

27. Nietzsche

Why it took so long I don't know but I finally came to him. The one thinker who consistently inspired me, heartened me, supplied me with numerous insights into myself and others. The one thinker who, as Emerson puts it in a more general way, had already expressed many thoughts that I myself had had but only skirted or played around the edges of. Expressed them is too weak a way of putting it. He expounded on them at length and with an audacity sans pareil. And what was his principal target? Philosophy itself. The whole Western tradition of philosophical thought. Was it possible to imagine anyone taking on singlehandedly a greater foe? Or at least taking it on in such a confrontational, provocative, menacing, wide-sweeping, and absolutely uncompromising way? To make of the great truth-tellers inveterate liars in their will to stand truth naked and unveiled before all – was this itself a truth too rude to go unpunished?

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of a mind that appears to be one's own but more powerful, magnifying, penetrating, and wide-ranging. The best way to put it is that, even at the time of my greatest disillusionment and uncertainty, coming into full contact with Nietzsche's thought made any abandonment of my highest hope virtually impossible.

Indeed, I know your danger. But by my love and hope I beseech you: do not throw away your love and hope.

You still feel noble, and the others too feel your nobility, though they bear you a grudge and send you evil glances. Know that the noble man stands in everybody's way. The noble man stands in the way of the good too: and even if they call him one of the good, they thus want to do away with him. The noble man wants to create something new and a new virtue. The good want the old, and that the old be preserved. But this is not the danger of the noble man, that he might become one of the good, but a churl, a mocker, a destroyer.

Alas, I knew noble men who lost their highest hope. Then they slandered all high hopes. Then they lived impudently in brief pleasures and barely cast their goals beyond the day. Spirit too is lust, so they said. Then the wings of their spirit broke: and now their spirit crawls about and soils what it gnaws. Once they thought of becoming heroes: now they are voluptuaries. The hero is for them an offense and a fright.

But by my love and hope I beseech you: do not throw away the hero in your soul! Hold holy your highest hope!

Thus spoke Zarathustra.

- *Thus spoke a madman. Andrew, try to play a bit more quickly than the last time we played.*
- *What do you mean?*
- *The conference in Bangkok fifteen years ago.*
- *You remember that?*
- *I remember it took you so long to make one move I finally lost patience and forfeited the game.*

What mattered to me most was not whether Nietzsche was right or fair or wise in everything he said, but that he took everything he said from the bottom of himself and did the best he could with it. Did his best, in other words, with all that is in fact *not* right and fair and wise and yet is so much a part of the human condition. Of course I was aware that numerous other philosophers also examined this allegedly negative all too negative side of things. But the difference between them and Nietzsche struck me forcibly in that the former immediately marked it off and exempted themselves from it.

- *I was thinking. Why hasn't anyone ever written a play about him?*
- *I saw a play about him, Andrew. It was a short piece in the university theatre when I was an undergraduate. My sister's fiancé, believe it or not, played Nietzsche.*
- *Is that right?*
- *Yes, and did a wonderful job. In fact, he received a standing ovation.*
- *Can you tell me something about this play?*
- *It was a one-man show portraying him after his breakdown and reflecting on his dubious intellectual heritage.*

Nietzsche's one-man polemical show largely concerned with pulling down the britches of traditional philosophy and giving it a good caning reinterpreted as inflammatory talk that had historical consequences for which he should be held responsible. Perhaps this was the sort of thought that eventually came to me and allowed me to take him up without reserve and with a growing admiration of his searching for the truth without the customary philosophical

reservation.

The good-evil opposition was the thing already falling in me that Nietzsche gave the final push to. It simply no longer made sense to take seriously other philosophers and the vast majority of people when they treated this opposition as if it were grounded right into the very heart of being. At least it no longer made sense unless one considered what made practical sense for most human beings to be the measure of what all life should be in its uttermost reach. But the thought of all life taking on the form of the thinking and acting philosopher with his perfecting of practical wisdom disguised most often as objective knowledge and theory was an absurdity that, as it seemed to me, everyone knew in their heart of hearts but knelt down to as the social good. To simplify to this point, to turn all life into one pattern, order, way of thinking, being, acting, feeling, imagining, and so on: what did Nietzsche show but that this was death and that life was this massive and manifold doctrine called the good only as a part of everything that was *also* life and that played into, around, beyond, and even against it?

– You see this chessboard, Andrew? What would happen if we just ignored the rules?

I took Nietzsche to be one who was cruel to that *compact* majority whose cruelty largely consists of shunning or persecuting or condemning those who don't go along with it by taking too seriously – that is, too radically, too noisily, or too performatively – some of its most cherished principles. The hyperbolic element in Nietzsche was more than matched by the hypocritical element of the compact majority: its firm declarations on the side of the good and the true coming as its various members found ways to dilute or circumvent these ideals precisely when they became menacing *as* ideals. Suppose the truth was terrible and suppose evil wrought good: was the compact majority even interested in looking into this? Was not their whole attitude to pretend that it didn't even exist as a question? And when someone finally came along who took the true and the good to be one in the most personal and heart-searching (one might even say, heart-wrenching) way, who at the same time cast his glance over what everyone else had been saying and was still saying about these matters, was he not one who was condemning himself in advance to be thrown out of the company of true believers? Was he not one who was forced to turn himself into a kind of pariah or apostate angel: malignant, rebellious, resentful, and scornful of those who dared to look only so far as they smelled no danger in it?

– It's your move, Theo.

*– Nazi propaganda! Made us out to be like vermin! Millions slaughtered!
Amongst them my grandfather and two aunts!*

As a reader of Nietzsche searching out and impressed by his extraordinary integrity, I no doubt became his apologist in the face of that post-holocaust consciousness both in and around me. So it was that I saw Nietzsche being forced to write, as everyone must do, both for and out of his time (despite the fact that he also wrote against it) and, as a consequence, with the advantages and disadvantages that come from being both somewhat blind and oblivious to the future. Advantages such as being able to speak more freely and openly and uninhibitedly (not to mention insightfully) about evil than anyone before him. Such as being able to look to the future with an almost exclusively eschatological (but definitely anti-Christian) concern. And such as being able to do both these things with a good conscience and so do what otherwise he never would have done. Disadvantages: that he ultimately underrated and undervalued what he himself waged war against: the systematizing, ordering, and machine-like character of society. Its capacity for exorbitant growth and its power to assimilate the most heterogeneous elements. Instead of a chair devoted to the study of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, there was Rosenberg's use of him. In short, Nietzsche's exposé suffered from having little or no internal check on its most dangerous and demonic aspect that would have been in keeping with the humanistic values to which it itself was inevitably indebted.

– I suppose the way he treats us – profs stuck on sticks here to play Punch and Judy for him – represents humanistic values.

Stefan Zweig describes Nietzsche's thought as starting old and growing younger. Wasn't there something like this in me when, after seven years away from university studies, I came back to them? The self-flattering aspect that is inherent in affirming this discomforts me enough that I have to admit it alongside my dread of aging. Stiffness. Love of law, order, safety, protection, comfort. Loss of the adventurer's spirit. A growing cowardliness and lack of candour that seemed to be inherent to fulfilling one's professional duties and responsibilities. Unctuousness. Lack of zest, spontaneity, and good feeling. All these elements I have always associated with getting older and only an imaginative view of myself as some prodigious exception has prevented me from being overwhelmed with nausea.

– I don't believe this! You've got me checkmated!

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