
Preface

My aim in this study is to look at Nietzsche in light of critical and postmodern political thought. This means that the study is not primarily about Nietzsche's own political theory, but rather about what his philosophy as a whole implies for political thought today. My interests here are less scholastic than theoretical: I am especially interested in Nietzsche's pivotal role in the transition from modern to postmodern approaches to philosophical issues, and in what this transition implies for political thought. By "modern" I generally mean to characterize rationalist approaches that, roughly since the Enlightenment, have relied on metaphysical (that is, real but nonempirical) characterizations of human agency as a knowing subject and rational actor. By "postmodern," I simply mean those approaches that try to do without metaphysical characterizations of human agency—attempts that begin, at least self-consciously, with Nietzsche.

My own sympathies lie halfway between modernism and postmodernism. On the one hand, I accept a number of the ideals of modern rationalism, including the notion that humans ought to be able to use their reason to decide on courses of action, control their futures, enter into reciprocal agreements, and be responsible for what they do and who they are. My suggestion throughout this book, however, is that these ideals are possible only within a postmodern view of the world: modernism lacks an account of how its ideals are possible. We ought not to presume that the individual capacities we usually think of as defining one's agency, subjectivity, or self (terms I use more or less interchangeably) are metaphysically given. Rather, it seems to me that we must find ways of thinking about how these capacities emerge within a contingent, historical universe.

It is with this concern that I return to Nietzsche, whom I take to be the first thoroughgoing postmodern, and who has in many ways become the symbol of postmodernism. But it is also important for my concerns that Nietzsche is not simply postmodern, if by “postmodern” one means only to identify ways of thinking that break with modernist categories and ideals. In important ways he reconceives central ideals of modern rationalism, especially the ideal of humans as agents with capacities for freedom, sovereignty, reciprocity, and responsibility. If I am right, Nietzsche reinterprets these ideals as immanent possibilities of human practices, and at the same time uses these possibilities to distinguish between better and worse practices. The result is what I shall sometimes refer to as a “critical postmodernism.” As I suggest throughout this book, the bulk of contemporary literature has missed this critically postmodern Nietzsche, much of it consisting either in traditional or modernist rejections, or in postmodern celebrations. This polarity of interpretations has made it difficult to engage those aspects of Nietzsche from which we might learn.

The interpretation I offer is, of course, contestable. Nietzsche’s texts move in very many directions, and which of these one deems most important is as much a function of current concerns as of the texts themselves. In looking at Nietzsche through questions of postmodern transitions, I take the liberty of developing and exploring these suggestions in ways that I see as consistent with Nietzsche’s philosophy. In certain cases—mostly those involving his political thought—I suggest that developing some aspect of Nietzsche’s thought would violate another, and I conclude that the conflict itself is important for assessing his limits. What I am interested in here are the problems themselves, and the manner of Nietzsche’s approach. I leave it to the reader to decide the extent to which my ways of dealing with these problems are in Nietzsche or are my own extrapolations based on what I take to be fruitful suggestions. The line between these possibilities is not always clear in an interpretive project, and this one is no exception. I do not mean to imply that Nietzsche’s texts place no limits on possible interpretations. To the contrary, it seems to me that making sense of postmodern transitions in political thought especially requires making sense of those texts that seem contradictory, enigmatic, or incomprehensible, as well as attending to those many texts that are usually ignored.

Yet even methods of textual reading and selection are controversial, including those I use here. Perhaps most controversial will be my approach to the question of the continuity between Nietzsche's philosophical concerns (about ontology, epistemology, and ethics) and his political visions (about what is a possible and desirable political life). Typically, one makes the methodological assumption that a thinker's positions are cut from the same cloth, that they are consistent pieces of a more comprehensive whole. I assume that this unity exists in Nietzsche, but I do not assume, as do many commentators, that his philosophical positions uniquely determine his political judgments and conclusions. Rather, I argue that his philosophical concerns are narrowed by a number of assumptions about social and political life. These assumptions are both insupportable and extraneous to his postmodern concerns, as is evident once they are identified. By isolating these assumptions, I aim to show both the continuity within Nietzsche's thought and how—once one removes the insupportable assumptions—the political possibilities of his philosophy are much broader than he himself imagined or desired. My interpretive goal is to liberate the possibilities of Nietzsche's postmodern transitions from the distortions of his politics, but without ignoring his politics, and without eclecticism. I make this argument at length in the last chapter of this book, and presuppose it in the first part, where I am mostly concerned with the possibilities of Nietzsche's thoughts about human agency.

Another controversial point of method will be the way I use Nietzsche's texts to support my interpretation. I assume that his texts are consistent with one another, and I draw textual support from all his works, often to support a single point. I do so respecting only the differences between published and unpublished materials, as well as differences between early, middle, and late works. One objection to this approach will be that it ignores the importance of style in Nietzsche because it fractures the unity of each work. This unity of style and substance is not accidental, but reflects Nietzsche's concern with overcoming the metaphysical implications of language when used in propositional form. The substance of what Nietzsche has to say can only be appreciated by interpreting the movement and continuity of single texts.

That Nietzsche's style is a form of argument is beyond dispute, and no one who has enjoyed the beauty, wit, and force of his writing

could wish to dispute it. Much of what Nietzsche has to say can only be appreciated through careful attention to the movement of his texts, and many contemporary interpretations are exemplary in this respect. Yet this is never enough, nor for that matter is it even a good way of entering Nietzsche's thought. When one infers meaning from style, one presupposes a specific account of how this is possible, in terms of relations between rules and meanings, between author and audience, and between interpretation and practice. This means that one ought to be able to reconstruct an *explicit* account of the kind of world in which some kinds of truths or insights cannot be formulated in direct propositions. Indeed, failure to articulate these assumptions can lead to conclusions that are bizarre, as well as being quite uncharacteristic of Nietzsche. It is common in literary interpretations of Nietzsche, for example, to confuse the world with a text by mistaking reality with discursive reality, points I explore in chapters 2 and 5. Moreover, there is a general tendency in readings that emphasize style to fall back on metaphor and style too quickly, often as a way of explaining apparent contradictions or other points that seem inexplicable. Thus, Nietzsche's straightforward propositions are ignored, and he is made to seem inarticulate and fuzzy—something he almost never is. This in turn is often used as an excuse to provide preferred readings of Nietzsche, or simply to make the point, after which nothing more can be said. What I am suggesting is simply that a critical reconstruction of Nietzsche's philosophy needs to coexist with readings of style and metaphor. I intend to provide such a reconstruction here.

Another point of controversy will be my reliance on portions of Nietzsche's *Nachlass*—his unpublished notes, manuscripts, fragments, plans and the like, many of which were collected by at the behest of his sister, Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche, under the title *Der Wille zur Macht* (*The Will to Power*). There are two schools of thought on the use of the *Nachlass*. At one extreme is Heidegger, who argues that the *Nachlass*, especially *The Will to Power*, contains the philosophy that Nietzsche intended to and would have written, had he not lost his mental capacities.¹ Nietzsche did in fact leave dozens of plans for a *magnum opus* to be entitled *The Will to Power*. At the other extreme is Bernd Magnus, who argues that the *Nachlass* ought not to be used at all since Nietzsche rejected his plan to write a book entitled *The Will to Power* in 1888, several months before his insanity.² Moreover,

what was eventually published as *The Will to Power* was based on an outline and included a number of notes that he rejected in February 1888. Thus what we have today as *The Will to Power* is nothing more than a random collection of notes written between 1883 and 1888, whose philological status is ambiguous at best. Magnus suggests that the primary motivation of those who use *The Will to Power* in their interpretations of Nietzsche is to find notes that portray a “metaphysical” Nietzsche, a Nietzsche that is less postmodern than the image that comes from his published texts alone. Heidegger is a case in point. In contrast, most of the *Nachlass* that does not rely on metaphysical language was incorporated into published work in one way or another. For these reasons, Magnus argues that there are no good reasons for referring to the *Nachlass* at all.

I take the position of a moderate on this issue: Heidegger clearly uses the *Nachlass* to give a “metaphysical” reading of Nietzsche, something I shall comment on in appropriate places. Yet the fact that the *Nachlass* can be abused, that *The Will to Power* can be confused with one of Nietzsche’s books, and that the notes are often tentative and sketchy, does not mean that they ought to be avoided altogether. The issue is rather one of knowing when referring to the *Nachlass* is appropriate. It is clearly inappropriate when there is a conflict between notes and published works, as there sometimes is. In these cases, one must simply note the conflict and opt for the published material. But in other cases, the notes are extremely useful. Sometimes they throw light on terse and unelaborated comments in the published texts. Often, they give insight into the ways in which Nietzsche thought, again making the task of understanding his published work less formidable. Finally, there is material in the *Nachlass* that is clearly implied in the published work, but not spelled out. It is especially in these latter cases that we must speculate on Nietzsche’s motives for not publishing these notes. Certainly, he may have simply decided to reject them. But we also know that he did not have time to finish his work before his insanity, notwithstanding his immense productivity in the few years preceding. Plans for a major work, for example, were not dropped when Nietzsche finally rejected the plan for a book called *The Will to Power*. He replaced *The Will to Power* with plans for a new *magnum opus* in four parts, to have been entitled *Umwertung aller Werte* (*Revaluation of All Values*), of which *The Antichrist* was to have been the first part. Thus we might quite reasonably

expect to find anticipations of future work in the *Nachlass* that never appeared in published work. What these considerations suggest is that while one must be cautious in using the *Nachlass*, it would be foolish to reject them out of hand. In my use of the *Nachlass* here, I follow a few simple rules. Where there are conflicts between the *Nachlass* and published texts, I opt for the published texts. Where the texts are similar, I favor the published versions. Where I use material that can only be found in the *Nachlass*, in many cases I provide references from published texts that would support my interpretation.

A final point of methodological controversy has to do with the division of Nietzsche's texts into early, middle, and late periods. Most commentators agree that there are differences between these texts, but differ as to their significance. I see the divisions as significant for problems of postmodern transitions, and divide Nietzsche's published texts accordingly. *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) is the only purely "early" work, and is distinguished by Nietzsche's metaphysical use of categories (see chapter 2 on this point). The four essays that comprise the *Untimely Meditations* (1873–1876) are transitional: residual uses of metaphysical explanations remain, but the burden of argument does not depend on them. *Human, All-Too-Human* (1878–1880) and *Daybreak* (1881) are middle period works, characterized by criticisms of prevailing values. One finds no metaphysical residuals here, but also little philosophic reconstruction. *The Gay Science* (1882) is transitional to Nietzsche's mature works: here one finds a systematic concern with how interpretations relate to forms of life, power, and historical evolution. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885) is the first fully mature work, in which one can find most of the central themes and arguments of the mature period. This is followed by *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), which contains the most comprehensive of Nietzsche's philosophical analyses, and is in turn followed in rapid succession by *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), *The Case of Wagner* (1888), *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (1888), *The Antichrist* (1888), and *Ecce Homo* (1888). Since these texts contain most of Nietzsche's philosophic reconstruction, I rely most heavily on them, and read earlier texts as anticipations of mature conclusions.

A comment on gender biased language is no doubt in order as well, especially in light of Nietzsche's well-known misogyny. Where Nietzsche's own language is gender biased, I replicate it in order to

avoid anachronistic usage. In my own usage, I have tried to reconcile neutrality with style, except in those very few cases where gender specificity actually makes a difference to Nietzsche's points. Regrettably, there are a few cases in which neutral alternatives would seem clumsy, forced, or distracting; in these cases I have opted for compromises in which gender biased language wins out. For this I apologize in advance.

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