

A Symposium on Jeremy Fortier's *The Challenge of Nietzsche: How to Approach His Thought*

Rebecca Bamford, Paul Franco, Rebecca Aili Ploof, and Graham Parkes, with a Response by Jeremy Fortier

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Introduction

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It is generally accepted that Nietzsche's thought evolved in significant respects over the course of his career.¹ As a result, readers of Nietzsche must eventually confront the question: How is Nietzsche's development to be explained, and to what extent do his different writings present us with different Nietzsches?² In *The Challenge of Nietzsche* I tackle that question by reading Nietzsche in light of the autobiographical self-assessments that he produced toward the end of his career. For, through those late autobiographical writings, Nietzsche shows what he found to be most challenging and most unsatisfactory about his own thought, at each major stage of his development. Nietzsche thereby applied to himself a principle that he asserted near

¹This point was made by the first major study of his thought, Lou Salome's *Nietzsche*, trans. Siegfried Mandel (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001). More recently, see the editor's introduction to *Introductions to Nietzsche*, ed. Robert Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–2, and the editor's introduction to *The New Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Tom Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 5–12.

²On the importance of this question for Nietzsche's readers, see Ruth Abbey, *Nietzsche's Middle Period* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xii; Keith Ansell-Pearson, *How to Read Nietzsche* (New York: Norton, 2005), 4–5; Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nietzsche's Final Teaching* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 20–21, 177; Laurence Lampert, *What a Philosopher Is: Becoming Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 8–9.

the very beginning of his career: "The only criticism of a philosophy that is possible and that also proves something, is to attempt to see if one can live according to it."³

My argument focuses on how Nietzsche used his writings to develop, and then retrospectively assess, two major character types, who also represent two distinct models of how to live: one, the free spirit, that strives to be as independent and critical of the world as possible, and one, Zarathustra, that engages with, cares for, and aims to change the world. According to my argument, Nietzsche developed the ideal of the free spirit in *Human, All Too Human* to help establish his independence from his former mentor Richard Wagner's project of regenerating Germany's cultural horizons by giving it new, inspiring, quasi-religious myths. But, as Nietzsche worked on *Human, All Too Human* (especially the final installment of the work, *The Wanderer and His Shadow*), he realized how psychologically difficult that degree of independence would be for any individual to maintain, because the desire to be part of some larger, world-changing cultural movement would persist. Moreover, when Nietzsche reevaluated *Human, All Too Human* towards the end of his career, he determined that its shortcomings exemplified an error characteristic of *all* would-be philosophers: namely, to begin by overestimating one's independence. The limitations of the free spirit ideal, and its defining trait of independence, led Nietzsche to reconsider the project of Wagner, and Wagner's leading theme of love. The loving care for and creative engagement with the world that Nietzsche had encountered in Wagner are revived through the character of Zarathustra—only Nietzsche has Zarathustra aim to accomplish something Wagner had not even attempted, namely, to love the world for what it truly is and then teach the world how to live in light of the truth. But Zarathustra's aim of loving the world for what it is and remaking it on that basis turns out to be no less challenging than the free spirit's aim of living a thoroughly independent life within it.

While it turns out to be extremely difficult to live as either a free spirit or Zarathustra, this does not mean that Nietzsche leaves readers at an impasse. For the autobiographical writings show that he came to see those competing alternatives as reflective of different but deeply ingrained aspects of human nature, which one must learn to negotiate between continually in order to learn ever more deeply about one's self. And I therefore conclude that the most important challenge left for Nietzsche's readers is not to identify one stage of his career or another as the more definitive statement of his thought, but, rather, to judge for themselves whether Nietzsche accurately identified tensions fundamental to human life—and, if so, whether his manner of navigating between those tensions in his own life can help others to do the same in theirs.

³Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, §8.

That said, the contributors to this symposium all weigh the balance between the different elements of Nietzsche's thought somewhat differently: Paul Franco, Rebecca Bamford, and Rebecca Ploof all highlight constructive, world-changing features of Nietzsche's thought that I put less emphasis on, while Graham Parkes argues that Nietzsche affirmed the world in a more thoroughgoing way than I recognize.

From Free Spirit to Zarathustra?

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Fortier has written an original and thought-provoking book. Part of its originality derives from its engagement with some of the less familiar texts in Nietzsche's oeuvre—for example, *The Wanderer and His Shadow* and *The Case of Wagner*; and part derives from the way this book avoids some of the standard debates in the voluminous scholarship on Nietzsche and establishes an analytic framework uniquely its own. The result is an interpretation of Nietzsche's thought that is both fresh and instructive.

The book puts forward two main claims, one methodological, the other more substantive. The methodological claim, alluded to in the subtitle of the book, asserts the primacy of personal experience in Nietzsche's thought. Nietzsche's writings are to be understood as growing out of and commenting on his life experiences. Fortier focuses on three such experiences: the drive for independence, the feeling of love, and the sense of one's overall health. And he draws heavily on Nietzsche's autobiographical writings—especially the preface to *Genealogy*, the 1886 prefaces to *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Human, All Too Human*, and *The Gay Science*, and *Ecce Homo*—to make the connection between his life and thought explicit.

The second, more substantive claim goes to the development of Nietzsche's thought and revolves around the figures of the free spirit and Zarathustra. Through an analysis of *Human, All Too Human* and its two supplements, Fortier shows that the free spirit is characterized by independence from and a critical posture toward the world. This position, however, proves to be untenable. In his later writings, Nietzsche comes to realize that the free spirit's desire for independence leads him to underestimate his dependence on community. Nietzsche remedies this defect with the figure of Zarathustra, who, out of love for the world, seeks to creatively transform it. But Fortier resists the easy conclusion that Zarathustra is simply superior to