

# Review of Nietzsche and the Politics

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Book Review by Peter Berkowitz

A review of Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism by Bruce Detwiler.

Almost from the beginning, Nietzsche's thought has aroused intense partisan passion. Early on, scholars associated with the Right, and more recently, critics on the Left have claimed Nietzsche a spiritual forebear. Nietzsche scholarship has been distinguished less by the axes on the ground and the political and personal agendas advances than by the astonishing variety of causes, movements, and schools of thought which have found inspiration and sustenance in Nietzsche's philosophical investigations. The enthusiasm for enlisting Nietzsche on behalf of some moral, political, or philosophical conviction or another has unfortunately been accompanied, or perhaps fueled, by an unwillingness to examine closely Nietzsche's own moral and political convictions. Therefore, students of Nietzsche and of political philosophy should welcome Bruce Detwiler's fine new book. Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism, for it offers a careful, wide-ranging survey of Nietzsche's political reflections and deftly relates those reflections to the fundamental conceptions of Nietzsche's thought: the death of God, the will to power, and the eternal return.

Detwiler begins by identifying and clarifying what he relates as the key question of Nietzsche's politics, namely, how does he reconcile or understand the relationship between Nietzsche's radical skepticism and his recurring vision of an aristocratic political order single-mindedly dedicated to the production of creative genius? Detwiler fully considers and rejects firmly a currently dominant tendency to discount or even sweep under the rug Nietzsche's express moral imperatives and political prescriptions. Detwiler's thesis, defended and deepened in each chapter, is that "Nietzsche's political ideas are a logical and in his [Nietzsche's] view necessary consequence of his other concerns; the political dimension cannot be excised without distorting the whole" (p. 13). Whereas Nietzsche's radical skepticism, many think, leads to the conclusion that nothing is true and everything is permitted (and, by an odd leap, ought to therefore be tolerated), Nietzsche's own venomous intolerance of democracy, liberalism, socialism, and Christianity suggests that Nietzsche concluded, to the contrary, that very little ought to be permitted or tolerated.

Detwiler, weaving together an impressive range of passages, argues that Nietzsche, in response to the engulfing nihilism he diagnosed, envisaged a new artist-philosopher endowed with a "godlike" and "redemptive power of creativity" (pp. 28, 29) who saves mankind from the enervating effects of the death of God by fashioning a radically aristocratic political order which has as its highest and indeed sole purpose the cultivation of artist-

philosophers. Detwiler, unencumbered by indignation (or enthusiasm), calls attention to the illiberal, antidemocratic, and merciless spirit of Nietzsche's conviction that the self-creation of the artist philosopher is the prerogative and right of the very few. Detwiler, moreover, emphasizes that the promotion of such self-creation and the enforcement of such a right is for Nietzsche the exclusive task of just politics.

Can Nietzsche's artist-philosophers satisfy their superhuman desire to make themselves the author of their own existence through engaging in political life, even the exalted politics practiced at the pinnacle? Detwiler thoughtfully reviews variants on the view that Nietzsche's fundamental position was antipolitical. Detwiler roams freely, and for the most part surely, through Nietzsche's vast writings (without hereby denying himself judicious recourse to the *Nachlass*), Detwiler established that Nietzsche frequently links the self-perfection of the rare individual to the perfection of mankind. Moreover, Detwiler observes that Nietzsche persistently praised ruthless political leaders such as Julius Caesar, Cesare Borgia, and Napoleon as higher types of man. On the other hand, Detwiler acknowledges that for Nietzsche personally the philosophical life was all consuming and led away from politics; that Nietzsche found modern politics repellent; and, most important, that Nietzsche condemned every tendency to deify the state (pp. 59-61).

Still, Detwiler insists that Nietzsche's extreme antipathy to politics, particularly as understood as disgust for the actual politics practiced by his contemporaries, is consistent with a radically aristocratic political vision, provided that one remains mindful of the fact that Nietzsche unwaveringly evaluates the political sphere according to whether it promotes or hampers the enhancement of man. One possibility touched upon though not fully explored by Detwiler is that Nietzsche conceives of the supreme human being in such a way that the political sphere, while perhaps a fit arena for the higher men in which to test their mettle, is, however arranged, ruinous for the highest enhancement of man. This possibility is suggested, for example, by Zarathustra's designation of the one poised to pursue the way of the lover, which is also the way of the creator, as "the lonely one [*der Einsame*]" (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, part 1, "On the Way of the Creator"); by Nietzsche's affirmation that he and free spirits like him are "born, sworn, jealous friends of solitude, of our most profound, most midnightly, most middaily solitude" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 44); and by Nietzsche's intriguing praise of Jesus, whose attainment of eternity within time is inseparably bound up with his radical repudiation of political life (*The Antichrist*, secs. 27-36).

Detwiler minces no words in insisting that Nietzsche's understanding of human excellence, indeed the "whole of Nietzsche's political enterprise" is indissolubly linked to the death of God (p. 69). In opposition to much contemporary scholarship, which exhibits a deafness to Nietzsche's cry of distress, Detwiler argues that Nietzsche viewed the death of God as an epic theological-political event constituting an unprecedented catastrophe for mankind. The death of God symbolizes not merely the withering away of religious belief but the disintegration of the foundations on which stand the standards of social justice, personal morality, and right and wrong, to which the Right as well as the Left appeal. A crisis for the

human spirit arises since the enhancement of man requires “perpetual struggle against severe consequences,” but the basis of severe constraint, sacred constraint, threatens to perish, with the death of god, from the face of the earth.

Yet as Detwiler properly emphasizes, the death of God, on Nietzsche’s account, also gives rise to an unparalleled opportunity for the artist-philosopher (p. 70). Nietzsche’s madman wonders whether the only worthy response to the death of God would be for man to become a god (*The Gay Science*, sec. 125). Detwiler suggests, correctly I believe, that Zarathustra’s superman, a self-made god, was intended to supply a solution to the political and spiritual crisis wrought by the death of God. In one of the rare instances, however, in which Detwiler’s argument outstrips his evidence, he asserts that Zarathustra “never adequately reveals what the superman entails” (p. 98). This decisive assertion, unfortunately, does not appear to emerge from a careful investigation of Zarathustra’s efforts to expound the superman’s powers and aspirations (*Zarathustra*, prologue and part 1), nor is it evidently based on a study of Zarathustra’s subsequent attempts to transform himself into the superman and gain redemption by achieving command over time itself (*Zarathustra*, parts 2 and 3). Rather, Detwiler’s casual and perhaps unintended disparagement serves to justify reading Zarathustra as a loose collection of aphorisms, assorted gems mixed in with the rubble. That is to say, it encourages one to not really read Zarathustra at all. Regrettably, Detwiler has deprived himself of observing how Zarathustra accepts the madman’s extraordinary evaluation of the moral imperative which stems from the death of God and how, despite his debilitating fears, Zarathustra embraces the duty to become a God.

Detwiler finds in Nietzsche’s career-long effort to articulate a Dionysian view of existence the key to understanding Nietzsche’s view of human perfection. While the early and late Nietzsche “explicitly look to Dionysian genius as the highest hope for mankind” (p.145), Detwiler emphasizes several important that Nietzsche’s view of Dionysus undergoes. Whereas the early Nietzsche conceived of Dionysus as a tragic artist, the later Nietzsche understood Dionysus as a new type of philosopher. Whereas the early Nietzsche associated Dionysus with intoxication and ecstasy, the later Nietzsche envisaged a Dionysian being who looked out on the world with a serene and self-aware fatalism. Detwiler does not flinch from reporting Nietzsche’s audacious conviction, uniting the early and late conception of Dionysus, that the task of the highest being is to bring a “new world into being like himself” (p. 155), that is, to experience divinity (p. 163), to create, like God, the world in his own image (p. 165), and to extend his power to encompass the world and finally stretch to eternity (p. 168). Arguably, however, it is not in but rather between the early and late conceptions of Dionysus that one finds the peak of Nietzsche’s philosophical investigations into the most choiceworthy life. For, particularly in Zarathustra’s speeches and deeds, one encounters not merely the announcement of but the immensely instructive attempt to enact the obscure, portentous, and supremely ambitious dream to achieve godlike mastery.

Detwiler's book, a model of scholarly restraint, probing analysis, and precise argument enriches our understanding of the intimate connection between Nietzsche's doctrine of human perfection and Nietzsche's recurring vision of a radically aristocratic politics. It also leaves the reader at a disquieting impasse. Detwiler believes that Nietzsche's philosophical radicalism is worthy of our admiration, that Nietzsche's politics is reasonably derived from that radicalism, yet in conclusion, he declares Nietzsche's politics horrifying (p. 196). Having labored long and hard to shed light on the unity of thought and conviction underlying Nietzsche's radical philosophical speculations, withering cultural criticism, and utopian political visions, Detwiler spurs one to wonder on what grounds, other than the very morality which Nietzsche's radical skepticism purports to discredit, to criticize or resist Nietzsche's intoxicating call to cultivate, heedless of cost, a new, superhuman caste of artist philosophers.

To break the impasse, Detwiler in conclusion tentatively proposes a promising line of criticism of Nietzsche's aristocratic radicalism. Detwiler asks whether God or all gods have, as Nietzsche maintains, died, and whether Nietzsche may have misconceived the foundations of Western morality (p.195). These questions deserve the most serious consideration, but coming as they do from beyond the borders of what Nietzsche considers indisputable, they will not carry conviction among those who dwell within these borders. Detwiler's skillfully crafted and illuminating book obliges students of political philosophy to explore whether the chill and distant commanding heights for which Zarathustra yearns and searches elevate or debase the human spirit. This question has the virtue of challenging Nietzsche on his own terms, since it is a crucial part of Nietzsche's enduring legacy to have taught the grandeur -- and the risk -- of loving what is noble.

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