

AN INTRODUCTION TO
NIETZSCHE AS
POLITICAL THINKER

The perfect nihilist

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Introduction

Speaking directly, the ultimate possible attitudes toward life are irreconcilable, and hence their struggle can never be brought to a final conclusion. Thus it is necessary to make a decisive choice.

Max Weber, 'Science as a Vocation' (1919)

Nietzsche is an ambiguous and paradoxical thinker whose writings never cease to disturb, provoke, and inspire, even when they challenge one's innermost convictions. He has been a key figure on the intellectual and cultural landscape for over a hundred years, and his thought has to be reckoned with. As Martin Heidegger once put it, everyone who thinks today does so in Nietzsche's light and shadow, whether they are 'for' him or 'against' him. He is important because he was, first and foremost, a philosopher of *life*, not because he is now academically respectable and has all the dubious status of a 'modern master'. Nietzsche's writing deals with the most important questions about what it means to be a human being (he defines man as the *questioning* animal). For Nietzsche, however, this existential questioning about human identity cannot be separated from an understanding of history (especially of morality), of culture, and of politics.

For most of this century Nietzsche's political thought has been a source of confusion and embarrassment. The consensus which held sway for several decades from the end of the Second World War until quite recently, was that Nietzsche was not a political thinker at all, but someone who was mainly concerned with the fate of the solitary, isolated individual far removed from the cares and concerns of the social world. This view was

typical of those, such as the renowned Nietzsche translator and biographer, Walter Kaufmann, who tried to rescue Nietzsche's writings from the abuse they had suffered at the hands of Nazi ideologists and propagandists. However, the result was a dehistoricised and depoliticised interpretation which put a closure on a key aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy: his political thinking. Recent years have seen the publication of a number of major studies on the topic of Nietzsche's political thought. As a result, the centrality of Nietzsche to the concerns of human beings living in late modernity, and trying to grapple with the political dilemmas of their existence, is now widely recognised. It remains the case, however, that his overt political thought continues to embarrass some and confuse many. Inquiry into the political dimension of Nietzsche's thought still remains the most contentious and controversial aspect of Nietzsche-studies.

Nietzsche is a thinker preoccupied with the fate of politics in the modern world. One has only to take a glance at his wide-ranging concerns – from his early reflections on the Greek *agon* to his attempt to write a genealogy of morality and his diagnosis of nihilism to characterise the moral malaise and sickness of modern human beings – to realise that Nietzsche is a 'political' thinker first and foremost. I am convinced that there is need for a much more sensitive approach to the topic than has hitherto been adopted.

Nietzsche's political thought is often dismissed and ignored because it fails to conform to liberal and democratic sentiments which have prevailed over the last two hundred years. The moralistic way in which Nietzsche's political thought has been treated hitherto polarises the debate between moral decency (the good liberal) and immoral or amoral power (the bad elitist – Nietzsche). Informing a great deal of the appreciation of Nietzsche is the illiberal supposition that the only way he can speak to us today is on our terms or not at all. We may want to reject Nietzsche's political thinking, deeming its solution to the immense problems facing modern human beings to be inadequate, but that should not mean that we can find no instruction in his work. As in life, so in Nietzsche's work we find both great danger and great promise. Nietzsche himself shows us this.

In the first two chapters, dealing respectively with the question of 'style' in Nietzsche and the issue of his legacy, I offer a general introduction to Nietzsche in which all the salient features of his thought are touched on. Chapters three to seven cover Nietzsche's intellectual trajectory, and show what is of political import in his various writings and principal texts, beginning with his early reflections on the ancient Greeks and closing with his notion of 'great politics'. The next two chapters, chapters eight and nine, look at how Nietzsche's ideas have been appropriated in recent political thought, focusing on issues within contemporary liberalism and feminism. In the final chapter, chapter ten, I offer my personal view of how we ought to take up Nietzsche's legacy and appropriate his thought today. In sum, I offer a picture of Nietzsche as 'the perfect nihilist'.

Every reading of Nietzsche is both a deconstruction and a reconstruction, conditioned by history, time, and place. This book is no exception. It has no pretensions of presenting a definitive and exhaustive treatment of the subject or the topic. Writing on Nietzsche, and interpreting the meaning and significance of his work, is a problematic, if not perilous, exercise. The important thing, I think, is to ensure that the *question of Nietzsche* – of who he is and of who we are to become in reading him – is kept open.

Nowhere in his writings does Nietzsche ever present a systematic account of his political thinking. This is not surprising since his deepest intellectual instincts were 'anti-system'. Nevertheless, his thinking is dominated by two interrelated themes. These are the problems of culture and of history.

From first to last Nietzsche is concerned with what he regards as a permanent conflict between culture and politics: what are the goals of art and culture? Should the organisation of society serve the ends of politics (justice) or those of culture? Which type of polity is best able to promote 'culture' (that is, the cultivation of greatness and true human beings)? Nietzsche's political thinking is based on a complex, and unusual, justification of economic relationships of exploitation and domination

(at one point he even defines ‘morals’ as ‘the doctrine of the relations of domination (*Herrschaft*) under which the phenomenon of “life” comes to be’, *BGE* 19). Nietzsche believes that the production of human greatness requires that society be established along the lines of a hierarchical social structure (an order of rank – *Rangordnung*). Some form of slavery is, for him, necessary for the creation of culture to take place. In *Beyond Good and Evil* he argues that the creation of ever higher, more complex, and hybrid human types requires there to be distances between human beings, distances which can only be created through certain kinds of social structures and economic relationships. An ever new widening of distances within the soul, making possible the attainment of rarer and higher, more comprehensive, states of being, can only be cultivated through certain social arrangements and a particular form of politics (*BGE* 257). Nietzsche is fully aware of the legitimacy of the demands of politics, but argues, in what he considers to be a ‘hard truth’, that the cry of compassion cannot be allowed to tear down the walls of culture.

Nietzsche’s thinking on the problem of history begins with his first published book *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1872. The problem which preoccupies him is that of how we are to interpret the suffering, pain, cruelty, and horror which characterise world-history. Is it possible to provide history with any meaning and significance? Nietzsche’s answer is that we cannot allow ourselves the comfort of a teleological view, of either human history or the universe, which would give them a final goal and purpose. Suffering, cruelty, pain, and ‘sin’ (sacrilege) are ineradicable features of human existence. What matters is how we comprehend them. Nietzsche urges us to fight for the rebirth of a tragic culture since it is only such a culture which is able to create a space (a *polis*) for the disclosure of human being in all its variegated nature. However, the most important medium for the disclosure of the ‘truth’ of human being, according to Nietzsche, is not politics, but art. He believed that it is through an appreciation of tragic art that the individual can attain a standpoint *beyond* his narrow personal existence and achieve Dionysian insight. It is art, for Nietzsche, which not

only affords us the deepest insights into the human condition, but which also enables human beings to give meaning and significance to the terror and absurdity of existence (art as truth). A society established on absolute moral values of good and evil is unable to comprehend the 'general economy of the whole'. Moreover, a society based largely on instrumental and utilitarian values, and determined by power-politics and driven by a 'money-economy', such as Nietzsche found in the modern German state, is incapable of arriving at a proper conception of culture. It is important to appreciate that the 'art' Nietzsche speaks of and esteems is *public* art, that is, art such as Greek tragic drama, which gathers together a people or community and discloses to them the 'truth' of their existence. One could say, therefore, that in this sense the experience afforded by art is political. Much depends on how we conceive the word 'political'.

It is often argued that Nietzsche's 'aestheticism' (captured in his formulation that it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that life and existence can be justified) is inadequate to deal with the problems life calls upon human beings to solve. In the face of the apparent moral nihilism of Nietzsche's so-called 'aestheticism' (by which is meant an attempt to extend the category of the aesthetic to all spheres of life) many find it necessary to advocate an explicit moral (and moralistic) standpoint of good and evil. However, a simple opposition between art and morality cannot be attributed to Nietzsche. Neither is the charge of 'aestheticism' wholly applicable to his thinking. This, I believe, is to misunderstand his thinking on art and morality. As I argue in this book, for Nietzsche we need art not to make us immoral, or to take us beyond the sphere of the ethical, but to enable us to carry on being moral in the face of our recognition of the terror and absurdity of existence. Writing in the context of the emergence of Bismarck's German *Reich*, Nietzsche is severely critical of 'politics' (by which he means *Machtspolitik*) as a way of addressing, or solving, the problem of human existence (*SE* 4). From his early to his last writings Nietzsche's thought is characterised by an opposition between 'Geist' (spirit) and 'Reich'. What humanity needs is not a violent political

revolution, but changes in education and in its ways of thinking. It needs to ground 'spirit' in a conception of 'culture'.

In many respects Nietzsche's critique of modern politics has much in common with the political thinking of Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59) and John Stuart Mill (1806–73). Like Tocqueville, for example, Nietzsche sees hidden dangers in the new political realities opened up by the modern industrial world, modern democracy, and a money-economy. Modernity for both is characterised by social atomism, moral malaise, and the cultivation of private experience and private taste at the expense of public action. This creates a political culture that is lacking in vigour. The danger of this degeneration of politics, in which politics is dominated by the class interests of the modern money-economy and by the instrumental rationality of modern technology, is that it can lead to a situation in which people lose political control over their own destinies and become politically apathetic. At this point the 'state' – the 'cold monster', as Nietzsche liked to refer to it – begins to dominate political life and to cultivate the tyranny of the majority ('public opinion') at the expense of individual liberty and genuine public action (this menace, also clearly seen by Mill, is what Tocqueville referred to as 'soft despotism').

Like Tocqueville, Nietzsche gave a pejorative flavour to liberal individualism. Both saw modern individualism as resulting in a self-centred preoccupation with purely personal ends. For Nietzsche, the danger is that society will lose sight of the importance of culture and allow philistinism to take over. Society becomes made up of a herd of 'last men and women' who are concerned only with 'happiness' (understood in the sense of the satisfaction of material desires) and who cannot conceive of anything higher or nobler beyond (*über*) themselves. These people no longer wish to cultivate themselves, to engage in risks and experiments, but seek only a dull and safe 'bourgeois' existence. As Nietzsche saw things, somewhat presciently, the problem of German society was that it was becoming dominated by purely power-political interests (*Machtpolitik*), and, in its struggle for national identity through statist and militarist policies, would experience the end of

culture, making itself ripe for the flourishing of a crude and aggressive nationalism. Throughout his life Nietzsche (the philosopher of will to power!) opposed the principles and aims of *Machtpolitik*. For him an adequate conception of politics is one which sees it as a means to an end; the production of culture and human greatness. Once our conception of politics becomes dominated by the concerns of material power, then, according to Nietzsche, we are unable to provide human social existence with any spiritual or cultural justification. With the notion of the *Übermensch* Nietzsche tries to envisage a human type which is spiritually higher and nobler than the kind of narrow egoism and materialism which he, like Tocqueville, saw as prevailing in modern societies. The revolution that Nietzsche sought was not a political revolution, but an educational and cultural one. He makes this clear in his writings from first to last. How the writings of this most spiritual of thinkers could be employed in the service of German material and military power (the total opposite of what he had in mind) is something I shall examine in chapter two of this book.

What sets Nietzsche apart, however, from the likes of Mill and Tocqueville, is the depth of his insights into the modern moral and spiritual malaise. For Nietzsche, the problem is not just a social or political one which can be solved simply by refining and improving liberal-democratic institutions and practices. He sees Western civilisation caught in the grip of debilitating and demoralising nihilism in which our most fundamental conceptions of the world are no longer tenable and believable. Nihilism is thus a condition which affects the metaphysical and moral languages through which we fabricate an understanding of the world and on which we base our acting in the world. Nietzsche gives examples of concepts such as 'aim', 'unity', 'purpose', 'truth' itself, 'pity', 'justice', and so on, to illustrate the depth of the crisis as he sees it. All of these concepts he believes are in need of a comprehensive self-examination. If God is dead, and if we have lost the traditional metaphysical-moral structure which enabled us to make sense of existence, to give it a meaning and a purpose, how is it possible for us now to interpret the world and to give meaning

to our lives? How can we endure such an experience and overcome it? For Nietzsche the event of nihilism affords us the opportunity of rethinking the aims and goals of social existence (of politics): why does society exist? What purposes should it serve? How should it be organised and for what ends? Today it remains as necessary as ever to think through the problem of nihilism and perform Nietzsche's demand for a reevaluation of all our values.

There are no easy answers in life, only difficult choices. To comprehend the weight of these choices it is necessary to pose the right kind of questions. This is what Nietzsche helps us to do. We err if we approach his work from some undeserved height of moral superiority. Labelling a thinker of his greatness a 'Fascist' on account of his confusions and excesses – and ignoring his nobility of mind and character, as well as the appositeness of a great deal of his *political* thought – is not a sign of insight, but of moral laziness and intellectual stupidity. We not only do Nietzsche a great disservice in this respect, but ourselves too.