

The Nazi Exploitation of Nietzschean Philosophy

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All things are subject to interpretation; whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth. – Friedrich Nietzsche

Introduction

This possibility for misinterpretation and distortion looms over the written works of all philosophers, threatening to misrepresent the author's thoughts so as to imply an intention that can many times be nearly the opposite of that in the original work. This must be the risk and understanding of anyone who makes the decision to put his or her personal thought into the public sphere. The inefficiency of language gives rise to the possibility of the misunderstanding of thoughts and ideas, especially in the study of philosophy. One can never make a statement that can completely defy confusion; language simply does not allow it. We rely on personal experience, knowledge, and opinion to interpret other peoples' words. This problem of personal perspectives is one of which German-born philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was quite aware. Ironically, much of the ideology of his work falls victim to misunderstanding and misrepresentation in favor of the Nazi Socialist Party.

The ordinary problem of language was compounded also by Nietzsche's stylistic writing choices. While many philosophers put forth their views and ideas in a very straightforward manner, often in the form of essays or notes, Nietzsche approached his writing differently. He wrote with the idea that philosophy was as much an artistic creation as painting or sculpting. He was aware that in the process of writing one's thoughts, they lose some meaning along the way. It was for this reason that he saw his

“written and painted thoughts”¹ as fictional. Using literary devices such as metaphors, symbolism, and aphorisms, Nietzsche created much room for misreading or confusion. His writing demands careful study. While this makes for much more exciting and interesting work, it also exponentially increases the possibilities of misinterpretation.

However, his work was not only misinterpreted; it was, in part, *intentionally* misrepresented. Upon his fall into madness in the last years of his life, Nietzsche’s sister, Elizabeth Forster-Nietzsche, gained control of, and acted as primary editor for, his literary estate. A prominent and vehement Nazi sympathizer, Forster-Nietzsche edited only select pieces of Nietzsche’s work and did so out of context, attempting to imply coherence between the ideas of her brother and Nazism.² Although her efforts were later revealed upon the discovery of forged notes and letters, the connection she created has influenced understandings of Nietzsche’s philosophy ever since. This has helped create the common notion that Nietzschean philosophy is dangerous and has led to the dismissal of many of the ideas introduced by this German thinker on the grounds of a counterfeit Nazi association.

This dismissal, in my opinion, is not only unfounded, but unfortunate as well. In fact, the philosophy of Nietzsche encouraged something quite the opposite of Nazism. A superficial and biased reading of his philosophical texts may be distorted as such; however, upon further evaluation, one comes to understand how different the two ideologies really are. If we are to take the philosopher at his written word, without assigning any assumed ulterior motives, the extent to which Nietzsche would have disagreed with Hitler and his party comes powerfully to light.

The Nazi party founded their pursuit of a pure Aryan race on several supporting premises, premises sometimes regarded as being in accord with Nietzschean philosophy. It is my intention to dispute this supposed accord by conveying my interpretation of his work. As Nietzsche would certainly recognize, though, my interpretation is as much a threat to his true intention as anyone else's. With this provision in mind, I find it an important task to try to relieve his work of the weight of ignominy it has borne in the spurious connection with the National Socialist Party.

A Brief Account of Nazism

Modern historical accounts of the reign of the Nazi party in Germany tend to focus the party's political ambitions and the proposed eradication of what they considered to be the "lower races" (namely the Jewish and "gypsy" populations) in an attempt to produce a "pure" German-Aryan people. But this alone did not lead to the atrocities of the Holocaust and World War II; several outlying principles held by the Third Reich led to the mistrust and hatred of anything perceived as un-German. After the German defeat in World War I, the Reich used propaganda and a rhetoric of fear and suspicion to spread the belief that Germany had been betrayed from within by the Jewish population. Using this alleged betrayal as a catalyst, the German State promulgated a vision of a homogenous population and the extension of a purified German culture throughout the surrounding countries, an objective that has come to be known as pan-Germanism.

Anti-Semitism, anti-communism, extreme nationalism, and a desire for more power and control over land and resources all drove the German State to pursue the goals set forth by the Nazi party and its leaders. Influenced by propaganda and fear, the people of Germany agreed to this cause even in the face of the horrific treatment of much of the

German population. Nazi political leader Adolf Hitler, known to be “unsurpassed as a public speaker, and bathed in the adoration of the crowd,”³ led enormous numbers of supporters through one of the darkest hours of European history. He set forth much of his ideology and philosophy in his book *Mein Kampf*, to which I will often refer as representative of the Nazi ideology as a whole.

Nietzsche’s Anti-German Sentiments

Of all Hitler’s declarations, in *Mein Kampf* as well as in public speeches and letters, the leading statement is the superiority and pride of the true German culture and the heritage of its people. It is upon this assertion of supremacy that the attack on the “lower” races was founded. Hitler often expressed the danger of allowing the greater race to be permeated by the lower races, claiming that “[a]ll great cultures of the past perished only because the originally creative race died out from blood poisoning.”⁴ It is from this type of logic that the Action T4 Nazi Eugenics Program was born in order to propagate only strong, pure German-Aryan stock and prevent the tainting of the superior by the inferior.

In his early years, Nietzsche too found a sense of respect for the culture in which he was raised, though not to the fanatical extent of the Nazis. Richard Wagner and Arthur Schopenhauer, both prominent and well-liked Germans, famously captivated him. Greatly affected by Romanticism, Nietzsche initially focused much of his philosophy on art and the drives of the human subconscious. However, as his philosophy developed further, Nietzsche grew critical of what he had once embraced. He became vehemently anti-Christian and anti-nationalistic. He disagreed with the growth of the anti-Semite movement and rejected the German-centered worldview and idealism, saying that “All great crimes against culture for four centuries [the Germans] have on their conscience.”⁵

He holds back little with respect to his disdain of the German culture. Much of the section entitled “The Case of Wagner” in *Ecce Homo* is devoted to expressing the reasoning behind this resentment.⁶ He even went so far as to renounce his German citizenship at age twenty-four and spent much of his life traveling outside the country, becoming simply a European citizen.⁷

This denial of German superiority would in itself be reason enough for Hitler to harshly denounce his work; however, in her underhanded attempts at uniting Nietzschean and Nazi philosophy, Elizabeth Forster-Nietzsche prevented *Ecce Homo* from being released. While some of his earlier works expressed anti-German sentiments as well, this posthumously published work was probably the most overtly articulate of these feelings. Even if they were not publicly known at the time, these negative assessments of the culture Hitler prized above all others demonstrated a stark incongruity between the two ideologies. This especially appears to be the case when one considers how the narrow-mindedness of Nazi Germany developed into a dangerous brand of nationalism that fostered an “us-against-them” mentality throughout Europe. The Europeans that did not support the goals of Nazism faced a country that was following the lead of a persuasive but dangerous dictator.

The “Triumph of the Will” to Power

This struggle between Nazi Germany and Europe at the start of the Second World War escalated as Hitler began to implement many of his objectives for the German State, particularly his desire to increase the *lebensraum*⁸ that he believed rightfully belonged to the Germans. Hitler looked eastward to Poland and Russia, which he saw as inhabited by “lesser races.” He then looked south to Austria and Czechoslovakia where he claimed

there were many German citizens residing. His attempts at expansion violated the agreements made in the Treaty of Versailles, but Nazi policy recognized what was viewed as the natural German rights before any agreements that had been made by man. His desire for the possession and control of land and resources in the name of Germany reflects what Hitler considered the definition of power. He expresses the importance of exerting this power in *Mein Kampf*. “In an era when the earth is gradually being divided up among states, some of which embrace almost entire continents, we cannot speak of a world power in connection with a formation whose political mother country is limited to the absurd area of five hundred thousand square kilometers.”⁹ It was ownership and desire for jurisdiction that drove Hitler’s will to power and made him attempt the overtaking of non-German land.

The Nietzschean definition of power is something much different. For Nietzsche, the “will to power” expresses something far greater than possession or control or even the will to survive. It is “unexhausted procreative will of life”¹⁰ and exists within all things. It is expressed not only in acts of violence, but also in acts of love and praise. It is creative and dynamic, allowing for struggle as an integral element of one’s existence. I choose this word, “allow,” quite intentionally. A theme that runs throughout much of Nietzsche’s work is the benefit of struggle and the opportunity for growth that springs from it. Perhaps this is a self-preserving theory in light of the string of tragedies and strife that seemed to characterize Nietzsche’s own life; nevertheless, it presents a useful prospect for all beings. It affirms the chance to prompt the growth and development of oneself through the overcoming of struggle by one’s subconscious will to power.

Admittedly, Nietzsche did write of exploitation and domination as a reflection of the human psychological “will to power.” specifically in his work *Beyond Good and Evil*. He states that “life itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one’s own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation.”¹¹ I, however, question the intent of such attitudes. I wonder if Nietzsche actually encouraged the type of behavior implied in these passages or if it is simply his extreme rejection of Christian values to the point of hyperbole. While I may be imposing my interpretation over the intent of the author, I deduce not an overcoming of others from Nietzsche’s writing, but an overcoming of the self. While the subconscious drives that define the will to power may encourage one to act in such a manner as to exploit the weakness in others in order to exert the strength of oneself, the ability human beings hold to make conscious moral choices would require a questioning of growth at the expense of others. While Hitler and the Nazi party did not think their actions morally corrupt, or at the least outwardly did not, I don’t hesitate to say that they were. I wonder: Did the expression of Nazi power at the expense of others actually prompt the celebrated and promised evolutionary advancement of the race? Would the possession of more land and resources in the name of Germany (Hitler’s idea of the will to power) have moved them further along the tightrope of human evolution? These may be rhetorical questions that cannot be answered, but my theory is that the answer to both is an unequivocal *no*. Power by possession is no match for the power to life.

Critique of Mass Culture

The pages of history are filled with hundreds of frightening photographs from the time of Nazi rule. The photographs show masses of people dead and dying, their eyes immersed in hate and evil; they show concentration camps and gas chambers, the factories and instruments of brutal hegemony. It is the images of Nazi rallies, though, that can in some ways be seen as the most frightening of all. Row upon row of Nazi soldiers and supporters, all dressed alike, holding similar banners and flags, enthusiastically hailing their leader, ready to follow wherever he leads. It is images such as this that show clearly the danger that lies in the impulses of the herd. Without a public waiting unquestioningly for the direction of their leader with open arms, the violence and cruelty captured in these chilling photographs may never have ensued.

Nietzsche often railed against this type of herd mentality and described the grave danger it posed to humanity as a whole. He referred to the herd animal¹² as “always the beginning of the end...they sacrifice the future to themselves.”¹³ Nietzsche criticized the man who blindly assumes the morality of antiquity and the values imposed upon him from high. He bewailed the stunting of human growth under the shadow of Christianity, a stunting maintained by the kind of blind acceptance illustrated by the Camel in *Zarathustra's Three Transformations*. There must, he says, be a reevaluation of values, a rejection of this passivity.

This is a theme Nietzsche returns to often. He frequently portrays Christianity as a disease that has stolen from man his ability to create his own morality and value system. Out of fear and a rejection of life, people have cleaved to religious dogma and followed the laws given to them instead of becoming “strong enough, hard enough, artistic

enough”¹⁴ to create their own. They are slaves to the morality of God instead of the masters of their own morality.

This criticism of religion, I believe, is easily translated to politics. People with a slave mentality yearn for someone to relieve them of the burden of self-responsibility. The danger that lies in the mindset of the mob is its willingness to follow wherever its “shepherd” leads and to reject anything different or unusual. This subconscious yearning for the relinquishment of responsibility is what often allows political leaders to rise to such a degree of power as Adolf Hitler did. Preaching the greatness of a pure Aryan race, the safety of homogeneity, and the danger of difference, offering the people of Germany a protection from evil with the extermination of Jews, Hitler and the Nazis were able to usher their flock into an era of terror and bloodshed. Such an instance of the many following the twisted ideology of the few, which would be, I would confidently venture, much to Nietzsche’s dismay.

The Quest for the Overhuman

A prominent element of the ideology that captivated Nazi Germany was the assertion of a “superior race,” a concept often confused with Nietzsche’s Overhuman. Unlike the Nietzschean drive toward an evolution of mankind, the goal for Hitler and his party was largely racially founded. The nationalistic pride fueling Germany called for an expansion of German race and culture and an establishment of empire. Pan-Germanism is a far cry from what Nietzsche intended in his idea of the Overman. In fact, I believe Nietzsche would reject many of the qualities of Hitler’s ideal Aryan-German.

The illusion of security that a sheep feels when following its shepherd is analogous to the ease of life felt when one simply follows the rules given to him from

authority, whether that authority is God, a human leader, or a combination of both. Betterment, unfortunately, often comes through strife; for Nietzsche, the continued evolution of humanity must come from a conscious overcoming of oneself. This *going under* and *going over* could result in the progression from the “last human” to the “Overhuman”—a progression that holds the potential to transform antiquated, life-rejecting values into the life-affirming ideals of the advanced man. Striving for betterment, humanity may overcome the infectious contentment and idleness of the “last human.”

The ease that the “last human” opts for is the parochial torpor that prizes sameness and mediocrity over exception. They choose to carry the weight of traditional values rather than forming their own, scoffing contemptuously at the thought of desiring anything more. There are “no herdsman and one herd! Everyone wants the same thing, everyone is the same: whoever feels differently goes voluntarily into the madhouse.”¹⁵ Nietzsche’s Overhuman breaks beyond this stagnation; the Nazi “Overhuman,” however, embraces it. A homogenous race of men and women who support and follow their State with nationalistic enthusiasm and look for the betterment of humanity through the spreading of a singular culture (namely, German culture): this is Hitler’s desire. This could never be, however, with a population comprised of many different kinds of people. The Nazi Overhuman’s evolution becomes possible only with the death of the other and the eradication of difference.

The Nietzschean Overhuman evolves by way of death as well, though not that of humanity; instead, this Overhuman makes his entrance via the “death of God.” With the loss of the values and morals that have been externally imposed, there is the opportunity

for human beings to understand the parallel between their own evolution and that of their morality. No longer stagnant and forced, morality could be seen as evolving, dependent not upon stone tablets or law-books, but upon people themselves. Hitler did not hope to foster a personal creation of morality, but sought to have the population accept that of the Nazi Party. This is more a reflection of slave morality than an advancement toward the Nietzschean Overhuman.

While on a surface level the Nietzschean and Nazi proposals of the need for a change in humanity may seem similar, each contradicts and rejects the aspirations of the other. The Nietzschean Overhuman would make a poor follower of the Nazi party and the Nazi Overhuman possesses the qualities Nietzsche condemns as characteristic of the Last Human. Though both are speaking of a superior humanity, they clearly have differing ideas as to what this superior humanity would be as well as what it would take to begin the journey of evolution toward it.

The Character of Master and Slave Morality

Much of Nietzsche's essay on *The Genealogy of Morals* focuses on the distinction between the two types of morality that were previously touched upon in my understanding of his critique of mass culture: master and slave morality. Though relevant to the understanding of herd mentality, these two systems of morals are influential in a greater respect also. Although the concepts were more fully developed after Nietzsche rejected Christianity, one of the foundational reasons for this rejection is the limit of human morality. On the other hand, Hitler strongly believed that his was the work of God and attributed his sense of ethics to the Creator. In both cases, the sense of morality that

was to develop, master or slave, depended upon either an embrace or rejection of religious views.

For one to develop a master morality, according to Nietzsche, one must reject Christian dogma. One cannot take personal responsibility for one's own ethics when he or she regards his or her actions as reflections of the commandments from a Higher Power. For Nietzsche, the realization that "God is dead"¹⁶ opens to one the possibility of becoming the creator of his own ethical ideals. He transforms and develops his morality based on a "triumphant affirmation of itself," as opposed to the man of slave morality, who "from the outset says No to what is 'outside,' what is 'different,' what is 'not itself.'"¹⁷ The slave looks to the external world for a drive to transform while the master looks inward. I believe this *ressentiment* describes the origins and development of slave morality altogether.

The slave looks outside himself for direction as to what exists as good or evil, how he should behave and think, and for the repercussions of his actions. The origin and transformation of his values depend on God—or, more appropriately, his understanding of the word of God or that of someone else telling him the how to infer the intent of God. Again, we come to the problem of interpretation. Many people act in ways that may seem evil to most, doing so in the name of God. Wars are fought in defense of religion, people are crucified as enemies of the Divine, and in the 1930's and -40's millions of people were murdered by the Nazi party, who believed themselves to be "the avenging hand of God."¹⁸ While in terms of human existence Plato saw our prison as the body, Nietzsche may have seen slave morality and its dependence upon external dogma as the prison we should reject.

The master, on the other hand, develops an internal moral view that progresses through personal effort. This self-overcoming is an integral part of the going over for the Overhuman. Through an affirmative “Yea-saying” like that of the child of *Zarathustra’s Three Transformations*, the master assumes personal responsibility for his morality and in doing so liberates himself from the confines of religion. While he may find himself lost at sea, a purposeful theme in some of Nietzsche’s work, he accepts this risk in an effort to triumph over the servile mentality of the “Last Human.” I venture to say that while the freedom of personal responsibility may be frightening, the possibility for growth that dwells in the depths of that tumultuous sea far outweighs the safety in the prison of religion.

Conclusion and Personal Reflection

In considering the history of humanity, it seems to be a habit for man to interpret the world as it best suits him. While philosophy is known to be the love of wisdom, “anyone who hears nothing in the background except a ‘will to truth’ certainly does not have the best of ears.”¹⁹ Our unconscious will to power refuses neutrality and objectivity; it is always working on our behalf. The reason will to power is so much more than a mere will to survive is that it participates in molding our vision of the world and strives to exert itself through it. Philosophy, as Nietzsche would offer, is our own creation. Our philosophy “always creates the world in its own image; it cannot do otherwise.”²⁰

I have found myself wondering, particularly during the research for this paper, about the relationship between our will to power and our morality. While I recognize the benefits of a master morality, I am not sure that this would lead to an entirely positive outcome for humanity. If our will to power is acting as such a powerful, unconscious

drive behind our imposing our philosophy and selfhood into our understanding of the world, this could engender a dangerous form of perspectivism. Is this nihilistic? Yes, however, in my view, very possible. If we all were to act as masters of our morality, creating a value system based on our own internal perspectives, whose perspective would be right? *Is there a right one?* Would not we each argue that our personal philosophy is correct, even though it is a creation of our own will to power? What would the outcome of a constant battle between our respective wills be?

Although it has created more questions than answers, at least for me, I am not refusing the philosophical views set forth by Nietzsche. If anything, I think I have just begun to realize the danger that he may represent for the philosophers of the future. It is not just a danger found in self-creation, but a danger also in the communication of what we find within ourselves. Nietzsche, I believe, faced both of these. The mental lapses and depression he suffered seem to be, at least in part, the result of a life spent in constant struggle with his morality and self. The products of this laborious introspection are the many great books and essays we have conveying his thought. It is in these works Nietzsche faces the second danger, that of our interpretation—and possible misinterpretation or self-serving re-interpretation—of the communication of his thought. It is this danger that we have seen in our discussion of how his writings were misappropriated by the Nazis. Perhaps if his work had been read without the Nazi will to power reading into it (and in turn asserting) its own self-preserving perspective, his work may have been accorded more validity and value since the time of his death. This discrediting of his work based on false associations may be simply the consequence of a vision of the future being reformed by hands of the “last humans.”

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¹ *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 296.

² "Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2008.

³ Orlow, Dietrich. *History of the Nazi Party 1933-1945*. London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973

⁴ Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kampf*.

⁵ *Ecce Homo*, Section 2.

⁶ He attempted to gain Swiss citizenship, but the process was never completed in his lifetime.

⁷ Pearson, Keith. *A Companion to Nietzsche*. Boston: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

⁸ German: "living space"

⁹ Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kampf*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983.

¹⁰ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "Self Overcoming."

¹¹ *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 259.

¹² More specifically, the "Good Christian"

¹³ *Ecce Homo*: "Why I am a Destiny," Verse 5

¹⁴ *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 59

¹⁵ Parkes, Graham. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

¹⁶ *The Gay Science*, Section 125.

¹⁷ *Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1 Section 10.

¹⁸ Toland, John. *Adolf Hitler*. London: Doubleday Books, 1976.

¹⁹ *Beyond Good and Evil*: "On the Prejudices of Philosophers," Section 10

²⁰ *Beyond Good and Evil*: "On the Prejudices of Philosophers," Section 9