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Charles M. Yablon

Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, yablon@yu.edu

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NIETZSCHE AND THE NAZIS: THE IMPACT OF NATIONAL SOCIALISM ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF NIETZSCHE

*Charles M. Yablon**

INTRODUCTION

Time moves in only one direction, but causation moves in two. That prior events affect those that follow is fundamental to our understanding of the world, Humean skepticism notwithstanding. But almost equally fundamental to our modern understanding of the world is the realization that absolute knowledge of the past is not possible, that our perception of historical events must always and inevitably be shaped by current concerns and perspectives, including our knowledge and judgment about events subsequent to those being studied. In short, the past affects the future, but the future also affects the past.

This is perhaps particularly true when the historical subjects involved are not discrete and isolated events, like the Second Punic War or the reign of Henry the Eighth, but philosophical ideas associated with a particular historical figure. Two forms of philosophical history uneasily co-exist within the modern academy. One seeks, within the limitations of all historical inquiry, to understand the works of Plato, or Aristotle, or Hegel, as products of their age, to recapture, if you will, the original intentions of their authors. Such works are philologically informed and very sensitive to historical context. The other form of scholarship is more concerned with taking philosophical ideas associated with the works of Plato, Aristotle, Hegel or others, and analyzing, refining, modifying and extending them in light of modern day issues and concerns. These scholars are less concerned with historical accuracy than with the cogency, power and philosophical coherence of their positions. Of course, these are tendencies and predilections rather than exclusive categories. Even the most

* Professor of Law, Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law. I wish to thank all the participants in the Nietzsche conference and particularly Peter Goodrich, the conference organizer, for support and helpful comments.

freewheeling post-modern Aristotelians or Hegelians feel a certain obligation to find a source for their idea in the writings of the Master. Even the most scrupulous historicists will explain that they study Plato in the original Attic Greek because his ideas are still relevant and important to us today.

Accordingly, when we speak of the philosophy of Aristotle, or Hegel, or Nietzsche, we are speaking of both more and less than the philosophical ideas in the mind of a single individual who wrote books many years ago. We are speaking about a set of ideas, and perceptions of those ideas, which had their historical origins in the writings of a specific individual, but which can and do change in response to subsequent events.

This paper is titled *Nietzsche and the Nazis: The Impact of National Socialism on the Philosophy of Nietzsche*. I hope that my prior discussion of causation and philosophical history makes it clear that this title is neither a misprint, nor an impossibility, nor a category mistake. Rather, it is an attempt to examine how the extensive adoption, interpretation and use of Nietzschean philosophical concepts by the Nazi regime, including, most importantly, the philosophers and interpreters of Nazi ideology, have affected and influenced the perception and interpretations of Nietzschean philosophy in the periods that followed. The existence of such an impact seems both undeniable and inevitable. Nietzsche was by far the most prominent and respected philosopher utilized by the Nazis as a source and justification for their ideology. Nietzschean concepts pervade Nazi propaganda, as well as the more academic work of Nazi philosophers. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that Nietzsche's work occupied a position of influence and authority in Nazi Germany not unlike that of Marx' work in the Soviet Union.

For post-Nazi era interpreters of Nietzsche, the central role that Nietzschean philosophy played in the Third Reich is an unavoidable fact, yet one that poses enormous difficulty for subsequent scholarship. For the many who find Nietzschean philosophy brilliant, deeply rewarding of intense study, and the source of powerful insights about humanity and the world, must somehow explain how the most brutal and murderous regime in the history of the world, and a nation with considerable philosophical sophistication, could find justification and support in those same works.

It is tempting perhaps, to say that the use of Nietzschean philosophy by the Nazis was largely pretextual, that Nietzsche was not so much the source of Nazi ideology as a convenient prop, a famous name to lend some intellectual respectability to the brutal,

racist and stupid ideas that made up the true Nazi ideology. There is undoubtedly much truth to this. Yet the fact remains that when the Nazi apologists sought an intellectual forebear to justify their horrific regime, they had the whole rich German philosophical tradition to choose from. It was no accident that they chose Nietzsche rather than Kant, or Hegel, or Leibniz. They saw something in Nietzschean philosophy that they could use. Indeed, they saw many things.

It is also tempting to say that the Nazis perverted the philosophy of Nietzsche, distorted many concepts, like the *ubermensch*, so that they were vastly different from their original meaning, and simply ignored other Nietzschean concepts that were incompatible with Nazi ideology. Again, there is undoubtedly much truth to this. But in order for this to be a fully satisfactory answer to the problem of Nietzsche and the Nazis, one must explain why certain accounts of Nietzschean philosophy which modify some concepts and de-emphasize others constitute "perversions" of the philosophy, while others are merely "interpretations." In short, one needs not just a theory of interpretation, but also a theory that will enable one to recognize incorrect, invalid or perverted interpretations of complex and ambiguous texts. In our post-modern world, informed, in no small part, by the philosophy of Nietzsche itself, it is hard to find such theories and harder still to believe in them. These statements are not meant as an indictment either of Nietzsche or of Nietzschean philosophy. Rather, they are intended to elucidate the way in which the Nazis' use of Nietzschean philosophy created deep and serious issues for the subsequent understanding of Nietzschean philosophy.

Let me be perfectly clear. I am not arguing, as some have previously done, that Nietzschean philosophy was, in fact, a forerunner of Nazi ideology, or at least contained the seeds of Nazism in some of its aspects. Even less plausible and more repugnant is the claim that Nietzsche himself was a proto-Nazi or had any sympathy for Nazi ideas and doctrines. I will stipulate that Nietzsche himself, unlike his egregious sister, was not an anti-Semite, but tended rather to philo-Semitism. He was not a German nationalist, but generally espoused a pan-European perspective. Indeed, to the extent that any ahistorical statements can be made with certainty, it seems certain to me that the historical Nietzsche would have been disgusted and repelled by Nazi ideas and Nazi ideology. However, except for those who are willing to limit the proper interpretative scope of a text to the ascertainment of the actual intentions of its author, I do not see

how this fact makes much of a difference to the problem I am posing.

Because it is an equally undeniable fact that the Nazis interpreted Nietzsche. They studied him assiduously, quoted him extensively, analyzed and expanded on key concepts, de-emphasized others and even "corrected" his "mistakes." In short, the Nazis engaged in pretty much the same enterprise we recognize as the study of philosophy, and concluded that the philosophy of Nietzsche anticipated and justified their goals of world domination and racial hegemony. These were not people lacking in philosophical sophistication. Indeed, it is probably the case that during the 1930s and early 1940s, the philosophers of the Third Reich constituted the most active and well-trained "interpretive community" of Nietzschean scholars in the world.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part, which draws mainly from the excellent book by Steven Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany 1890-1990*,¹ provides a brief overview of the facts concerning the relationship of Nietzschean philosophy to national socialism, and seeks to describe the ways in which certain key Nietzschean concepts were understood and interpreted by philosophers during the Nazi period. The second part of this paper examines the ways in which writings about Nietzsche in the post-Nazi period have responded to the Nazis' interpretation and use of Nietzschean philosophy. I will seek to set out a brief taxonomy of responses to the Nazi interpretations of Nietzschean philosophy, both as a means of understanding some post-Nazi writing about Nietzsche and the impact that national socialism has had on the philosophy of Nietzsche.

I. NIETZSCHEAN PHILOSOPHY DURING THE NAZI PERIOD

During the 1930s and 1940s, the association of Nietzschean philosophy with national socialism was considered by many philosophically trained individuals to be quite evident and obvious. This view was held by many (but not all) Nazi proponents and sympathizers, and also by many strongly opposed to the Nazi regime, as well as philosophically trained individuals who were ambivalent about the rise of national socialism. Even before the Nazis obtained power, Nietzsche had become the favorite philosopher of the radical right in post-World War I Germany. A key figure in this development was Alfred Baumler, a professor of

¹ STEVEN E. ASCHHEIM, *THE NIETZSCHE LEGACY IN GERMANY 1890-1990* (1992).

philosophy at the University of Berlin who was to become the Third Reich's authorized Nietzsche scholar. As early as 1931, Baumler portrayed Nietzsche as a prophet of Nazism, a primarily political thinker whose writings predicted the revolutionary conflicts in European society which the Nazis sought to bring about. Other well established Nietzscheans of the pre-Nazi period saw the rise of national socialism as a Nietzschean revolution which both fulfilled and elucidated the meaning of Nietzsche's work. For example, Ernst Horneffer, an editor of the *Nietzsche Archive* who in the pre-Nazi period is described by Ascheim as one of the foremost champions of a neo-pagan "Germanic Nietzscheanism"² had by 1934 become a committed Nazi who declared that Nietzsche did not belong to the nineteenth century but to "our time. It is as if he lingered on living among us."³ Similarly, Gottfried Benn, a talented German expressionist whose work in the pre-Nazi period focused on Nietzschean nihilism and the death of God, saw, in national socialism, at least for a time, the possibility of a transcendent Nietzschean community that was both "primal and future oriented,"⁴ since it portended the creation of a "new biological type—the Aryan, whose great task it was to do battle against decadence in all its guises."⁵

Whatever other sins these Nietzschean Nazis were guilty of, it seems clear from Ascheim's account that they were not insincere. They recognized that there were important differences and inconsistencies between the writings of Nietzsche and the doctrines of national socialism (although they obviously believed that the affinities and similarities were even greater). Accordingly, they developed a hermeneutics of Nietzschean thought which not only permitted reinterpretations and new understandings of Nietzsche's work, but actually justified such reinterpretations as superior to contemporaneous nineteenth century understandings of Nietzsche, including perhaps, even those of Nietzsche himself. On this view, it was the triumph of the Nazi regime itself which for the first time made a full understanding of Nietzsche possible. This was the meaning of Ernst Horneffer's statement that Nietzsche belongs "to our own time." It was echoed by Alfred Rosenberg's statement in 1944 that only "in our time" was a true appreciation of Nietzsche possible.⁶

At the level of popular culture in the Third Reich, these

² *Id.* at 222.

³ *Id.* at 236.

⁴ *Id.* at 68.

⁵ *Id.* at 69.

⁶ *Id.* at 237.

hermeneutic issues were cast aside, and Nietzsche was simply portrayed as the great prophet of the Nazi revolution. In the words of Franz Neumann, Nietzsche "provided National Socialism with an intellectual father who had greatness and wit, whose style was beautiful and not abominable, who was able to articulate the resentment against both monopoly capitalism and the rising proletariat."⁷ At a ceremony commemorating Germany's victory over Russia in the First World War, three books were placed in the Tannenberg Memorial: *Mein Kampf*, Alfred Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century*, and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.⁸ Nietzschean concepts provided a critical source and justification for many of the policies and reforms advocated in the Third Reich. Assaults on scientific objectivity were made in the name of Nietzsche, "the intellectual Fuhrer to a new culture." Concepts of universal law and equal rights based on immanent reason were rejected in favor of a Nietzschean conception of law as embodying "the strong unbreakable tie of the law to the power-political necessity of every Volk." Eugenic measures were justified by Nietzschean concepts of biologism and the doctrine of "holy cruelty." Yet, as Aschheim reminds us, although Nietzsche's works were published and distributed throughout the Third Reich "at a dizzy pace," those published works first went through a process of "appropriate editing."⁹

Although Nietzsche was in some respects the official philosopher of the Third Reich, unlike Hitler and the Nazi regime itself, he was not immune from criticism. It was possible in the Nazi era to espouse philosophies and doctrines totally antithetical to Nietzscheanism, to criticize Nietzschean concepts as wrong or incoherent, just so long as one remained a committed Nazi. For example, the Nietzschean rejection of objective value was criticized by neo-Kantian German philosophers, who argued that such a concept of objective value was necessary to ground the doctrines of national socialism. They sought to reinterpret Nietzsche not as a proponent of extreme relativism but as someone whose insights could be limited to an *a posteriori* account of human will and action.¹⁰

More severe critics of Nietzsche than the neo-Kantians were representatives of the Christian churches, who recognized in Nietzsche a powerful antagonist. Despite the expurgated nature of the Nietzschean texts being published in Germany, these critics

⁷ *Id.* at 235.

⁸ *Id.* at 239.

⁹ *Id.* at 245.

¹⁰ *See id.* at 256.

had no difficulty citing Nietzsche's "antinationalist, antiracist and pro-Jewish positions" as grounds for his rejection as philosopher of national socialism.¹¹ The fact that these groups and many other anti-Nietzscheans were free to criticize Nietzsche as insufficiently reflective of true national socialism indicates that the many other German intellectuals, including most German Nietzscheans, who saw Nietzsche as the great prophet and forerunner of national socialism were likely to have held such views sincerely, a reflection of serious study of Nietzsche's work, and not merely to ingratiate themselves with the current regime.

Even more indicative of the widespread belief among intellectuals in Nazi Germany that Nietzsche was the great philosopher of national socialism was the acceptance of this idea among intellectuals trained in other traditions. After all, for Nietzscheans like Baumler and Horneffer, the association of Nietzsche with national socialism, however sincerely held, was also a good career move given their chosen specialty. It is even more significant, therefore, that many non-Nietzscheans, both in and outside the Third Reich, saw essentially the same connection. We have already noted how German neo-Kantians, in an attempt to provide the proper philosophical grounding for national socialism, sought to merge Kant and Nietzsche. Outside the Third Reich, in 1934, Carl Jung began a five-year marathon seminar analyzing Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*. The analysis, of course, was a Jungian one, with Jung detecting a powerful resonance between Nietzsche's unconscious and the collective unconscious of modern man, particularly in the form it was taking in Nazi Germany. Jung's statements in that seminar indicate a deep ambivalence about the Nazi regime, praising it faintly at times and referring to "this modern political evil" at others. He did not waver, however, in his identification of Nietzsche with events in Nazi Germany, describing Nietzsche as "in a way the great prophet of what is happening in Germany" yet also viewing the actually Nazi understanding of Nietzsche's work as somewhat crude and pathological.¹²

Finally, there is Heidegger. The extent to which Heidegger supported national socialism in the early years of the Nazi regime, and had, by his own account, rejected it by the late 1930s, is a complex and much debated issue. What appears beyond dispute, however, is that for Heidegger, his position on national socialism was inextricably tied to his acceptance or rejection of Nietzscheanism. While Heidegger's works, particularly in the

¹¹ *Id.* at 254.

¹² *See id.* at 260-62.

early 1930s, contain positive references to Nietzsche and Nietzschean concepts, Heidegger claimed to have broken with Nazism by the late 1930s, and cited as evidence of that his lectures on Nietzsche in 1936-1937 and in 1939-40 which have been published and translated as a four-volume treatise titled "*Nietzsche*." The extent to which these lectures constitute a repudiation of Nazism is certainly open to debate, although they clearly reject the sort of simplified political Nietzsche of Baumler and other Nietzschean Nazis. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that Heidegger too viewed his positions on Nietzsche to be intimately linked to his position on national socialism.

In short, there can be no serious dispute that during the Nazi period, Nietzschean philosophy was strongly identified with national socialism, was seen as providing Nazism with intellectual depth and potential philosophical justification. This view was held not only by Nietzschean scholars in the Third Reich, but by German intellectuals trained in other philosophical traditions, as well as by many non-German, non-Nazi intellectuals.

Yet Nietzschean pronouncements were never accepted blindly. Despite the expurgated versions used as school texts, Nietzschean scholars were well aware that while many Nietzschean concepts seemed compatible with or even to instantiate basic principles of national socialism, others Nietzschean concepts seemed incompatible or downright subversive to Nazi ideas. Intellectual work was required by Nietzschean Nazis so that these latter concepts could be reinterpreted, clarified and understood in new ways.

Among the Nietzschean concepts favored by the Nazis was undoubtedly the "will to power." The notion that one could escape nihilistic despair by an act of will whereby good and evil were transcended to create a more primitive, vital and natural society seemed like a thorough endorsement of the basic goals and methods of the Nazi regime. Similarly, the concepts of *ubermensch* and the much less used Nietzschean term, *untermensch*, were also of immense value to the Nazis in providing intellectually respectable pedigrees to brutal racist categories.¹³ The Nazis also found much value and support in Nietzsche's biologism, his emphasis on bodily health and vigor. Unlike their racial and nationalist agendas, the Nazi policies of eugenics and euthanasia, as well as repression of homosexuals, could be clearly and easily justified by quotations from Nietzschean texts. Hadn't Nietzsche written in *The Will to Power* that "[s]ympathy for

¹³ See *id.* at 237.

decadents, equal rights for the ill-constituted—that would be the profoundest immorality, that would be antinature itself as morality!”¹⁴

What about those Nietzschean concepts which appeared inconsistent with Nazi doctrine? Different concepts created different levels of difficulty. Nietzsche's rejection of collective values in favor of a heroic individualism, for example, could be modified by emphasizing those statements where Nietzsche saw the individual as part of a larger historical destiny, and by Nietzsche's biologism, which often manifested itself in discussions of the vitality of various “races” and species. Nietzsche's rejection of nineteenth century German nationalism and his vision of the “good European” was converted by the Nazis into a useful recruiting tool among non-German Europeans sympathetic to the Nazi cause. Non-German volunteers for the Waffen SS, (and there were a significant number) were often inspired by a Nietzschean vision of good Europeans forging a new, war-like aristocracy of the future.¹⁵

With respect to Nietzsche's many condemnations of anti-Semitism and “the race swindle” however, the Nazis needed and discovered a more radical reinterpretation of Nietzsche. Aside from Baumler's assertion that, in his personal life, Nietzsche really didn't care much for Jews at all,¹⁶ they pointed to Nietzsche's many attacks on Christianity and priestly religion generally as indications of his true and much more thoroughgoing anti-Semitism. Nietzsche's statements in, for example, *Genealogy of Morals*, where Christianity itself is presented as a secret Jewish plot, through which “Israel, with its vengefulness and revaluation of all values, has hitherto triumphed again and again over all other ideals, over all nobler ideals”¹⁷ was be viewed as a form of anti-Christian anti-Semitism, and the “nobler values” presumed to be the Volkish ideology of the Third Reich. As for Nietzsche's claim that there were no pure races and his suspicion of the “race swindle,” these were viewed as merely an empirical mistake on his part, ameliorated by Nietzsche's obvious concern for eugenics and racial improvement.¹⁸

In short, it is beyond dispute that during the Nazi period,

¹⁴ FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *THE WILL TO POWER* para 734, at 389 (Walter Kaufman ed., Walter Kaufman & R. J. Hollingdale trans., 1967). See generally ASCHHEIM, *supra* note 1, at 243.

¹⁵ See ASCHHEIM, *supra* note 1, at 247-48.

¹⁶ See *id.* at 250.

¹⁷ FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *BASIC WRITINGS OF NIETZSCHE* 439, 471 (Walter Kaufmann ed. & trans., 1968).

¹⁸ See ASCHHEIM, *supra* note 1, at 244.

many and probably most scholars and intellectuals, Nietzscheans and non-Nietzscheans, Nazis and non-Nazis, geniuses and intellectual hacks, all viewed Nietzsche as a forerunner, a source and a potential justification for national socialist ideas and practices.

II. THE EFFECT OF NATIONAL SOCIALISM ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF NIETZSCHE

What are we to make of the strong identification of Nietzsche with Nazi ideology during the period of the Third Reich? For many, particularly in the immediate post-war period, it led to the condemnation of Nietzsche and Nietzschean philosophy. After all, if most of the trained Nietzschean experts, or if you prefer, most of the Nietzschean interpretive community, identified Nietzsche with Nazi ideas, wasn't the characterization of Nietzsche as a proto-Nazi likely to be correct? This argument has, of course, raged for years, and I am not going to add anything to it here, except to point out that the argument itself only makes sense if one takes a fairly determinate view regarding the meaning and interpretation of texts. That is, if you believe the writings of Nietzsche have a fixed and determinate meaning which can be ascertained through the correct hermeneutic process, then the question of whether the ideas set forth in the Nietzschean texts corresponds to those of the Nazis is at least intelligible and coherent, if not necessarily answerable.

If, however, one is inclined to view the meaning of texts, particularly complex aphoristic ones, as relatively indeterminate, malleable and contingent over time, then the fact that a text has been interpreted a certain way at a particular time sheds little light on its actual meaning. Indeed the very project of ascertaining true or actual meaning begins to seem misguided.

However, recognition of the indeterminacy of textual interpretation raises a different question, a question not about the meaning of Nietzsche prior to the Nazis, but about the meaning of Nietzsche *after* the Nazis. If the interpretation and understanding of Nietzsche is indeed relatively indeterminate, malleable, and contingent over time, then how have the meaning of those texts been affected by the indisputable fact that they can be and have been interpreted and understood to justify the most evil and destructive regime in world history? The facts concerning the Nazi interpretation of Nietzsche, the knowledge that such vicious, evil readings of the texts are available, that they were made, debated

and believed by serious scholars, must necessarily inform the work and the interpretations of every student of Nietzsche who has written about him since that time. In the pages that follow, I will attempt to give a preliminary taxonomy of the kinds of responses that this knowledge has generated in post-Nazi writings about Nietzsche.

The first response, perhaps unsurprisingly, is denial, both implicit and explicit, a refusal to recognize that the Nazi interpretations of Nietzsche could possibly constitute sincere, genuine and sophisticated understandings of the texts. Consider, for example, the essay by Walter Kaufmann which introduces his translations of the *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*.¹⁹ In that essay, Kaufmann talks about the widespread influence of Nietzsche's works, not only on philosophers, but on literature, psychology and other humanistic endeavors. Among the many he names as influenced by Nietzschean ideas are Freud, Sartre, Buber, Camus, Malraux, Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, and virtually every "German philosopher of note" since Nietzsche's time, with the single exception of Husserl.²⁰ Of course, most of these people cannot by the broadest stretch of the imagination be considered faithful interpreters of Nietzsche, and Kaufmann makes no such claim. Rather he says that they were people on whose work Nietzsche's ideas had an impact. For example, Kaufmann approvingly quotes Freud's statement that Nietzsche's "premonitions and insights often agree in the most amazing manner with the laborious results of psychoanalysis," and states that some of Sartre's best known literary works contain "dozens of echoes of Nietzsche's writings." But Kaufmann's listing of the various intellectual influences of Nietzsche in the twentieth century, extensive though it is, contains a curious omission. Clearly there was another group of influential thinkers in the early twentieth century who also believed that Nietzsche's work contained "premonitions and insights" that often agreed with their own, and whose work also often contains "echoes of Nietzsche's writings." Yet Kaufmann chooses simply to exclude Nazis and Nazi thought from his otherwise expansive list of those influenced by Nietzsche's works.

Later in the same essay, Kaufmann explicitly rejects the claim that Nietzsche was a "Nazi philosopher" as an "absurdity" that can only be held by those showing either "rank ignorance" or "an

¹⁹ See generally *Introduction to* FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *BASIC WRITINGS OF NIETZSCHE* (Walter Kaufmann ed. & trans., 1968).

²⁰ *Id* at ix-x.

incredible lack of intellectual integrity.”²¹ As a lawyer, I perceive in these words a familiar litigation strategy—restate your opponent’s position in the weakest formulation possible, and then attack it vigorously. Kaufmann can easily deny that Nietzsche was a Nazi. He can much less easily deny that Nietzschean ideas had an impact on Nazi thought, or that all those who saw parallels between Nietzschean ideas and Nazi thought were either ignorant or guilty of a lack of intellectual integrity. Yet Kaufmann dedicated his life to a noble attempt to deny precisely that. His translations and commentaries on Nietzsche, written after the Nazi period, are designed to set forth an authoritative, positive, non-Nazi interpretation of Nietzsche as the only intellectually honest possible reading. Like many forceful advocates, however, Kaufmann is always in danger of overstating his case. In attempting to deny that anything in Nietzsche’s writings can plausibly be interpreted to support Nazi ideas, he offers, as authoritative, positive readings of Nietzsche, concepts that are no more inherently plausible than the Nazi concepts they are intended to replace. For example, in footnotes to his translation of the term “blond beast” in *Genealogy of Morals*, Kaufmann takes pains to provide a non-racial interpretation, associating blondness with “the beast, the lion” rather than with Aryans. While this reading is not clearly wrong, it is certainly hard to reconcile with the phrase “blond Germanic beast” which appears in the very next paragraph of the *Genealogy*.²²

The project of denying the validity of the Nazi interpretation of Nietzsche by positing a correct authoritative non-Nazi reading of Nietzsche runs afoul of many of the same problems that the Nazi interpreters of Nietzsche encountered. Indeed, it threatens to become a mirror image of the Nazi project. Some concepts fit easily into a positive non-Nazi reading of Nietzsche, but others, the will to power, the *ubermensch*, the Blond Beast, the very concepts the Nazis found so congenial, must be de-emphasized or reinterpreted or suppressed.

A second, rather different response to the Nazi interpretation of Nietzsche is what we might call “radical indeterminacy.” This view denies the validity of the Nazi interpretation of Nietzsche by denying the possibility of making any single positive interpretation of Nietzschean works. Nietzsche’s writings readily lend themselves to such a reading containing, as they do, contradictory statements on some matters, vague and aphoristic statements on many others, and a plethora of different styles and statements on many matters,

²¹ *Id.* at xii.

²² NIETZSCHE, *supra* note 17, at 477-78.

including the nature of truth itself. The problem is how to give an account of such radical indeterminacy without making Nietzsche's work appear hopelessly confused and incoherent.

One of the earliest thinkers to adopt this approach was Karl Jaspers. His book on Nietzsche, written in 1936, was a clear challenge to those Nazi thinkers, like Baumler, who sought to find in Nietzsche a coherent political philosophy. Instead, Jaspers emphasized the contradictions in Nietzsche's thought. He stated that one could ground a Nazi position "down to every detail" in Nietzsche's work, but that "one can see the exactly opposite position represented by Nietzsche with equal vehemence."²³ For Jaspers, Nietzsche's method was to embrace contradiction in order to free the mind from all ideological and other conceptual constraints, in order to achieve "systematically conscious domination of one's own thinking."

Another philosopher I would place in this same radical indeterminist tradition is Jacques Derrida. Although Derrida does not write expressly about Nazi interpretations of Nietzsche, in his famous essay, *Spurs*, Derrida confronts a more commonly accepted charge against Nietzsche, his hatred of women. Where others have found in Nietzsche's work only "incurable misogyny," Derrida finds three contradictory positions. First, "[w]oman is condemned, debased and despised as a figure or power of falsehood." Second, "Woman is condemned and despised as a figure or power of truth." Finally, "Beyond this double negation, woman is recognized, affirmed as a power of affirmation, dissimulation, as an artist, a dionysiac."²⁴ Accordingly, there is no single true Nietzschean position on women or any way of arriving at one, and if there is no Nietzschean truth about woman, neither is there a Nietzschean truth about anything else. As Derrida tells us:

[T]here is no one truth of Nietzsche or of his text. The phrase one reads in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "these are only—my truths" My truths implies no doubt that these are not truths because they are multiple, variegated, contradictory. There is no one truth in itself, but what is more, even for me, even about me, the truth is plural."²⁵

Of course, this Derridean position makes statements about Nietzsche which are themselves subject to a radical indeterminist

²³ KARL JASPERS, *Reply to My Critics*, in *THE PHILOSOPHY OF KARL JASPERS* 857-63 (Paul Arthur Schilpp ed., 1957).

²⁴ JACQUES DERRIDA, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Syles*, in *A DERRIDA READER: BETWEEN THE BLINDS* 370-71 (Peggy Kamuf ed., 1991).

²⁵ *Id.* at 373.

critique, but that is a subject for a different day, (or at least a different panel).

A third category of reaction is what we might call the dialectical response to the Nazi interpretation of Nietzsche. These thinkers considered the Nazi interpretation of Nietzsche a misreading, but not an ignorant or pretextual misreading. Rather, applying a dialectical approach to Nietzschean interpretation, they viewed the Nazi embrace of Nietzsche as an understandable, even predictable view of Nietzsche which was the product of the social, economic and psychological conditions under which it was made. These dialectical thinkers see Nietzsche as a prophetic voice who was doomed to be misunderstood, perhaps did not even fully understand his own message, but whose works helped propel a process whereby a fuller understanding of his own significance could later be achieved.

The paradigmatic work in this category is Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Although utilizing concepts of dialectical reasoning derived from Hegel and Marx, Adorno and Horkheimer apply these insights to the Enlightenment itself, which is seen as simultaneously a tool for both popular liberation and oppression. Nietzsche, on this view, was one of the few nineteenth century thinkers to recognize the potential for oppression, the "nihilistic anti-life force" inherent in the progressivism of the Enlightenment. Adorno and Horkheimer compare Nietzsche to that other great flouter of nineteenth century enlightenment values, the Marquis de Sade, and see Nietzsche and Sade's *Juliette* as engaged in similar projects of critiquing the oppressiveness of Enlightenment thought and asserting a vital primitive resistance against concepts of rationality and conventional morality.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the context in which Nietzschean ideas are set forth is critical. The Nazi exaltation of power, strength and barbarism over civilization and morality were indeed Nietzschean themes, but when coming from a little-read nineteenth century philosopher such statements were liberating attacks on a dominant world-view. Their adoption by a State power inevitably distorted and converted them to an instrument of oppression. As Adorno and Horkheimer state:

By raising the cult of strength to a world-historical doctrine, German Fascism also took it to an absurd extreme. As a protest against civilization, the master's morality conversely represents the oppressed. Hatred of atrophied instincts actually denounces the true nature of the task-masters—which comes to light only in their victims. But as a Great Power, or state religion, the master's morality wholly subscribes to the civilizing

powers that be, the compact majority, the resentment, and everything that it formerly opposed. The realization of Nietzsche's assertions both refutes them and at the same time reveals their truth, which—despite all his affirmation of life—was inimical to the spirit of reality.²⁶

Georges Bataille, another prominent post-war thinker strongly influenced by Nietzsche, also views Nietzsche from a dialectical perspective, not a dialectic of world-historical events, but a dialectic of personal liberation struggle. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, he sees de Sade, along with Nietzsche, as the two great nineteenth century apostles of total liberation, of freedom from conscience and rationality. Yet Bataille's deep ambivalence about the Nietzschean project of liberation comes from his own attempts to live it. He tells us that "Nietzsche's work, seen from the perspective of action, is an abortion—a strongly defensible one; his life is a failed life, like that which attempts to put his writing into action."

For Bataille, Nietzsche cannot be understood by simply reading him, but only by living the same struggle he lived. All mere readings of Nietzsche, therefore, including the Nazis', are inevitably misreadings:

One has truly not heard a single word of Nietzsche's unless one has lived this signal dissolution in totality; without it, this philosophy is a mere labyrinth of contradictions, and worse, the pretext for lying by omission (if, like the fascists, one isolates passages for purposes which negate the rest of the work).²⁷

Missing from all the previously discussed responses to Nazi Nietzscheanism is any feeling of complicity or responsibility. All these various commentators seem quite sure that what the Nazis saw and valued in Nietzsche is quite different from what they find valuable and powerful in his work, whether it be Kaufman's positive non-Nazi Nietzscheism, Jaspers and Derrida's radical indeterminacy, or the dialectic perspectives of Adorno, Horkheimer and Bataille.

Another position is of course possible, a position which states that the concepts that the Nazis saw and valued in Nietzsche are indeed an essential and valuable part of Nietzsche. This does not imply that Nietzsche was in any sense a Nazi philosopher, far less that Nazism was a correct or necessary result of Nietzschean thought. But it does lead to what we might call a tragic view of

²⁶ MAX HORKHEIMER & THEODOR W. ADORNO, *DIALLECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT* 100-01 (John Cumming trans., 1972).

²⁷ GEORGES BATAILLE, *On Nietzsche: The Will to Chance*, in *THE BATAILLE READER* 340 (Fred Botting & Scott Wilson eds., 1997).

Nietzschean philosophy, of a set of ideas whose power does indeed transcend good and evil, whose conscious ambiguity both reveals and obscures, and whose potential for unleashing barbarity upon the world must be recognized and regretted. Although there does not appear to be any post-war philosopher who has adopted this view, it is the pervasive theme of Thomas Mann's great post-war novel, *Doctor Faustus*.

Mann himself seems to have had reservations about *Doctor Faustus* as a literary work. He called it "joylessly earnest, not artistically happy." The impact of the book lies as much in its allegorical power as in its novelistic technique. It tells the story of Adrian Leverkühn, a brilliant, driven and solitary composer, who seeks in his work to shatter all artistic norms, who contracts syphilis, and who goes mad. Leverkühn obviously represents Nietzsche, whose life and illness are paralleled in many respects, but he also represents the German nation, itself descending into madness and destruction, as well as the legendary Faust. Leverkühn, however, is not seduced or deceived by the Devil, but has actively sought him, has made his pact willingly, even before the Devil himself arrives to seal it.

The story of Leverkühn is narrated in the novel by his friend, Serenus Zeitblom, an earnest, pedantic, and thoroughly conventional man, whose own reactions and responses to Leverkühn and to the Nazi tragedy are the central theme of the book. Zeitblom himself describes the book as "a monumental work of lamentation" and so it is. Mann clearly saw a link between the works of Nietzsche and the Nazi catastrophe, and whether that is an accurate portrayal of the relationship is less important than the fact that it was so viewed. *Doctor Faustus*, therefore, is not so much about Nietzsche as about the perception of Nietzsche, while recognizing that reality and perception are not only linked, but indistinguishable. The dominant mode of the book is indeed one of lamentation, not condemnation. Leverkühn's work is brilliant, exhilarating, frightening and dangerous. Yet viewed, as Mann and Zeitblom view it, with knowledge of the madness and destruction that were to follow, it is also, and perhaps predominantly, tragic.

Let me conclude then with a quotation from *Doctor Faustus*, a description of Leverkühn's music, which may also be taken as a description of Nietzsche's writing, and must therefore also be taken as a description of the perception of Nietzsche's writing in the aftermath of the Nazi destruction:

Yes, in the contemplation of this music, admiration and sadness mingled in the most peculiar way. "How beautiful!"

one's heart said—or at least mine said to itself—“and how sad!” For what one admired was a wittily melancholy work of art, an intellectual feat worthy of the name heroic, laconic anguish behaving like playful travesty—which I do not know how to characterize other than to call it an unrelenting, tense, breakneck game played by art at the very edge of impossibility. And that was what made one sad.²⁸

²⁸ THOMAS MANN, *DOCTOR FAUSTUS* 233 (John E. Woods trans., 1997).