
Response: Autonomy and Culture in Nietzsche's Early Period

Jeffrey Church

University of Houston

Few thinkers in the history of philosophy have given rise to so many utterly divergent—in many cases opposed—interpretations as Nietzsche. To write on Nietzsche is to court disagreement, as this symposium reveals. Every author has certain ideal readers in mind and the participants in this symposium, with their careful readings and insightful comments, were mine, and I owe them all an immense debt.

Nietzsche is himself partly to blame for these disagreements. As any reader knows, his writings, especially the later works, are ambiguous, elliptical, often cryptic. His aphoristic style forces scholars to reconstruct his views systematically, despite his own famous disdain of systematizers. His texts invite many different interpretations; this thrills some, but leaves others, like me, wondering how to distinguish between the intentionally provocative assertion, the deliberately one-sided hypothesis or exaggerated claim, and the poetic idealizations, on the one hand, and Nietzsche's final teaching, developed conclusion, and worked-out theses, on the other.

Nietzsche's rhetoric presents numerous interpretative challenges, not least of which is deciding how to resolve all the *prima facie* contradictory propositions his works contain. For this reason, I have focused my scholarship primarily on Nietzsche's early published works, especially *The Birth of Tragedy* and the *Observations*, where I believe Nietzsche not only expounds his views more clearly and at greater length, but also is more honest about his intellectual debts and his continuity with the tradition of classical German philosophy. His early work can give us a clearer picture not only of Nietzsche's views, but of his philosophical motivation and goals, which can help contextualize and illuminate his later works.¹

Nevertheless, the young Nietzsche still generates scholarly disagreement. Participants in this symposium have rightly focused on two of my most controversial claims. First, in response to the scholarly trend to read Nietzsche as a naturalist in his ethics, I argue that his ethics is a form of idealism in the broad post-Kantian tradition of autonomy or self-determination. Shilo

¹I discuss Nietzsche's early writings in *Nietzsche's Culture of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) and *Infinite Autonomy: The Divided Individual in the Political Thought of G. W. F. Hegel and Friedrich Nietzsche* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2011).

Brooks and Kimberley Burns in different ways challenge this view, especially my claim that the early Nietzsche seeks to dispel myth, illusion, and metaphysics as part of the project of leading an exemplary human life in modernity. Second, in response to the scholarly debate about Nietzsche's politics—radical aristocrat or agonistic democrat—I argue that he synthesizes both into a form of meritocracy. Just as Burns questions the egalitarian aspect of my reading, so Rebecca Bamford and Hugo Drochon challenge my view as still too democratic.

Myth, Culture, and the Good Life

The standard reading of Nietzsche's early period is that he dallied with Schopenhauerian metaphysics and willfully embraced myth as central to a healthy culture and good life. This reading helps divide Nietzsche's work into distinct periods, as it is commonplace to argue that in the middle period Nietzsche turns from metaphysics and myth to affirm science and truth. I argue that this standard reading of the *Observations* is mistaken for several reasons. One of the most important concerns philosophical coherence: If he thinks that the highest truths are myths, how are we to evaluate Nietzsche's own normative truth claims about an exemplary human life? Brooks challenges my reading on textual and philosophical grounds. On textual grounds, he points toward the myth making Nietzsche lauds in Wagner's works and that he himself subsequently practices in *Zarathustra*. Wagner is engaged in reviving and constructing ancient myths that could speak to and vivify German culture, and Brooks is indeed correct that the young Nietzsche admired this.

However, there are two ways to think of "myth" here. On the one hand, in the first section of the "Utility and Liability," as is often argued, Nietzsche holds that healthy cultures need to close their horizons, that they must believe in something false—a myth—so as not to be enervated by the weight of history. On the other hand, myth can function in a work of art quite differently. Neither Wagner nor Nietzsche intend German culture to believe once again in Wotan, Brunnhilde, or the Valkyries. Indeed, part of Wagner's point in the *Ring* cycle is to bring about the end of belief in myth, the twilight of the gods. Instead, myths or fiction function as imaginative representations of deeds and worlds that express something true about humanity. Brooks, then, is right that Nietzsche affirms the importance of imaginative representation to capture truth, in contrast to abstract philosophical representations, for instance. Yet this is quite different from the standard scholarly view of the early period—which is my target—according to which Nietzsche asks us to consciously believe in false things. It is this latter interpretation that I critique.

On philosophical grounds, Brooks argues that for Nietzsche, modern science reveals the deadly truth about the sovereignty of becoming, which

undermines any claim to universally valid truth. If there is no being, there can be no truth, so it is myth all the way down. I mentioned above the incoherence of holding such a position, so let me point out here why the sovereignty of becoming does not in fact undermine ethical truth. The sovereignty of becoming would undermine ethical truth if we derived knowledge about how to live from nature (in this way, Brooks offers a nice argument against the naturalist interpretation of Nietzsche). However, I argue that Nietzsche adopts a neo-Kantian view whereby nature provides no normative standard for how to conduct our lives. Human freedom, by contrast, is the basis of normativity. Nietzsche departs from Kant, of course, in many ways, and in his view, exemplary self-determining individuals become the highest expression of the value of freedom. For this reason, in several places in the *Observations*, he envisions these exemplary individuals as erecting bridges over the Heraclitean stream of becoming (e.g., UL, 151; SE, 211). For Nietzsche, then, our highest truths refer not to the natural world, but to what we have made, our highest, most enduring achievements, those exemplars who create something lasting amid the ever-changing natural world, who create being in a world of becoming. Like Kant, Nietzsche holds we can only truly know what we have made. Thus, exemplars are not myths, but rather real people, such as Rousseau, Goethe, Schopenhauer, and they express and embody real human tendencies. They become the object or end of Nietzschean philosophy, and this turn to exemplary freedom represents Nietzsche's own turn toward the primacy of the practical, to use Kant's term, away from the classical conception of the theoretical life's submission to nature.

Burns challenges my Kantian reading of the early Nietzsche. First, she points out the tension between autonomy and the elitism in Nietzsche's assessment of human beings. She asks, in particular, how the many can express freedom when the few transform culture and sweep them away. As I read the *Observations*, Nietzsche envisions a potentially much more collaborative relationship between the many and the few. As he points out in "Richard Wagner," the genius needs the many to prepare the way for him, "the person who wishes to give something must see to it that he finds takers able to appreciate the significance of the gift" (RW, 259). Exemplary individuals, then, are not born, nor do they emerge ex nihilo—metaphysical claims that would violate the "deadly truths" discovered by modern science (UL, 153). Instead, they complete the work of the many, and so the latter can be self-determining through their exemplars, since these few geniuses both express and transform a way of life. These geniuses draw out the intimations of greatness in a people, while also destroying what is base in them.

Second, Burns asks: Why must freedom end up always directed to cultural ends? It does not seem much like culture if we are not free to direct our lives in a different way. Yet Nietzsche does not conceive of freedom as following your particular individual genius wherever it leads, to whichever experiment in living it takes you. In this way, he differs sharply from J. S. Mill, to whom liberal-democratic readers of Nietzsche sometimes compare him. The

Millean approach assumes human life in all its diversity is valuable or worth living. To be truly free, for Nietzsche, demands inquiry into the value of human existence, the most fundamental and distinctively human question. For this reason, he lauds the artist, saint, and philosopher, since these are the vocations devoted to submitting themselves to answering this question. These lives constitute a culture, and so for this reason only the cultural life is truly free.

Finally, Burns argues that the value of autonomy must be grounded on some metaphysical claim, and so Nietzsche cannot be as anti-myth and anti-metaphysics as I claim. This is quite a difficult point, treated more extensively in my *Nietzsche's Culture of Humanity*. The basic point I make there is that value for Nietzsche does not come from nature or pre-given substance and so from any metaphysics. Instead, it comes from a certain problem besetting humanity as a whole, namely, that human life lacks intrinsic value—a problem posed by indifferent nature and encapsulated in the Silenian question quoted in Wilford's opening contribution about whether it is better never to have been born. Value then derives from the use of our freedom in fashioning a solution to it, namely, those exemplary individuals who bring meaning and purpose to human existence.

Culture and Politics

If my Kantian reading of Nietzsche has been controversial, my more meritocratic interpretation of his politics has also been heavily criticized, especially in reviews of my 2015 book. As I see it, the problem with the aristocratic view of Nietzsche's politics is that it tends to negate human agency, freedom, and responsibility, seeing genius as the result of nature alone. At the same time, this view is right, and the democratic view wrong, to the extent that for Nietzsche, only a few individuals will be able to achieve the difficult task of becoming truly free, as only a few are able to overcome the daunting obstacles placed before cultural excellence. The democratic view, however, is correct in seeing that for Nietzsche all human beings have the potential for excellence, we all are "one-of-a-kind miracles," as he puts it in "Schopenhauer as Educator" (SE, 171). I do not develop a democratic reading of Nietzsche as a few scholars have in different ways in recent years, such as Lawrence Hatab, James Conant, and David Owen. Yet I do think that there is a democratic tendency in Nietzsche's thought. This tendency is emphatically not an attempt to make equality the overriding or highest value or goal in culture at the expense of excellence.

Bamford challenges the democratic element of my interpretation of "Richard Wagner." I agree that Nietzsche is a critic of the democratizing of culture. Nietzsche's democratic sentiment is to recognize that freedom is of value, and that all human beings are free (even if very few of them take up the difficult task of realizing their freedom). As a result of this

commitment, Nietzsche does not conceive of the relationship of the few and the many as predatory, in which the few exploit the many, and in which the exploitation is justified as necessary to achieve the higher value of excellence. Instead, the unequal relationship must benefit both the many and the few. Nietzsche argues in the *Observations*, as well as in his later work, that the deeds of the exemplar bring meaning to the existence of the many, indeed these exemplars honor and redeem the existence of humanity (e.g., SE, 233). Wagner, for instance, also has this aim, which is one of the reasons the young Nietzsche so admired him. Perhaps this is a strange use of the term “democracy,” but my point is that Nietzsche’s comprehensive aim is to redeem humanity as a whole, not just the few geniuses with the many serving as sheep.²

Second, Bamford argues that it is best not to think of the people as sharing in self-determination or really demonstrating any kind of autonomy. Instead, we should conceive of Nietzsche’s exemplars as alone bringing about human development of many distinct types. However, it is not clear to me how exemplars could effect change without help. As stated in my response to Burns, exemplars are not divine figures able to miraculously tear themselves away from their culture. Goethe, for example, is a product of German culture as all Germans were. What makes him distinct is that he was able to draw on some productive currents in German culture to transform it and create something new. We would distort the role of the people in the genesis of the exemplar if we overlooked them. This is the mistake monumental historians make in suggesting that great individuals emerge solely through their own effort, as Nietzsche points out in “Utility and Liability” (99). Nietzsche distinguishes between the *Volk*, with its “unity of artistic style that manifests itself throughout all the vital self-expressions of a people [*Volk*]” (DS, 9), and the *Masse*, which are “deserving of notice” as “faded copies of great men” or as “tools of the great” (UL, 154).

Finally, Bamford suggests that self-determination is not the right way to conceptualize the activity of exemplars. They are engaged in creating new human types. I am not sure I see what the opposition between autonomy and creativity here is. In my view, they go hand in hand. To be self-determining requires realizing one’s own uniqueness. Yet to be truly unique requires that one contrast one’s character with the great unique individuals of the past. If one is successful in doing so, one has created a unique character. If this unique character is then successful in transforming and founding a culture, it becomes the pattern for a new human type. In other words, autonomy is the normative basis for human types, and its end is the creation of a new type. Without the appeal to autonomy, I fear, we have no reason to affirm new types.

Drochon argues that Nietzsche brings politics and culture together in an attempt to unify them. His own book offers a compelling reading of

²Cf. *Birth of Tragedy* 8, 33.

Nietzsche's lectures on the pre-Platonic philosophers as a way to substantiate this claim. By contrast, I think that Nietzsche aims to drive culture and politics apart, to carve out a space for culture apart from the state, which gives his early thought a liberal, though not a democratic, character. Our disagreement turns, in part, on what we mean by "politics." In his late period, Nietzsche will describe philosophic activity as legislating the whither and for what of human beings. This view of philosophy can be traced all the way back to "Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks," in which the philosopher is described as a legislator of value. Nietzsche employs the language of politics here, but I do not understand him to be describing narrowly political activity. That is, the legislation of value by the philosopher is not carried out by the institutions of the state. It is not enforced through coercion. Instead, Nietzsche employs the language of legislation metaphorically to describe the kind of principles the philosopher creates to found the community of culture. Indeed, Nietzsche uses the language of legislation as part of his Kantian heritage, as well.

I must qualify my argument that Nietzsche opposes culture and politics, so as to clarify the motivation for their separation and perhaps bring Drochon's and my views closer together. As Drochon recognizes, Nietzsche approaches the relationship between culture and politics historically. The ancients and moderns are different in important ways on this matter. Like his forerunners Schiller and Hegel, Nietzsche conceives of the ancient world as an immediate ethical unity, demonstrating a wholeness of character between culture and politics, making political and cultural life indistinguishable from one another. However, as humanity moves into the modern age, the community fragments. The state diverges from culture and adopts an abstract, mechanistic relationship to the people, eventually attempting to co-opt culture for its ends (e.g., SE, 219–20). Under modern conditions, then, Nietzsche is deeply concerned about the state and its tremendous power to destroy culture, which he witnessed under Bismarck. It seems unlikely, then, in this context that he would advocate a philosopher-king taking the reins of the state, since in such a case culture would be imposed on the people through an abstract, mechanistic relationship, which is hardly a good way to disseminate culture. Under modern conditions, the best thing the state can do is get out of the way of culture, to let philosophers and artists engage in cultural legislation, not coerce bodies toward these ends. It is in this context that Nietzsche opposes politics and philosophy. He argues that "anyone who has the furor philosophicus will have no time whatsoever for the furor politicus" (SE, 239). Furthermore, though Nietzsche admired Plato and the idea of the philosopher-king, he points out that in real politics, whenever his plan is implemented, it is "exchanged for that of a hobgoblin" (SE, 244). In sum, then, I agree with Drochon that Nietzsche aligns culture and politics for the ancients, but disagree that he wants to do so in modern life. It is both impossible and undesirable under modern conditions.

Drochon poses a difficult final question, however. What about the last humans? What about those who remain resistant to cultural persuasion, and so instead must be forced to support culture? It is possible that this is a valid concern about the late period, at which point Nietzsche has become much more pessimistic about the possibility of cultural renewal than he was in the early 1870s. Yet I expose many more commonalities between the early and late period than is often appreciated, particularly on the overall ethical and cultural aspiration of Nietzsche's philosophical project. In the entirety of "Schopenhauer as Educator," Nietzsche makes little mention of coercion, except in the case of "provid[ing] protection" of property rights (SE, 238), and of the philosopher justifiably coerced by the state in order to restrain his transformative power (SE, 244). Instead, as we have seen, that essay affirms that every human being is a unique miracle, so it would be strange if Nietzsche would advocate coercing such beings, as that would be no longer treating them as unique beings. He calls on human beings to consecrate themselves to culture, not to be sacrificed to it (SE, 216). These moments among others in the *Observations* point to Nietzsche's fundamental Kantianism, that all human beings have the capacity to be freely self-determining, and coercion negates or violates this basic freedom. It is of course possible that Nietzsche jettisons such fundamental ethical commitments in his later work. But it seems unlikely, and we are given little indication in Nietzsche's own corpus of a change of view on this matter.