

A Symposium on Jeffrey Church's *Nietzsche's "Unfashionable Observations"*

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and Hugo Drochon, with a Response by Jeffrey Church*

Jeffrey Church: *Nietzsche's "Unfashionable Observations."* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2019. Pp. 256.)

Introduction: Humanity's Creative Freedom and the Value of Culture

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If we lack belief in a transcendent deity that issues commands, if nature is devoid of purpose—not only indifferent to our aspirations but so thoroughly anarchic as to appear positively rebarbative to humanity's desire for meaning—if any criterion as to how we should live seems historically contingent and all absolute values appear relative to a particular way of life, where can we turn to find a touchstone for human conduct? By what standard might we distinguish between mere life and the good life? Absent criteria by which to make such discriminating judgments, how are we to justify our existence? Adrift in a sea of historical self-consciousness, humanity wanders aimlessly amid an abundance of pseudoscience; we know many things, but lack the one thing needful—knowledge of how we should live.

Jeffrey Church puts such questions center stage in his lucid, bold, and insightful interpretation of Nietzsche's *Unfashionable Observations*. While Church writes with the pedagogical aim of making the text more accessible, he never shies away from presenting Nietzsche's most provocative, unsettling, and even disturbing ideas. At the heart of Church's interpretation is the "fundamental problem" posed by "Schopenhauer's pessimistic challenge to the value of existence" encapsulated "in the story of Silenus" that Nietzsche recounts in *The Birth of Tragedy*: "When King Midas comes upon the 'wise Silenus, companion of Dionysos,' he asks, 'what is the best and most excellent

thing for human beings?’ Silenus answers, ‘the very best thing is utterly beyond your reach, not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon’” (16). This “fundamental problem” runs like a red thread through the book connecting Church’s multifaceted and subtle treatment of Nietzsche’s proposal that “the beautiful lives of exemplary individuals” might “justify existence” and “redeem the suffering of the world” (16, 213, 44; cf. 114, 125, 173).

According to Church, Nietzsche’s response to the wisdom of Silenus rests on an account of human freedom as radical self-determination. Transforming the Kantian ideal of moral autonomy in an aesthetic direction in light of the *Critique of Judgment*, Nietzsche argues that human freedom is realized not by conforming the will to the universal imperative of the moral law, but through creative adaptation and transfiguration of the given, the highest form of which is individual self-creation that precipitates cultural transformation. Since human beings are defined by their capacity for normative innovation, the peak of human excellence consists in supreme instances of “self-overcoming, on the path towards [an] ideal” (109; cf. 170). Humans justify their existence by realizing this capacity for freedom in the struggle for self-transcendence.

Kantian ideas of freedom serve throughout as a foil for approaching Nietzsche’s thought and one strength of Church’s book is its illustration of Nietzsche’s continuity with the central preoccupations of German idealism, especially the tension between “longing for wholeness” and our desire for perfection (21; cf. 65–70, 154–55, 220–21).¹ Thus, as for Kant, for Nietzsche freedom is the highest value, but unlike Kant, he held that freedom is realized not in pursuit of an a priori moral ideal but through the invention of new ways of being. While the telos of all human activity remains the ceaseless endeavor to transcend what *is* in favor of what *ought to be*, in place of Kant’s highest good Nietzsche posits the goal of forever “extending the concept of ‘the human being’ and of giving it a more beautiful substance” (UL, 97).² Furthermore, since such creative self-overcoming always occurs within the context of a tradition or culture, autonomy, on the Nietzschean model, is exemplified in the activity whereby a genius overcomes his origins in the culture that nurtured him by appropriating and transforming

¹On the centrality of this theme to German idealism see Richard L. Velkley, *Being after Rousseau: Philosophy and Culture in Question* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

²In this and the following contributions to this symposium, all references to Nietzsche’s text are to page numbers in *Unfashionable Observations*, trans. Richard T. Gray (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), the edition used in *Nietzsche’s “Unfashionable Observations.”* Citations will be given parenthetically, referencing the essay quoted according to the following abbreviations: “David Strauss the Confessor and the Writer” = DS; “On the Utility and Liability of History for Life” = UL; “Schopenhauer as Educator” = SE; “Richard Wagner in Bayreuth” = RW.

that inheritance so comprehensively as to found a new culture. The highest human types are those individuals who in fashioning themselves refashion everything and everyone around them.

As Church illustrates, the essence of Nietzsche's project is the promotion of such exemplary individuals through the reformation of existing German culture and the projection of a new object of admiration and aspiration. Nietzsche is, thus, attempting to perform the very act his book lauds as the peak of human excellence. This aim governs the book's organizational structure and rhetorical strategy, with the four essays falling neatly into a negative, critical half and a positive, prescriptive half: a withering assault on the regnant sociopolitical and spiritual world (and its correlated understanding of science) is complemented by an affirmative vision of the conditions, purposes, and products of a healthy culture directed to the promotion of human excellence. Accordingly, "David Strauss the Confessor and the Writer" and "On the Utility and Liability of History for Life" diagnose the ills besetting a decadent modern culture, while "Schopenhauer as Educator" and "Richard Wagner in Bayreuth" offer images of a new kind of excellence—one worthy of devotion and sacrifice. Contrary to the still common impression that the four essays are occasional pieces, distinct treatments of discrete topics, Church conclusively demonstrates that only by reading the four essays as constituting a unified whole governed by an overarching intention can we uncover the full richness of Nietzsche's attempt "to work against the time and thereby have an effect upon it" (UL, 87).

Yet this neat division into negative and positive halves by no means exhausts the principles at work in the book's organization, for different structuring principles reveal different facets of Nietzsche's argument. When read sequentially, the four essays reveal a subtle exploration of the dialectic between the individual agent and her culture, as Nietzsche moves from attacking a particular decadent individual, to identifying the underlying universal cause, to examining how an individual may extract herself from such decadence, before culminating in a description of how an individual genius might self-consciously create a new culture or form of *Sittlichkeit* in which subjective individuality and objective universality align. At the same time, however, "David Strauss the Confessor and the Writer" serves as a foil for "Schopenhauer as Educator," and "On the Utility and Liability of History for Life" for "Richard Wagner in Bayreuth"—the philistine scholar is contrasted with the genuine thinker and the stultifying effects of modern historical scholarship are juxtaposed with the life-affirming possibility of historically self-conscious great art.

Church's interpretation is full of interesting observations, unexpected connections, and nuanced reflections. His erudition and familiarity with Nietzsche's corpus clarify conceptual distinctions and illuminate textual obscurities. Yet the outstanding virtue of Church's work lies in the probing questions it raises about human nature and the search for meaning. The most serious political question that Church's Nietzsche helps us confront

lies in the deep connection between self-sacrifice and culture. To be self-transcending, the human being must also be self-sacrificing, but this raises the question of how one might create a culture in which individuals willingly divest themselves of something substantial that is their own for the sake of something higher, more noble, and more exalted that is not their own. Unless the culture offers a sufficiently compelling reason for self-sacrifice, no one will endure the pain of self-denial. We are thus left with a puzzle: If self-sacrifice and culture are coeval and conjoined, reciprocally dependent and codetermining, how does a genuine culture come into being? It seems that Nietzsche's answer is the creative genius, who can emerge even from a decadent culture to serve as inspiration and exemplar for others—as Nietzsche hoped Wagner would. Regardless of whether Nietzsche retained his faith in Wagner's aesthetic project, the heroic creative genius raises more questions than it answers; in particular, it leads us to reflect on Nietzsche's account of human freedom and to wonder about the relation between the common expression of freedom in service of an existing culture and the extraordinary activity of cultural geniuses that serve as legislators for the rest of humanity, presenting in their own person a new ideal prescribed by new tables of law. As this symposium attests, such questions take us to the heart of Nietzsche's thought, and Church is to be commended for writing such a stimulating and provocative book.

Freedom, Myth, and Science

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Unfashionable Observations is a difficult book. It can exasperate even Nietzsche's most dedicated students not only because it consists of four intricate and subtle essays, but also because the essays appear at first to be only contingently related occasional reflections provoked by a particular concern or interest. As I have argued elsewhere, the unity of the essays, the continuity of the intention animating their composition, and the logic of the book's overall argument become evident after repeated comparative readings.¹

¹Shilo Brooks, *Nietzsche's Culture War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). Like Church, I argue that taken together the essays offer a unified and coherent