (and therefore ascetic) relief from

it, as Schopenhauer did in the metaphysics of Kant (155). He is also prone to spiritual gravity—a seriousness that verges on disappointment with the human situation in the world—and he needs solitude and independence to recover. This temperament disqualifies him from counter-ideal status because it tempts him to the asceticism he is at war with.

Like a caterpillar evolving step by step into a butterfly, the warrior-philosopher transforms into the “artist-philosopher,” a second but still defective form of the counter-ideal in Nietzsche’s genealogical laboratory. The “artist-philosopher” is an idealized philosophic Wagner who unifies the physio-psychological characteristics of the artist and the intellectual, thereby gaining access to the highest registers of human capacity and vitality (159). This version of the philosophic counter-ideal also turns out to be defective because artists are prone to becoming mirrors of the ascetic world and (like Wagner) often place themselves in the service of an ascetic ideal (174–75). Rather than reflecting the already existing ascetic spiritual world, Nietzsche’s counter-ideal must of necessity be a creator of new spiritual worlds, a storyteller who can redeem our becoming world from its ascetic past through a joyful counter-history of the world.

It is for this reason that the “poet-philosopher” is the third and final form of Nietzsche’s counter-ideal. He is a maker of creative history, a human being of Homeric abilities with a philosophic warrior’s soul (175). In “Psyche Airborne,” the seventh and perhaps richest chapter of *Warspeak*, van Boxel presents Nietzsche’s counter to the ascetic ideal through an extended treatment of the poet-philosopher type. Unlike the warrior-philosopher, the poet-philosopher is liberated from the gravity that accompanies the moral-theological prejudice. Unlike the artist-philosopher, he is a storyteller who creates worlds in the manner of a child at play, affirming the lightness and joy of human life. His physio-psychology incorporates the highest drives and capacities of his predecessors and overcomes their drawbacks. His task is to reorient the “bad conscience” of man so that human physio-psychology is repulsed by aspirations to the beyond and slander of body and world. He brings good tidings of a nonmetaphysical future, and the good news that man is the as yet undetermined animal whose future is ripe with limitless or almost limitless possibilities for vital enhancement and self-overcoming.

According to van Boxel, the highest purpose of *On the Genealogy of Morals* is to pave the way for the poet-philosopher by paving the way for Nietzsche’s poetic history: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (197). “The content-rich goal, the historical good,” van Boxel concludes, “is now to embody more fully the characteristics of the sovereign individual, Zarathustra, or the

poet-philosopher.” Zarathustra is the counter-ideal to the ascetic ideal and the “maximum shape of super-abundant vitality” (206). He is that human being who has so fully realized what a human being can be that he is on the verge of transcending the capacities, powers, and physio-psychology of man as we currently know him. He is pregnant with a genealogical leap. If humanity ever attains the ideal he represents, then Zarathustra too must be overcome. For Lise van Boxel and her Nietzsche it is only by overcoming what we are that we become what we are.

