

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

Lee Spinks

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It is difficult to imagine a world without common sense, the distinction between truth and falsehood, the belief in some form of morality or an agreement that we are all human. But Friedrich Nietzsche did imagine such a world, and his work has become a crucial point of departure for contemporary critical theory and debate. This volume offers a lucid and accessible account of Nietzsche's philosophy, encompassing such ideas as anti-humanism, good and evil, nihilism and the will to power, and introduces the reader to the radical questions posed by Nietzsche that challenged the received history of thought. The author not only prepares readers for their first encounter with Nietzsche's most influential texts, but enables them to begin to apply his philosophy in studies of literature, art and contemporary culture.

Lee Spinks is a lecturer in English Literature at the University of Edinburgh. He has published articles on literary theory, modern and postmodern culture and contemporary American literature.

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CONTENTS

Series editor's preface	vii
Acknowledgements	xi
WHY NIETZSCHE?	1
KEY IDEAS	11
1 Tragedy	13
2 Metaphor	37
3 Genealogy	57
4 History	75
5 Beyond good and evil	89
6 The Overman	115
7 The will to power	133
AFTER NIETZSCHE	153
FURTHER READING	163
Works cited	175
Index	179

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The books in this series offer introductions to major critical thinkers who have influenced literary studies and the humanities. The *Routledge Critical Thinkers* series provides the books you can turn to first when a new name or concept appears in your studies.

Each book will equip you to approach a key thinker's original texts by explaining her or his key ideas, putting them into context and, perhaps most importantly, showing you why this thinker is considered to be significant. The emphasis is on concise, clearly written guides which do not presuppose a specialist knowledge. Although the focus is on particular figures, the series stresses that no critical thinker ever existed in a vacuum but, instead, emerged from a broader intellectual, cultural and social history. Finally, these books will act as a bridge between you and the thinker's original texts: not replacing them but rather complementing what she or he wrote.

These books are necessary for a number of reasons. In his 1997 autobiography, *Not Entitled*, the literary critic Frank Kermode wrote of a time in the 1960s:

On beautiful summer lawns, young people lay together all night, recovering from their daytime exertions and listening to a troupe of Balinese musicians. Under their blankets or their sleeping bags, they would chat drowsily about the gurus of the time . . . What they repeated was largely hearsay; hence my

lunchtime suggestion, quite impromptu, for a series of short, very cheap books offering authoritative but intelligible introductions to such figures.

There is still a need for 'authoritative and intelligible introductions'. But this series reflects a different world from the 1960s. New thinkers have emerged and the reputations of others have risen and fallen, as new research has developed. New methodologies and challenging ideas have spread through arts and humanities. The study of literature is no longer – if it ever was – simply the study and evaluation of poems, novels and plays. It is also the study of ideas, issues, and difficulties which arise in any literary text and in its interpretation. Other arts and humanities subjects have changed in analogous ways.

With these changes, new problems have emerged. The ideas and issues behind these radical changes in the humanities are often presented without reference to wider contexts or as theories which you can simply 'add on' to the texts you read. Certainly, there's nothing wrong with picking out selected ideas or using what comes to hand – indeed, some thinkers have argued that this is, in fact, all we can do. However, it is sometimes forgotten that each new idea comes from the pattern and development of somebody's thought and it is important to study the range and context of their ideas. Against theories 'floating in space', the *Routledge Critical Thinkers* series places key thinkers and their ideas firmly back in their contexts.

More than this, these books reflect the need to go back to the thinker's own texts and ideas. Every interpretation of an idea, even the most seemingly innocent one, offers its own 'spin', implicitly or explicitly. To read only books on a thinker, rather than texts by that thinker, is to deny yourself a chance of making up your own mind. Sometimes what makes a significant figure's work hard to approach is not so much its style or content as the feeling of not knowing where to start. The purpose of these books is to give you a 'way in' by offering an accessible overview of these thinkers' ideas and works and by guiding your further reading, starting with each thinker's own texts. To use a metaphor from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), these books are ladders, to be thrown away after you have climbed to the next level. Not only, then, do they equip you to approach new ideas, but also they empower you, by leading you back to the theorist's own texts and encouraging you to develop your own informed opinions.

Finally, these books are necessary because, just as intellectual needs have changed, the education systems around the world – the contexts in which introductory books are usually read – have changed radically, too. What was suitable for the minority higher education system of the 1960s is not suitable for the larger, wider, more diverse, high technology education systems of the twenty-first century. These changes call not just for new, up-to-date, introductions but new methods of presentation. The presentational aspects of *Routledge Critical Thinkers* have been developed with today's students in mind.

Each book in the series has a similar structure. They begin with a section offering an overview of the life and ideas of each thinker and explain why she or he is important. The central section of each book discusses the thinker's key ideas, their context, evolution and reception. Each book concludes with a survey of the thinker's impact, outlining how their ideas have been taken up and developed by others. In addition, there is a detailed final section suggesting and describing books for further reading. This is not a 'tacked-on' section but an integral part of each volume. In the first part of this section you will find brief descriptions of the thinker's key works, then, following this, information on the most useful critical works and, in some cases, on relevant websites. This section will guide you in your reading, enabling you to follow your interests and develop your own projects. Throughout each book, references are given in what is known as the Harvard system (the author and the date of a work cited are given in the text and you can look up the full details in the bibliography at the back). This offers a lot of information in very little space. The books also explain technical terms and use boxes to describe events or ideas in more detail, away from the main emphasis of the discussion. Boxes are also used at times to highlight definitions of terms frequently used or coined by a thinker. In this way, the boxes serve as a kind of glossary, easily identified when flicking through the book.

The thinkers in the series are 'critical' for three reasons. First, they are examined in the light of subjects which involve criticism: principally literary studies or English and cultural studies, but also other disciplines which rely on the criticism of books, ideas, theories and unquestioned assumptions. Second, studying their work will provide you with a 'tool kit' for your own informed critical reading and thought, which will heighten your own criticism. Third, these thinkers are critical because they are crucially important: they deal with ideas and questions which

can overturn conventional understandings of the world, of texts, of everything we take for granted, leaving us with a deeper understanding of what we already knew and with new ideas.

No introduction can tell you everything. However, by offering a way into critical thinking, this series hopes to begin to engage you in an activity which is productive, constructive and potentially life-changing.

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WHY NIETZSCHE?

Despite the fact that he was a late-nineteenth-century thinker, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) provided arguments that challenge and undermine many of the assumptions that we still hold dear today. It is difficult for us to imagine a world without common sense, the distinction between truth and falsehood, the belief in some form of morality or an agreement that we are all human. But Nietzsche did imagine such a world and he also argued that we should write and think in such a way that we would realise this world. Nietzsche was not just another philosopher or thinker: he challenged the very concepts of knowledge and thought. More importantly, he insisted that through transforming how we write and think we might transform who we are.

Nietzsche's philosophy insists that we ask questions about a range of issues that we assume to be matters of common sense. Whereas most philosophers are content to find a place for themselves within the received history of thought by analysing and refining the function of concepts, Nietzsche posed the radical questions: What is thought for? What does it mean to 'think' and how is thinking related to other forces within life? When we say that our culture and way of life reflect our 'values', how do we create values and how do they express the way we do or should live? We assume, he explained, that humanity is born with an innate moral sense and that truth is an objective and ideal standard by which we regulate our ideas and actions. But what if we discovered

that 'morality' is the historical effect of regimes of cruelty, violence and force and that 'truth' is merely a particular perspective we impose upon life in order to render it explicable in moral terms? Could we possibly conceive of a way of living beyond the moral dichotomy of good and evil? And if we could do so, what might such a life look like?

BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Nietzsche was born in Rocken, Saxony, in 1844, the son of a Lutheran pastor. His father died when he was a child, and Nietzsche, his mother, two maiden aunts and his younger sister Elizabeth (who was to assume considerable importance in her brother's life and the reception of his work) moved to Naumburg in 1850. Nietzsche left for boarding school in Pforza in 1858, where he established himself as a brilliant and precocious scholar, then studied classical philology at Bonn and Leipzig Universities, and in 1869 was appointed Extraordinary Professor of Classical Philology at Basel University, aged only 24. His first book, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, was published three years later. Already Nietzsche's idiosyncratic and combative style was evident: his book offers a visionary overview of the origins and decline of Greek tragic culture, and claims that this culture was destroyed by the subordination of the poetic imagination to a sterile rationalism that has come to dominate our own modern age. This provocative thesis was delivered in fewer than 120 pages devoid of footnotes or substantial scholarly references. Notwithstanding its brevity, *The Birth of Tragedy* expressed two of Nietzsche's most enduring themes, each of which was wholly at odds with the political disengagement and intellectual conservatism of the German university system. Nietzsche suggests first that 'philosophy' and 'culture' are *not* rarefied and elevated pursuits, but rather the expressions of a ceaseless competition between conflicting forces and drives. Secondly, he argues that we are mistaken in understanding philosophy to be a comprehensive and abstract account of dominant concepts and ideas; instead, the proper task of philosophy should be to identify and promote those historical forces that embody a 'strong' and creative movement of life and to recreate those forces in the present. Not surprisingly, *The Birth of Tragedy* was fiercely condemned by the academic community for its 'unphilosophical' approach, although the shock that Nietzsche's work produced in intellectual circles was represented in more neutral terms as distaste for his violation of scholarly

etiquette, abrupt shifts of historical focus and needlessly polemical tone. The stage was set for a dispute between Nietzsche and German intellectual culture that was to last the rest of his life.

This initial bout of hostility was followed by a disrespectful silence on the part of his critics. Consequently, the dozen or so books Nietzsche completed in the next sixteen years made little or no impression upon the general reading public, despite their incendiary content. He continued to teach at Basel until 1879, when he was forced to retire because of ill health precipitated, it now appears, by his contraction of syphilis in the late 1860s. From this point, Nietzsche led the life of an independent thinker, devoting himself to a furious schedule of writing, earning little money, and moving constantly between hot and cooler climates as his health dictated. Although Nietzsche's peripatetic existence outside the academy is frequently interpreted as a typically individualist and nonconformist gesture, it may also be understood as part of a more general historical movement: the separation of radical thinkers from establishment intellectual communities. This schism was a consequence of the collapse of revolutionary hopes and the dream of a new society after the failed *marzrevolution* of March 1848, a year of revolutionary turmoil across Europe (Magnus and Higgins 1996: 74).

The failure of the *marzrevolution* was a turning point in nineteenth-century German history. The aims of the rebellion were political and economic reform, the unity of the various German states, free parliamentary elections, freedom of the press, a written constitution and the establishment of a Bill of Rights. The rebellion was precipitated by a number of factors: the example set by the revolutionary assaults on autocracy represented by the American Revolution of 1776, the French Revolution of 1789, and the subsequent French rebellions of July 1830 and February 1848; the emergence of a large and immiserated industrial working class; the domestic political repression exemplified by the military response to the 1844 rebellion of Silesian weavers in search of cheaper food and better wages; and the famine and starvation produced by the crop failures of 1847. It was initially successful, leading to major concessions by the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV, but lost momentum because of disputes between its liberal and radical factions and the counter-rebellion of the Prussian aristocracy (backed up by the military). In April 1849 the king was offered the crown of emperor under a new constitution. The new parliament inaugurated by the rebels

gradually disintegrated and the old monarchical and feudal order was re-established. From this point radical thinkers and those critical of the existing order redirected their energies away from mainstream political culture and participation in the state's institutions, and began to develop alternative traditions of politics and philosophy.

As we will see, Nietzsche had little time for the democratic and egalitarian objectives of the radicals and reformers, but joined them in finding the conservatism of German culture and politics stultifying. He therefore embraced a nomadic existence for the last ten sane years of his life, wandering extensively through Germany, Switzerland, France and Italy, while he maintained his assault upon modern thinking and living. While in Turin in January 1889 he experienced a complete mental collapse, from which he never recovered. He was delivered over to the care of his sister and mother, with whom he lived for the next eleven years in a state of almost complete prostration until his death on 25 August 1900.

NIETZSCHE'S CHALLENGE

The challenge of Nietzsche's work consists in the questions he poses concerning the meaning and value of life. Nietzsche felt compelled to pose these questions because he believed that modern life was characterised by a fateful form of 'nihilism'. Nietzsche employed the term 'nihilism' to describe the sense of emptiness or 'nothingness' befalling a people that had no faith in the standards and values that regulated its daily life, but who could find no way to bring new values into being. The problem for humanity today, he argued, is that it no longer believes in the moral ideals that shaped the Christian view of the world, but lacks the power to create values capable of underpinning a new vision of life. All around him Nietzsche saw men and women who could no longer believe in the transcendent value of Christian divinity, but felt unable to dispense with the rules and prohibitions of Christian morality. As he wrote in *Twilight of the Idols*, first published in German in 1889, 'They have got rid of the Christian God, and now feel obliged to cling all the more to Christian morality' (1990b: 80).

Nietzsche's famous declaration in *The Gay Science*, first published in German in 1882, of the 'death of God' was intended to alert humanity to this 'twilight of the Idols' and to underline the necessity of producing an interpretation of life unconstrained by the Christian inheritance.

What distinguishes Nietzsche from other nineteenth-century critics of religion, morality and nineteenth-century life is that he does not search for a more effective moral life; he attempts to save life *from* morality itself. He argues that nineteenth-century culture experiences life as a form of nihilism because it has invented a series of moral concepts such as 'truth', 'selflessness' and 'equality' that have been raised above life in order to regulate and judge life. Not only do these moral values repress what Nietzsche took to be the most profound instinctual forces of life; they also encourage us to live *reactively* according to an inflexible and timeless moral law instead of creating our values *actively* for ourselves. For Nietzsche, the moral circumscription of life evacuated thought of positive content. 'Morality is merely sign-language, merely symptomatology,' he complained; 'one must already know *what* it is about to derive profit from it' (1990b: 66). He worked tirelessly against what we might call the 'transcendence' of thought: the subjection of life to concepts that determine the form and content of life. Instead, he sought to develop a principle of life that was *interior* to life and which might enable him to forge a connection between the most powerful forces of existence and the creation of new values.

Nietzsche discovered this new principle of life in his theory of the will to power. He claimed that life is driven forward by an inhuman principle of creation that is *immanent* or interior to life: we should not *judge* life from the point of view of an external morality, but *live* life to its maximum potential. Will to power is an inhuman principle because it envisages *all* life, not just human life, as united by a common striving for power. The entirety of existence is perceived as a ceaseless process of becoming and transformation within which each form of life seeks to expand and increase its power. The aim of life from this perspective is not enlightenment, moral improvement or even self-preservation; it inheres in the acquisition of power. A particular form of life becomes powerful insofar as it appropriates other forces to its domain. Every movement of life bears within it a configuration of forces. The struggle between powers produces a hierarchy of stronger and weaker forces, which then leads to the creation of concepts. Indeed, what we rather euphemistically call 'values' describe the domination of a particular perspective upon or interpretation of life – such as the 'ascetic ideal' of Christian moralism or the interests of the ruling class – at a determinate historical conjuncture. There is, Nietzsche asserts, no 'world' or 'essence' that we can know *behind* this competition of forces; every

concept and value we possess represents the triumph of a powerful interpretation of life. The moral image of humanity only appeared because we invented a language to project our values on to the world and create it in our own image and then promptly forgot that we had invented this image for ourselves. In contrast, Nietzsche presents a challenge to the moral interpretation of existence by marking its historical emergence and limits and developing an 'immoral' or non-moral image of thought to replace it.

Nietzsche's challenge to the moral image of 'man' led him to develop a genealogical critique of the history of our moral values. He rejected both the idea of morality as an innate or natural human capacity and the identification of the origin and purpose of moral practices proposed by traditional historians. Instead, he focused upon the material forces that produce moral concepts in the first place. For Nietzsche, moral concepts such as 'conscience', 'guilt' and 'humility' are produced by successive reinterpretations of life created by dominant historical forces and interests. Every reinterpretation expresses a specific quantity of will to power. Some of Nietzsche's most striking passages detail the secret desire for mastery inscribed within the sacrificial rhetoric of Christian asceticism (the purging and denial of the self opposed to the accumulation of worldly possessions). Because every historical interpretation of life is produced by the victory of strong over weaker forces, Nietzsche argued that we should abandon our idealistic notion of history as an objective account or a narrative of moral development. The point of historical inquiry from what he referred to as a *genealogical* perspective is rather to separate ascending from descending modes of life and to create a version of the past that enables us to develop the most vital and powerful forces of the present.

NIETZSCHE'S POLITICS

Nietzsche's 'revaluation of all values', which relies upon a division between 'stronger' and 'weaker' forms of life, introduces the notorious issue of his politics. Nietzsche has long been caricatured as a fascist thinker whose ideas found their eventual expression in the genocidal racial politics of Nazi Germany. In fact, Nietzsche despised nationalism and anti-Semitism and railed against the backwardness of the German Reich from the 1870s onwards. A good deal of the damage done to his reputation was inflicted by his sister Elizabeth Nietzsche (1846–1935),

who assumed editorship of Nietzsche's corpus of work after his collapse into insanity in 1889. Elizabeth's political sympathies may be gauged by her marriage to the anti-Semitic political leader Bernhard Förster (1843–89). Her editorship of Nietzsche's work corrupted its content, removed many of the philosophical contexts that gave it its meaning, and prepared it for its appropriation by Nazi ideologues after Nietzsche's death in 1900.

However, Nietzsche's politics remain highly controversial even when Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche's intervention is taken into account. This is true, in part, because he resolutely opposes our commonplace assumption of a moral context for political thought, whether that context takes the form of the Judaeo-Christian tradition or the egalitarian impulse of socialism and modern liberal democracy. Nietzsche opposed these movements because he believed that by positing the ideal of a general human nature or the appeal to equal rights, Christian morality, socialism and liberalism represented a triumph of base and slavish nature over the strong and independent spirit. In contrast, Nietzsche's 'aristocratic' or 'great politics' argued that the aim of culture and politics was to produce the 'Overman', a superior mode of being that knows only affirmation and creates its own values from the superabundance of its power:

The problem I raise here is not what ought to succeed mankind in the sequence of species (– the human being is a *conclusion* –): but what type of human being one ought to *breed*, ought to *will*, as more valuable, more worthy of life, more certain of the future. This more valuable type has existed often enough already: but as a lucky accident, as an exception, never as *willed*.

(1990b: 128)

Nietzsche's intemperate remarks about slavish natures, the 'weak' and women undoubtedly disclose a violent and troubling aspect of his imagination, and have contributed considerably to the misreading and avoidance of his work. So have his remarks about 'breeding' a higher type of being, although Nietzsche consistently employs the term in the context of an ethical and political, rather than biological, progression beyond the moral image of humanity. It is indisputable that Nietzsche's work can be appropriated for violent political ends, although this is also true of Christianity, egalitarian politics and the cultural humanism that underpinned the 'civilising mission' of colonial imperialism. The *risk* of Nietzsche's antifoundationalist mode of thought – a style of thinking