

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Summer 2022

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An Exchange

Book Review

Heinrich Meier, *What Is Nietzsche's Zarathustra? A Philosophical Confrontation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 194 pp., \$50.00 (cloth).

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Many of Friedrich Nietzsche's writings are explicitly about Friedrich Nietzsche. The titles of *Ecce Homo* and *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, to name just two, draw attention to the writer's singular personage and distinctive intellectual biography. But even those of Nietzsche's writings whose titles do not explicitly refer to Friedrich Nietzsche address some aspect of his personal development. Nietzsche called his *Dawn* and *Joyous Science* his "most personal" books.¹ In *Ecce Homo*, he says that his third and fourth Untimely Meditations, entitled *Schopenhauer as Educator* and *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, are visions of his own past and future rather than odes to the men named in their titles.² The self-referential prefaces in later books like *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Antichrist*, and the personalizing prefaces Nietzsche

¹ Leo Strauss, "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil," in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 174.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, "Why I write Such Good Books," *Untimely Ones* 3, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 2000).

added to earlier books like *Human, All Too Human*, also place the author's life before his philosophy.

If there is any book in Nietzsche's oeuvre whose autobiographical character is difficult to discern it is his most famous book, and his only work of fictional poetry, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In *What Is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?*, Heinrich Meier does the welcome work of showing how and why *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is about Friedrich Nietzsche. In particular, he argues that Nietzsche's *Book for All and None* represents a crucial turning point in his intellectual life because it contains the philosophic essentials of Nietzsche's search for self-knowledge and intellectual independence. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche again tells the story of how one becomes what one is.

According to Meier, the primary purpose of Nietzsche's parodic poem is to explore the differences between the typology of the philosopher and the typology of the prophet. Nietzsche deliberately leaves ambiguous *who* his Zarathustra is—philosopher, prophet, or both—and by doing so creates an occasion to explore concurrently *who* Friedrich Nietzsche is—philosopher, prophet, or both. The book is a workshop for Nietzsche's self-ascertainment because Zarathustra the man, like Nietzsche the man, is attempting to unite in himself what, according to Meier, cannot be united: the philosopher and the prophet. In Meier's view, "*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* provided Nietzsche the opportunity to gain clarity over the options of the philosopher and the prophet" (187). It gave him occasion to explore the limits of each type, and to separate in his own mind what belongs to the psychology of each.

The prophet longs to change the world whereas the philosopher finds satisfaction in understanding it. The prophet is motivated by love of man, whereas the philosopher is motivated by love of wisdom. Both risk falling prey to the distorting desire to take revenge on reality: the prophet by proclaiming a new and promising future that negates a miserable past, and the philosopher by willing a systematic philosophy that distorts reality and forcefully compels its knowability. Nietzsche's Zarathustra does not know which world-historical type he is at the beginning of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Neither, Meier argues, did Friedrich Nietzsche when he began writing the book. "The knowledge Nietzsche attained about himself can be considered by far the most important yield of the years he spent in the company of Zarathustra," Meier says, and "everything" that the book is and that Nietzsche intends with it is secondary to the task of self-understanding (187).

Thus Spoke Zarathustra is a parody of the Luther Bible, one that opens with Zarathustra the Counter-Jesus lamenting from a lonely mountaintop that he is not self-sufficient. In Part I of the book Zarathustra is full of wisdom, but his wisdom does not sustain him. He loves mankind in addition to, or perhaps more than, his wisdom. He longs for a “going-under” which would place him in the company of men so that he can give them a gift. As Meier pointedly observes, Zarathustra loves men “as recipients of his gift, what they could become through him” (12). It is this aspect of Zarathustra’s longing that makes him a prophet. He aims to change mankind by bringing them the great gift of the Overman, which he declares is the future toward which all human affairs should aim. In announcing the Overman, Zarathustra also prophetically announces an impending calamity by invoking the great danger of the last man. This impending calamity is uttered with a prophet’s “triple ‘Woe!’” (15). In Meier’s telling, Zarathustra the prophet is a “revolutionary,” whose “futurist teaching appears as an enemy to the status quo” (23). He seeks to gain power over the past by asserting power over the future. Friedrich Nietzsche, who is not ashamed to call himself “a destiny” in *Ecce Homo*, is similar in this regard. “You want a formula for such a destiny become man? That is to be found in my *Zarathustra*.”³

It is in Part II of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that Zarathustra begins to realize that his prophetic longings and his high hopes for the future of man have deceived him. He is unhappy, and he begins to long either again or for the first time for the self-sufficiency of the philosopher, and for the life of wisdom whose richness he did not fully appreciate in his loneliness on the mountain. His reversal is spurred by the fact that his going-under disillusioned him with men and politics. The men who heard his speeches did not truly have ears to hear him. He has been misunderstood and even ignored. He sought disciples among men, but his charges have proved unsuitable. Zarathustra’s disillusion with man reveals to him that his love of mankind originated in a deep dissatisfaction with mankind combined with a profound disappointment with the world as it is (75). Zarathustra twice weeps in Part II (89). The world is unbearable to the prophet, and this is precisely what made the prophet Zarathustra long to re-create the world and save it thereby. In Meier’s formulation, Zarathustra’s “orientation toward the future proves to be dependence on the future, on the imaginary” (75). Zarathustra’s futurist teaching of the Overman as the man of tomorrow is rooted in his indignation over reality. His longing to teach arises out of “a previously unacknowledged neediness” (81).

³ *Ecce Homo*, “Why I am a Destiny,” 2.

Zarathustra has gained self-knowledge about this neediness, and through him so has Friedrich Nietzsche. Zarathustra's task in the remaining parts of the book is to find and articulate a contentment that is independent of the caprices of mankind and thus independent of the success or failure of the prophet's attempt to change mankind.

The last two parts of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* show Zarathustra abandoning or overcoming his prophetic longings and embracing philosophy, understood as the life of the "knower." He frees himself from the prophet's desire to take revenge on reality at the same time that he realizes that the revenge-taking trap is likewise the "philosopher's greatest danger" (49). To overcome this vengeful danger Zarathustra confronts the will of the knower to do violence to the world by harnessing the spirit of revenge and transforming the world into what is thinkable for man (58). This vengeful desire to create the world in one's own image is the "Will to Power," and it animates the philosopher's desire to know the world as much as it does the prophet's desire to rule it. According to Meier, the doctrine of the Will to Power is not a solution for Zarathustra or for Nietzsche but rather a problem driven by anger or *thumos* in their souls that must be overcome (78). By exposing the Will to Power's operation on, or infection of, the will to truth, Zarathustra teaches that the Will to Power of the aspiring knower must be turned against itself and subdued. The Will to Power hinders the pursuit of truth because it poses falsely as the will to truth itself, bending reality into philosophic systems and formulas according to its own wishes and prejudices. This resembles what a prophet does when he propounds a futurist prophecy like that of the Overman, which Zarathustra realizes was meant to tyrannize the world by making the past, present, and future appear intelligible through the prism of a single fact. "Once Zarathustra too cast his delusion beyond man, like all backworldsmen" (21).

To avoid the pitfalls of a revenge-seeking Will to Power, the knower must awaken himself to the psychology of his own Will to Power and turn against it in a laughing feat of self-conscious self-overcoming (61–62, 77). Zarathustra's most famous doctrine, the doctrine of the Eternal Return, serves as a linchpin for the process of overcoming the desire for revenge because it teaches that liberation from indignation over reality is possible only by saying yes to becoming as a whole. One must will what is past as past, what is present as present, and what is future as future. The Eternal Return is merely a doctrine because it prepares the knower's disposition for the search for knowledge but does not itself consist in knowledge. In Meier's terms, Zarathustra teaches

that the knower's will "must be converted to the belief that it is the ground of the acceptance of the world as it is, so that the world is in harmony with the direction of the will's willing" (79–80). In an especially insightful section of *What Is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?*, Meier discloses seven meanings or "steps" of the Eternal Return, the fourth and central of which is that "in the teaching of the Eternal Return, the teaching of the Overman finds its complement and correction.... By negating the neediness of redemption of that which was, it puts in its place the spirit of revenge at work in the [prophet's] futurist vision of the eventual triumph over nonsense and senselessness" (184). The Eternal Return is a teacher's tool rather than a philosophic principle.

In the rich conclusion to *What Is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?*, Meier asserts that the most well-known aspects of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* all recede behind the fact that the book is "a monument to self-understanding for the philosopher" (187). Nietzsche's attack on Christianity, his attempt to establish a new aristocracy, and his doctrines of the Overman, the Will to Power, and the Eternal Return are all ancillary to the self-knowledge-seeking crux of the book. In Meier's view, Nietzsche sought to "test out options and play through possibilities" with these doctrines and pronouncements, none of which he makes his own despite their being inextricably connected to his name in the popular and scholarly imaginations (188). For Meier, no comprehensive doctrine or system emerges from Zarathustra's teaching because Nietzsche "will neither abet the confusion of philosophy with a doctrinal edifice, nor provide additional nourishment to the foreseeable elevation of a tool of knowledge and means of understanding into a metaphysical principle" (189). Nietzsche did not write a book entitled *The Will to Power*, nor did he write one entitled *The Eternal Return*. Instead, the self-knowledge he acquired in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* compelled him to begin speaking of the philosopher's task (not the philosopher's doctrines) in the writings that followed its publication. In Meier's interpretation, Nietzsche takes up the philosophic life in *Ecce Homo* and he confronts the question of what a philosopher is in *The Antichrist*, finally providing answers to the questions he began exploring in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Meier's 2019 book *Nietzsches Vermächtnis: "Ecce homo" und "Der Antichrist"* (C. H. Beck) examines these writings and is forthcoming in English translation.

What Is Nietzsche's Zarathustra? is a book that scholars with even a tangential interest in Nietzsche will find invaluable. For anyone with a deep intellectual interest in the subject matter, the book is essential. That said, readers who do not fully subscribe to Meier's careful manner of reading may balk at what could look to some like an overwrought and overreaching esotericism

that pervades both Meier's book and his interpretation of Nietzsche's book. Deliberately convoluted paragraphs that run four full pages or longer are common in *What Is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?*, and Meier does a stupefying amount of arithmetical gymnastics to count words and verses that fit into groups of seven and three. Consider the following characteristic passage: "The refrain constituted by the three identical verses, which invoke return seven times and eternity three times seven times, contains Zarathustra's sevenfold declaration of love for eternity, the sevenfold expression of his desire for the 'nuptial ring of rings,' and the sevenfold assurance never to have found 'the woman' from whom he wanted children, except it be eternity" (126).

That Nietzsche was an esoteric writer is beyond dispute, but the manner of his esotericism is richer and more profound than the mere counting of threes, sevens, and arithmetical centers reveals. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he says that "the difference between the exoteric and the esoteric, formerly known to philosophers," is that "the exoteric approach sees things from below, and the esoteric looks *down from above*."⁴ He adds that "there are books that have opposite values for soul and health, depending on whether the lower soul, the lower vitality, or the higher and more vigorous ones turn to them: in the former case, these books are dangerous and lead to crumbling and disintegration, in the latter, heralds' cries that call the bravest to *their* courage." Meier's interpretation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is masterful, but it would be invigorating to see him integrate Nietzsche's living way of reading and writing into his scholarly dissection of these bio-graphic works.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 30, in *Basic Writings*, trans. Kaufmann.