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# NIETZSCHE'S PRAISE OF MASTER MORALITY

## THE QUESTION OF FASCISM REVISITED

### ABSTRACT

One of the most disquieting facts about the totalitarian movements of communism and fascism which threatened the European political order in the interwar period is the support both these movements appear to derive from the writings of two of the most important European philosophers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. The destruction of Western civilization seems to have been engendered by Western civilization itself. It is commonplace to charge that Bolshevism represented a travesty of Marx's ideas, just as Nazism represented a travesty of Nietzsche's ideas. But while it is impossible to describe Nietzsche as a fascist *avant la lettre*, it is no less untenable to maintain that there is no connection whatsoever between his ideas and the ideological turmoil which brought Europe to the brink of destruction in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. My paper examines the *locus classicus* of proto-fascist elements in Nietzsche's writings – his praise of “master morality” in the First Treatise of the *Genealogy of Morality*. I argue that when Nietzsche's praise of master morality is approached with a proper appreciation of the distinction Nietzsche himself makes between “the exoteric and the esoteric,” the proto-fascist elements in his rhetoric reveal themselves to be playful, ironic and intentionally self-undermining, and subservient to Nietzsche's goals of philosophical pedagogy. Yet, at the same time, this insight does not absolve Nietzsche of the charge of fatal irresponsibility in the rhetoric he chose to employ.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche, political philosophy, fascism

*In order that there may be institutions, there must be a kind of will,  
instinct or imperative which is anti-liberal to the point of malice.*

Nietzsche

One of the most disquieting facts about the totalitarian movements of communism and fascism which threatened the European political order in the interwar period is the support that both these movements appear to derive from the writings of two of the most important European thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. These threats to the very existence of Western civilization seem to have been engendered by Western civilization itself. As Leo Strauss wrote, *We cannot expect that liberal education will lead all who benefit from it to understand their civic responsibility in the same way (...) Karl Marx, the father of communism, and Friedrich Nietzsche, the stepgrandfather of fascism, were liberally educated on a level to which we cannot even hope to aspire.*<sup>1</sup> It is common today to charge that Soviet communism was a travesty of Marx's ideas, just as Nazism was a travesty of Nietzsche's. But as Strauss' neologism *stepgrandfather* suggests, while Nietzsche was certainly not a fascist *avant la lettre*, it would be no less untenable to maintain that there was no authentic connection whatsoever between his writings and the ideological turmoil which brought Europe to the brink of destruction in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the Polish political philosopher Leszek Kołakowski remarked, *"It is indeed not enough to say that Nazi ideology was a 'caricature' of Nietzsche, since the essence of a caricature is that it helps us to recognize the original. The Nazis told their supermen to read The Will to Power, and it is no good saying that this was a mere chance and that they might equally well have chosen the Critique of Practical Reason."*<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, the Catholic historian Christopher Dawson observed, *The 'New Order' inaugurated by the national socialist regime went far to fulfil Nietzsche's forecast concerning European nihilism, for though Adolf Hitler was very unlike the superman of Nietzsche's dreams, he was in fact the embodiment of a will to power which ignored good and evil and trampled underfoot human rights and national liberties.*<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I will not be concerned with tracing the direct or indirect influence of Nietzsche's writings on fascist ideologues and their supporters, a worthy task which has been the focus of several important studies.<sup>4</sup> Rather, I want to look closely at the aspects of Nietzsche's own rhetoric which anticipate fascist sensibilities and to raise the related questions: What did Nietzsche himself want to achieve *as a philosopher* by means of this rhetoric? To what extent can Nietzsche *himself* be held accountable for whatever historical influence he may have had on fascism?

<sup>1</sup> L. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, New York 1968, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism, 1. The Founders*, transl. by P.S. Falla, Oxford 1985, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> C. Dawson, *The Gods of Revolution*, Washington 2015, p. 145.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see the essays collected in J. Golomb, R.S. Wistrich (eds.), *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism?: On the Uses and Abuses of a Philosophy*, Princeton 2003.

A writer's books might be appropriated in ways unrelated to anything which he could reasonably have anticipated; conversely, a writer might propose a clear political program which may or may not receive direct implementation. I argue that the case of Nietzsche and fascism is not so clear cut as either alternative. I take a middle path between those who read him as a straightforwardly proto-fascist thinker and those who claim that he had no responsibility at all for the use which fascists made of his authority. I will focus on what is arguably the *locus classicus* of proto-fascist elements in his writings – his praise of *master morality*, the instinctual self-affirmation and wanton cruelty of the pre-modern nobility and the raging *blond beast*, in the first treatise of *On the Genealogy of Morality* (henceforth *OGM*<sup>5</sup>). I argue that when Nietzsche's praise of master morality is approached with a proper appreciation of his subtle and ironic art of writing, the proto-fascist elements in his rhetoric reveal themselves to be playful and intentionally self-undermining, and thereby ultimately subservient to his goals of philosophical pedagogy. However, although Nietzsche offers no clear political program, and he would have despised fascism as a travesty of his thought, the extreme rhetoric in which he indulges is reckless and irresponsible, and he cannot be absolved of all blame for contributing to a political atmosphere in which fascism could take root. In Strauss' language, an appreciation of Nietzsche's *esotericism* helps us grasp the sense in which he is indeed the stepgrandfather, but *not* the father, of fascism.

## I

Nietzsche is well known both for his critique of Christian morality and for his critique of modern democracy, liberalism, and egalitarianism. One of the most remarkable and surprising aspects of his political stance is his refusal either to take sides in the late modern struggle between traditional religion and the democratic Enlightenment or to advocate a reconciliation between them. Instead, he rejects them both as different manifestations of what he calls *slave morality*. This provocative and unusual stance raises the question: What is Nietzsche's alternative to *slave morality*? From what perspective does he oppose both what we would call *religious conservatism* and what we would call *secular progressivism*? The textbook answer is that Nietzsche advocates the restoration of the brutal and hierarchical *master morality* characteristic of the ruling classes in pre-Christian societies, such as the ancient Greek city-states and the Roman republic, which he contrasts with the other-regarding and egalitarian *slave morality* invented by the politically powerless class of Jewish priests and spread across the globe first by Christianity and then by the modern democratic movement. Nietzsche's anti-egalitarian stance led one of his earliest readers, the Danish literary critic Georg Brandes, to characterize his political sensibility as *aristocratic radicalism*, an epithet which earned Nietzsche's

<sup>5</sup> References will be to treatise and section number. Citations are from F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, transl. by W. Kaufmann, New York 1965.

mildly ironic approval.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, many religious conservatives and secular progressives, who are usually at each other's throats in the political arena, concur in opposing Nietzsche as a dangerous writer, whose far-reaching influence played a significant role in the catastrophes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Nietzsche can certainly be faulted for his hyperbolic rhetoric, which lends itself easily to political use and abuse. He surely knew that the casual reader of *OGM* would be left with the impression that he was a passionate advocate of *master morality* against *slave morality*. Most scholars continue to read Nietzsche in this way. For example, Matthew Rampley writes, *His essay in On the Genealogy of Morals on the origin of moral evaluations clearly pits one system of values against another, and his sympathy for the value system of the masters is all too apparent.*<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, despite describing himself elsewhere as *a teacher of slow reading*,<sup>8</sup> and insisting in the preface to *OGM* itself that his books are difficult to understand and demand an *art of exegesis* and much patient *rumination* (*Wiederkäuen*),<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche knew that most of his readers, including those who would be horrified by his praise of master morality as well as those who would embrace it enthusiastically, would not pay close attention to the ambiguous literary details of his presentation, which often undercut the surface impression. As Robert Pippin notes, *Given the great passion and energy of Nietzsche's polemical writing, his readers are often tempted to race through passages, as if that passion requires, to do it justice, such speed. But much of what is actually said is, and is meant to be, puzzling, and that puzzlement, properly attended to, slows one down.*<sup>10</sup>

The most disturbing passages in the first treatise of *OGM* include Nietzsche's description of the masters' conduct when they are freed from social constraint and unleash themselves on their enemies: *Once they go outside, where the strange, the stranger is found, they are not much better than uncaged beasts of prey. There they savor a freedom from all social constraints, they compensate themselves in the wilderness for the tension engendered by protracted confinement and enclosure within the peace of society, they go back to the innocent conscience of the beast of prey, as triumphant monsters who perhaps emerge from a disgusting procession of murder, arson, rape, and torture, exhilarated and undisturbed of soul, as if it were no more than a students' prank, convinced they have provided the poets with a lot more material for song and praise. One cannot fail to see at the bottom of all these noble races the beast of prey, the splendid blond beast prowling about avidly in search of spoil; this hidden core needs to erupt from time to time, the animal has to get out again and go back to the wilderness: the Roman, Arabian, Germanic, Japanese nobility,*

<sup>6</sup> F. Nietzsche to G. Brandes, December 2, 1887, in *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, transl. by C. Middleton, Chicago 1969, p. 280.

<sup>7</sup> M. Rampley, *Nietzsche, Aesthetics and Modernity*, Cambridge 2007, p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, transl. by R.J. Hollingdale, Cambridge 1997, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> *OGM* Preface: 8.

<sup>10</sup> R. Pippin, "Nietzsche's Masks: Philosophy and Religion in Beyond Good and Evil", in P.S. Loeb, M. Meyer (eds.), *Nietzsche's Metaphilosophy: The Nature, Method, and Aims of Philosophy*, Cambridge 2019, p. 109.

*the Homeric heroes, the Scandinavian Vikings – they all shared this need.*<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche's eloquent description of *the splendid blond beast* engaged in murder, arson, rape and torture comes across as an enthusiastic *celebration* of the warlike brutality and sadism of the masters, their ability to engage in acts of wanton cruelty and destruction without the moral qualms and *bad conscience* which would inhibit a *domesticated* modern European democrat or a meekly obedient Christian from engaging in such behavior. Nietzsche himself appears to join the ranks of the *poets* who regard the masters' terrible deeds as an opportunity for *song and praise*.

If this were not clear enough, in the second treatise of *OGM*, which presents an account the *bad conscience* as originating in cruelty turned against oneself when one is denied the opportunity to exercise it upon others, Nietzsche writes, *It is not long since princely weddings and public festivals of the more magnificent kind were unthinkable without executions, torturings, or perhaps an auto-da-fé, and no noble household was without creatures upon whom one could heedlessly vent one's malice and cruel jokes. (...) To see others suffer does one good, to make others suffer even more: this is a hard saying, but an ancient, mighty, human, all-too-human principle to which even the apes might subscribe; for it has been said that in devising bizarre cruelties they anticipate man and are, as it were, his 'prelude.' Without cruelty there is no festival: thus the longest and most ancient part of human history teaches – and in punishment there is so much that is festive!*<sup>12</sup> While Nietzsche's account of the wanton behavior of the masters might be taken to have a purely descriptive or *scientific* intent, however enthusiastic and celebratory his language might sound, in this passage, there appears to be no room for ambiguity. Nietzsche's language is unabashedly normative: *To see others suffer does one good, to make others suffer even more.*

While there is hardly a clear normative *political theory* in *OGM*, let alone a political program, Nietzsche's rhetoric has unmistakable affinities with fascist sensibilities, in the disgust it expresses with the timidity and aversion to pain (whether inflicting pain upon others or undergoing suffering oneself) characteristic of modern liberal-democratic civilization, in its dangerous flirtation with violently anti-Jewish rhetoric (despite Nietzsche's contempt for the anti-Semitic movement of his day), and in its looking to pre-modern authoritarianism for inspiration, especially to that of ancient Rome: *'Rome against Judea, Judea against Rome': – there has hitherto been no greater event than this struggle, this question, this deadly contradiction. Rome felt the Jew to be something like anti-nature itself, its antipodal monstrosity as it were: in Rome the Jew stood 'convicted of hatred for the whole human race'; and rightly, provided one has a right to link the salvation and future of the human race with the unconditional dominance of aristocratic values, Roman values.*<sup>13</sup> Of course, the name *fascism* (*fascismo*) itself derives from the *fascis*, the bundle of rods symbolizing power and authority in the ancient Roman republic, and while anti-Semitism was not integral to Italian fascism

<sup>11</sup> *OGM* 1:11.

<sup>12</sup> *OGM* 2:6.

<sup>13</sup> *OGM* 1:16.

(even as it played a certain role), the Nazis certainly saw themselves as fighting for the dominance of *Roman values* over *Jewish values*.

In his lecture on *German nihilism*, delivered at the New School for Social Research in New York on February 26<sup>th</sup> 1941, Leo Strauss offered a diagnosis of the most profound spiritual motivations, in contrast to the more narrowly political or economic causes, of the passionate rebellion against liberal-democratic civilization among reactionary cultural critics which gained momentum after Germany's defeat in the First World War: *The prospect of a pacified planet, without rulers and ruled, of a planetary society devoted to production and consumption only, to the production and consumption of spiritual as well as material merchandise, was positively horrifying to quite a few very intelligent and very decent, if very young, Germans. They did not object to that prospect because they were worrying about their own economic and social position; for certainly in that respect they had no longer anything to lose. Nor did they object to it for religious reasons; for, as one of their spokesmen (E. Jünger) said, they knew that they were the sons and grandsons and great-grandsons of godless men. What they hated was the very prospect of a world in which everyone would be happy and satisfied, in which everyone would have his little pleasure by day and his little pleasure by night, a world in which no great heart could beat and no great soul could breathe, a world without real, unmetaphoric, sacrifice, i.e. a world without blood, sweat, and tears. What to the communists appeared to be the fulfilment of the dream of mankind, appeared to those young Germans as the greatest debasement of humanity. (...) They did not really know (...) what they desired to put in the place of the present world and its allegedly necessary future or sequel: the only thing of which they were absolutely certain was that the present world and all the potentialities of the present world as such must be destroyed in order to prevent the otherwise necessary coming of the communist final order: literally anything, the nothing, the chaos, the jungle, the Wild West, the Hobbian state of nature, seemed to them infinitely better than the communist-anarchist-pacifist future. Their Yes was inarticulate – they were unable to say more than: No! This No proved however sufficient as the preface to action, to the action of destruction.*<sup>14</sup>

Nietzsche was the first important thinker to give voice to this form of radical protest against the leveling tendencies of modern civilization, characterized as tending ineluctably towards a communistic dystopia, not from the reactionary religious perspective of a writer such as Joseph de Maistre or Juan Donoso Cortés, but from an avowedly atheistic perspective.<sup>15</sup> The particular kind of violently anti-liberal, but secular and modern political sensibility which Strauss depicts as emerging in interwar Europe, especially in Germany, was certainly anticipated by much of Nietzsche's rhetoric. Strauss notes that these *conservative revolutionaries* (Mohler) or *reactionary modernists* (Herf), to use two

<sup>14</sup> L. Strauss, *German Nihilism*, "Interpretation" 1999, vol. 26, no. 3, p. 360.

<sup>15</sup> For a recent argument that liberal democracy tends gradually to move in a quasi-communist direction, see R. Legutko, *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies*, transl. by T. Adelson, New York 2016. Legutko begins from reflections on the transition from communism to liberal democracy in Poland, then broadens his argument into a general critique of liberal modernity, carried out from a traditionally conservative and religious perspective, rather than from that of the "revolutionary right."



labels which have been proposed for this broad tendency,<sup>16</sup> included a *few very intelligent and very decent, if very young Germans*, such as Ernst Jünger – further on, he notes that the Nazi movement is only *the most famous, because the most vulgar, example* of this phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> The most dangerous aspects of this overall tendency, which found their most brutal and crude manifestation in the Nazi movement, appear to derive considerable support from Nietzsche's own texts.

Strauss observes, *The Nazis probably derive a disinterested pleasure from the aspect of those human qualities which enable nations to conquer. I am certain that the Nazis consider any pilot of a bomber or any submarine commander absolutely superior in human dignity to any traveling salesman or to any physician or to the representative of any other relatively peaceful occupation. (...) The admiration of the warrior as a type, the unconditional preference given to the warrior as warrior, is however not only genuine in German nihilism: it is even its distinctive feature.*<sup>18</sup> In the speech *Of War and Warriors*, Nietzsche's Zarathustra declares: *You should love peace as a means to new wars. And the short peace more than the long. (...) You say it is the good cause that hallows even war? I say it is the good war that hallows every cause.*<sup>19</sup> And in the speech *Of Old and Young Women*, we find the apothegm: *Man should be trained for war and woman for the recreation of the warrior: all else is folly.*<sup>20</sup> Further on, Strauss observes, *There is reason for believing that the business of destroying, and killing, and torturing is a source of an almost disinterested pleasure to the Nazis as such, that they derive a genuine pleasure from the aspect of the strong and ruthless who subjugate, exploit, and torture the weak and helpless.*<sup>21</sup> In the first treatise of OGM, Nietzsche himself seems to derive such a pleasure *from the aspect of the strong and ruthless*, when he contemplates the sadistic brutality of the pre-modern nobility, albeit from a safe scholarly distance. In *The Antichrist*, which further develops the polemic against Judaism and Christianity carried out in OGM, Nietzsche writes, *The weak and the ill-constituted must perish: first principle of our philanthropy. And one shall help them to do so.*<sup>22</sup>

Those who argue, then, that Nietzsche bears no responsibility for the uses to which his texts were put by the Nazis and other *German nihilists*, when they appealed to his authority in support of their militarism (*man was made for war, woman for the recreation of the warrior*), their valorization of hardness and cruelty (*to see others suffer does one good, to make others suffer even more*), and even such particular policies as the state-sanctioned killing of the mentally or physically disabled (*the weak and the ill-constituted*

<sup>16</sup> Cf. A. Mohler, *Die konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918-1932: Ein Handbuch*, Stuttgart 1950 and J. Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, Cambridge 1985.

<sup>17</sup> L. Strauss, *German Nihilism...*, p. 372.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369.

<sup>19</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, transl. by R.J. Hollingdale, Oxford 1969, p. 74.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>21</sup> L. Strauss, *German Nihilism...*, p. 369.

<sup>22</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist*, ed. K.-M. Guth, Berlin 2016, p. 4 (aphorism 2). My translation.

*must perish (...) and one shall help them to do so*), are arguing from an unconvincingly apologetic position. For even if (as I will argue) Nietzsche's use of this kind of rhetoric is partly playful and even comic in intent, and is meant both to amuse and to perplex the thoughtful reader, and thereby to set such a reader onto a path of philosophical reflection and discovery, Nietzsche is playing a very dangerous game. He knew that many of those who would turn to his texts with the *most* enthusiasm would also be among those *least* inclined to read them carefully, to tease out the elements of irony and satire, and to develop an *art of exegesis* mindful of the difference between the exoteric and the esoteric.<sup>23</sup> Although Nietzsche couldn't have anticipated that his avowedly anti-nationalist and anti-socialist *aristocratic radicalism* would be travestied by *national socialists*, he surely anticipated that his praise of master morality in all its brutality would be taken at face value by many readers. Furthermore, he didn't underestimate the kind of influence which could be exercised by a writer of his rhetorical abilities, particularly in late modern Europe, where the broad educated populace was growing less *theistic* but also *more religious* (i.e. more in need of dogmas or *ideals*), as he puts it provocatively in *Beyond Good and Evil*,<sup>24</sup> and thus increasingly felt a need for new, secular substitutes for religion, such as communism and fascism.

Nonetheless, these observations, while valid, are insufficient. For those of us who are disturbed by Nietzsche's rhetoric, or who are amused yet also perplexed by it, while being disturbed by the awareness that his books are written in such a way that much of what amuses *us*, and causes us to reflect on Nietzsche's deeper philosophical intentions, will be taken with deadly seriousness by many of his readers, and cause *them* to act on his most provocative suggestions in the belief that in doing so they are realizing his political vision, should not for that reason resist the opportunity to learn from his books. Rather, we should seek to understand *why* he chose such a reckless rhetorical strategy, which provokes dangerous misunderstandings, and appears to do so knowingly and deliberately. At the same time, there ought to be no more effective way to cause a fascist sympathizer who regards Nietzsche as *the* intellectual authority to question his political convictions than to demonstrate that Nietzsche is silently laughing at *him*. In the second part of this paper, I will look more closely at Nietzsche's praise of master morality, with a view to understanding the role it plays in realizing his goals as a philosopher and as a teacher of future philosophers.

## II

The first impression one receives from *OGM* is that the conflict between masters and slaves is a struggle for victory or power *between* individuals and political groupings. Moreover, it is not simply a political or military struggle for rule or dominance, as when two claimants to a throne struggle to be recognized as the legitimate ruler and to

<sup>23</sup> Idem, *Beyond Good and Evil*, transl. W. Kaufmann, New York 1966, p. 42 (aphorism 30).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 66 (aphorism 53).



enforce that recognition in the face of opposition, or when two factions in a civil war struggle for victory, whether in armed conflict or on the battlefield of public opinion. Rather, the conflict between masters and slaves is what in contemporary parlance one would call a "culture war" – it is a struggle for the dominance of the *values* of the masters (*good and bad*) over those of the slaves (*good and evil*).

Of course, political and military struggles, in both the ancient and the modern world, have frequently involved some form of conflict over *values* – one might think of the often violent and bloody conflicts between democratic and oligarchical factions in ancient Athens, which were driven by competing conceptions of what constitutes good rule in addition to merely personal allegiances, or the conflicts between left-wing guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries in Central and South America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the conflict between masterly and slavish values depicted by Nietzsche is a conflict at a very fundamental level, between two opposed forms of moral evaluation. Nonetheless, despite the profoundly *philosophical* dimensions of this conflict (masterly and slavish values represent *the* two fundamentally opposed forms of moral evaluation *as such*), it is not simply an ethereal battle of ideas or a literary *battle of the books*, a war fought with pamphlets and polemics. Rather, the masterly values are the values of the ruling class *as such*, while the slavish values are the values of the ruled – or the dominated and subjugated. Like Marx in his analysis of class struggle, in *OGM* Nietzsche appears to identify being ruled with being dominated, subjugated or tyrannized over. While he seems to take the side of the masters against the slaves, he doesn't argue that the rule of the masters is an imperative of justice or *good governance*. Rather, observing this struggle from a scholarly or philosophical distance, he seems to take *an almost disinterested pleasure* (to cite Strauss on the Nazis) in contemplating the triumphant and fearsome self-affirmation of the masters: *Grant me from time to time – if there are divine goddesses in the realm beyond good and evil – grant me the sight, but one glance of something perfect, wholly achieved, mighty, happy, triumphant, something still capable of arousing fear!*<sup>25</sup>

Nietzsche presents masterly values as those of the ruling class *as such*, the result of their creative, spontaneous, unreflective determination of value, while slavish values originate in *the slave revolt in morality*.<sup>26</sup> They are the values which are produced when the subjugated class becomes *creative* in the arena of moral evaluation, reactively originating an alternative standard of value and opposing that novel criterion to the value-standard maintained by their rulers. Nietzsche seems to imply that, prior to this fateful historical event, which took place among the ancient Israelite priests after the Jewish people had been rendered politically powerless in the Babylonian Exile, the subaltern classes of antiquity simply accepted the values of their masters, even as they must have recognized that, measured by this standard, they themselves were *bad*, i.e. wretched and contemptible.

Accordingly, Nietzsche faces the problem of how to account for the triumph of slavish values in the modern world. For while Nietzsche clearly associates masterly

<sup>25</sup> *OGM* 1:12.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *OGM* 1:7 and 1:10.

values with political dominance and slavish values with political subjugation, he also seems to assume that slaves do not *cease* being *slaves* even when they become politically dominant. Furthermore, Nietzsche seems to suggest that the slaves achieved dominance (without ceasing to be *slaves*) in part by tricking the masters into accepting the mode of evaluation which the slaves themselves had *created*. This difficulty is implicit in Nietzsche's seemingly rather overdrawn characterization of European history as a millennia-long struggle for dominance between masters and slaves. If the values of those who rule, whoever they might be, are invariably masterly values (*good and bad*, not *good and evil*), then the slave revolt in morality could not possibly have *succeeded*. At the moment of triumph, the slaves would simply have transformed into *masters* – something which Nietzsche never proposes or implies.

However, Nietzsche's account of the struggle between the masters and slaves is far more nuanced than it appears it to be, while his praise of *master morality* is far more qualified. In an important passage in the first treatise of *OGM*, Nietzsche describes how the master and the slave inevitably misunderstand each other: *When the noble mode of evaluation blunders and sins against reality, it does so in respect to the sphere with which it is not sufficiently familiar, against a real knowledge of which it has indeed inflexibly guarded itself: in some circumstances it misunderstands the sphere it despises, that of the common man, of the lower orders; on the other hand, one should remember that, even supposing that the affect of contempt, of looking down from a superior height, falsifies the image of that which it despises, it will at any rate be a much less serious falsification than that perpetrated on its opponent – in effigy, of course – by the submerged hatred, the vengefulness of the impotent.*<sup>27</sup> Although the passage concludes by emphasizing the extreme *falsification* of the master in the perspective of the slave, Nietzsche also claims (as if in passing) that the slave is likewise *misunderstood* and *falsified* by the master, who *blunders and sins against reality* and *inflexibly guards* himself against *real knowledge* of those who are outside his *sphere*.

Nietzsche, then, occupies a perspective different from the opposed perspectives of the slave and the master. *Nietzsche implies that he understands the slave and the master better than they understand themselves.* Nietzsche lays claim to a knowledge of psychology which masters and slaves necessarily lack. Accordingly, the cartoonish account of European, or even global, history as a millennia-long struggle for victory between the masterly or noble mode of evaluation (*good and bad*) and the slavish or base mode of evaluation (*good and evil*) which emerges from the first treatise of *OGM*, and which gives the impression that every human being must either be a master or a slave, as if these were fixed natural types, cannot be Nietzsche's last word. There is at least one exception, someone who is neither a master nor a slave – Nietzsche himself.

The attentive reader is thus prepared for an important point which Nietzsche makes towards the end of the first treatise. There we find the grandiose claim that, *The two opposing values 'good and bad,' 'good and evil' have been engaged in a fearful struggle on earth for thousands of years; and though the latter value has certainly been on top*

<sup>27</sup> *OGM* 1:10.

for a long time, there are still places where the struggle is as yet undecided.<sup>28</sup> But Nietzsche then adds an important qualification: *One might even say that it has risen even higher and thus become more and more profound and spiritual: so that today there is perhaps no more decisive mark of a 'higher nature,' a more spiritual nature, than that of being divided in this sense and a genuine battleground of these opposed values.*<sup>29</sup> The struggle between masters and slaves, then, is not just a struggle *between* individuals or political groupings, a *culture war* – it is also a struggle *within* individuals, in their very souls, between the masterly and slavish modes of evaluation. Furthermore, Nietzsche suggests that those individuals who are *themselves* a *genuine battleground of these opposed values* are *higher and more spiritual* than those who are merely *slaves* – or merely *masters*.

In fact, throughout *OGM*, and most clearly in the third treatise, we are introduced to a variety of human types not easily assimilated to the slave or to the master, such as the artist, the scientist, and the philosopher. These types are too complex to be described as *masters* or *slaves* without qualification. Furthermore, Nietzsche's depictions of the master and the slave in the first treatise are *themselves* so exaggerated and caricatured, one wonders whether there has ever been – whether there *could* ever have been – a real person who corresponds to them. In some passages, the master is portrayed as a being so purely driven by instinct, so utterly lacking in self-consciousness or interiority, that he must lack all self-knowledge or reflective awareness of the world around him – a beast, not a man. Conversely, in some passages, the slave is portrayed as an individual with such a pathological excess of neurotic reflexivity as to make genuine knowledge of himself or the world around him equally impossible as it would seem to be for the master. The psychological delicacy and nuance one expects from Nietzsche appear to have forsaken him in such passages. By contrast, the depictions of the artist, the scientist, and the philosopher in the third treatise would not be out of place among the subtle analyses of different human types one finds elsewhere in his corpus.

Now, one could imagine extreme cases that *roughly* approximate Nietzsche's most overdrawn and caricatured depictions of the master and the slave – a violent, impulsive, sexually insatiable warlord or gang leader, who gets what he wants when he wants it and never thinks about why he wants it, or a miserable, hypocritical religious fanatic, seething with resentment and endlessly nursing his sores and relishing the prospect of the exquisite tortures God will inflict on everyone who has slighted him from his earliest youth. However, it is more plausible to understand the master and the slave as unreal idealizations intended to prompt reflection on *why* they are unreal and thereby to help the thoughtful, demanding reader understand the complex structure of human interiority. They point to the connection between self-knowledge and genuine knowledge of others, as well as the dependence of both on the right kind of interiority or self-relation, equidistant from the sheer outward-directed instinct of the master, which is also a kind of solipsism, and the sheer inner-directed repression of the instincts in the slave, which transforms itself into an unbridled satisfaction of the instincts by losing itself in fantasy.

<sup>28</sup> *OGM* 1:16.

<sup>29</sup> *OGM* 1:16.

Indeed, in the more extreme passages, master and slave morality as Nietzsche presents them appear to be different forms of solipsism which lead, paradoxically, to the absence of a true sense of self or individuality.

Perhaps, then, Nietzsche's claim that *today the higher nature just is a battleground of masterly or noble and slavish or base modes of evaluation* isn't meant to apply only to exceptional human types such as the artist, the scientist, and the philosopher. Perhaps this claim is meant to apply more generally to *the human species*, insofar as humanity itself represents a *higher and more spiritual (geistiger) nature* in relation to that of unreasoning beasts. Certainly, in Nietzsche's other writings, the complex interplay between *the noble (edel or vornehm)* and *the base (gemein – the common)* is central to his psychology of human beings in general. Nobody is perfectly noble or altogether base. Furthermore, while in *OGM*, he tends to conflate *the noble* with an overdrawn caricature of *the master*, the presentation of *the noble* which he gives elsewhere is far more nuanced and multifaceted, often incorporating contradictory features and internal tensions.<sup>30</sup>

There are good reasons, then, to doubt that Nietzsche wanted to restore an archaic past in which ruthless masters ruled over resentful slaves, a past which never existed in the exaggerated terms in which he sometimes depicts it. But this only brings us back to the question – What is the *philosophical* purpose of his praise of *master morality*, along with his passionate, politically charged attack on *slave morality*?

Let us examine now more closely the distinction between the oppositions *good and bad* and *good and evil*. Nietzsche presents master morality as a form of *moral* evaluation, as the label suggests. Sometimes, he seems to be interested in attacking what he characterizes as the prevalent contemporary assumption that slave morality is the *only* possible form of morality. Opposing such historical amnesia, Nietzsche argues that slave morality is in fact a derivative form of moral evaluation, which came into being as a reaction to an earlier form. However, Nietzsche seems to equivocate between presenting master morality as an alternative form of *morality* and as an alternative *to* morality itself.

The slavish distinction between *good and evil* is clearly a distinction between the inherently meritorious and blameworthy. By contrast, the masterly distinction between *good and bad* evinces a certain ambiguity. Sometimes, Nietzsche's presentation suggests that master morality is an alternative criterion of moral merit and blame. The meritorious man is not the man who refrains from acting on his desires, *turns the other cheek*, and puts the other before himself, as the slaves would have it, but rather the man who acts on his desires instinctively and fearlessly, who triumphantly affirms himself, while the blameworthy man, the man worthy of contempt, is the weakling and coward who allows himself to be mistreated and subjugated. Sometimes, however, Nietzsche's presentation suggests rather that the distinction between *good and bad* is not an alternative criterion of *moral* evaluation, but an extra-moral or pre-moral mode of evaluation. Master morality would then not be an alternative moral criterion, but *an alternative kind of criterion*. For example, in a famous passage, Nietzsche compares the masters to

<sup>30</sup> For example, Chapter 9 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, "What Is Noble?", presents a far more complex and multifaceted treatment of "the noble."

great birds of prey and the slaves to little lambs and suggests that, while the lambs blame the masters for their rapacious activities, the birds of prey don't *blame* the lambs for doing and being that which they cannot help but do and be: *That lambs dislike great birds of prey does not seem strange: only it gives no ground for reproaching these birds of prey for bearing off little lambs. And if the lambs say among themselves: 'these birds of prey are evil; and whoever is least like a bird of prey, but rather its opposite, a lamb – would he not be good?', there is no reason to find fault with this institution of an ideal, except perhaps that the birds of prey might view it a little ironically and say: 'we don't dislike them at all, these good little lambs; we even love them: nothing is more tasty than a tender lamb.'*<sup>31</sup>

Notably, Nietzsche proposes that the concept *good* was originally applied primarily to *human beings* and only derivatively to actions, in contrast to the emphasis on good and bad actions characteristic of modern moral theories such as Kantian or utilitarian ethics. Originally, Nietzsche suggests, it is the good man who experiences *himself* as good and for this reason applies the concept *good* to his actions derivatively, as the kind of actions characteristic of men like him.<sup>32</sup> The good man recognized himself as such according to a *typical character trait*.<sup>33</sup> Conversely, the good man of master morality is the evil man viewed from the perspective of slave morality. However, Nietzsche appears to equivocate between suggesting that *good* in the masterly sense has an extra-moral meaning, roughly equivalent to *triumphantly happy and exultant*, quite apart from any considerations of *merit*, while *bad* in the masterly sense simply means *miserable, wretched, weak*, and so on, without any imputation of *blame*, and suggesting rather that *good* in the masterly sense is a criterion of merit according to which the human being who is triumphantly happy and *active* is also the one who is *inherently worthy of respect*, while *bad* in the masterly sense is a criterion of blame, according to which the one who is lowly, wretched, miserable and *reactive* is *worthy of contempt*. By contrast, there is no such ambiguity in Nietzsche's presentation of slave morality, according to which the good and the evil man alike are morally responsible for their behavior, the good man for his meritorious (self-denying and charitable) deeds and the evil man for his blameworthy (self-affirming and rapacious) deeds.

Does this asymmetry reflect an inconsistency on Nietzsche's part? Or does it reflect an inconsistency on the part of the masters themselves? Does Nietzsche oscillate between characterizing master morality as a form of morality and as a pre-moral mode of evaluation? Or do the masters oscillate between the willingness to view themselves and others through a gleefully amoral perspective and the desire to view themselves as *morally* superior to those whom they subjugate and mistreat?

I suggest that a different but parallel ambiguity in Nietzsche's presentation of the *origin* of slave morality supplies evidence that it is not Nietzsche, but the masters who are inconsistent. Nietzsche in fact gives two accounts of the origin of slave morality, a historical and a psychological account. The precise formula *the slave revolt in morality*

<sup>31</sup> OGM 1:13.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. OGM 1:2.

<sup>33</sup> OGM 1:5.



*begins* occurs twice in the first treatise. In *OGM* 1:7, Nietzsche says that *with the Jews the slave revolt in morality begins*,<sup>34</sup> but a little later, in *OGM* 1:10, Nietzsche says: *The slave revolt in morality begins when resentment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the resentment of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge*.<sup>35</sup>

Now, there need not be a contradiction between these two accounts of the origin of slave morality, assuming that the psychological process which Nietzsche describes in the later passage occurred *for the first time* at a certain time and place in recorded history, among the ancient Jewish priests. However, it would be profoundly implausible to maintain that the phenomenon which Nietzsche describes in *OGM* 1:10 occurred first or exclusively among the ancient Jews. In *OGM* 1:10, Nietzsche describes the process by which a person blames someone who has wronged him, in doing so believing that they *could have* done otherwise, *could have* refrained from acting on their injurious desire, and for this reason can be held accountable, as by contrast a lion taking its prey, or a stalactite falling from the roof of a cave and causing injury, could not be the target of righteous indignation. If the *triumph* of slave morality consists in this mode of evaluation having become thoroughly internalized in ordinary human moral consciousness, among rulers no less than among the ruled, then Nietzsche is surely correct that this triumph has come to pass. But is it really plausible to suggest that this mode of evaluation emerged *first* among the ancient Jews and only spread through the influence of the Jews and their successors, the Christians? Can't this form of moral evaluation also be found among the ancient Greeks, for example? Aren't *masterly* types such as Pericles or Alcibiades not just as given to moral indignation at real or perceived injuries as *slavish* types such as the Jewish priests?<sup>36</sup> Indeed, can't *slave morality* be found in *every* culture in recorded history, among the rulers no less than among the ruled? Isn't morally charged *resentment* fundamental to being human? Aren't the *origin* and *triumph* of slave morality pre-historic phenomena rather than datable events in recorded history?

One might suppose that even if this mode of moral evaluation is indeed fundamental to human nature, at least as we know it both from contemporary experience and from recorded history, *Nietzsche himself* failed to recognize this, due to his notorious prejudice in favor of the strong and ruthless. One might suppose that Nietzsche had an exaggerated, idealized conception of the pre-modern nobility, as beast-like paragons of spontaneous self-affirmation, wholly *beyond good and evil*, free of festering *resentment* and *bad conscience* alike. However, we have already seen that there are good reasons to suspect that his more extreme portrayal of the masters is a deliberate caricature. Furthermore, while in some passages the masters do indeed appear to be wholly spontaneous, instinctual beings, who act immediately on their desires and never engage in reflective, means-to-end thinking or utilitarian calculation (*what had they to do with*

<sup>34</sup> *OGM* 1:7.

<sup>35</sup> *OGM* 1:10.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Plato, *First Alcibiades* 110b-c.



*utility!*<sup>37</sup>), and who determine their own value without any gnawing resentment or concern for how they appear in the eyes of others, other passages suggest a more complex picture, in which the masters only act in a purely *masterly* way on those occasions when they have the opportunity to unleash their bestial impulses on *the stranger*, during acts of war or pillage, or when tormenting subordinates. Amongst themselves, by contrast, the masters are *held sternly in check* by *custom, respect, usage, gratitude, and even more by mutual suspicion and jealousy*, hardly the marks of triumphant self-affirmation and sovereign indifference to the wishes and opinions of others.<sup>38</sup>

The famous metaphysical excursus in *OGM* 1:13, in which Nietzsche compares human agency to a lightning-flash and denies that there is any *doer* distinct from the *deed*, gives the impression that *only* the slaves believe in free will and thus in the human agent's responsibility for blameworthy or meritorious deeds. However, in this very passage, Nietzsche characterizes the belief in free will as one of the *fundamental errors of reason* implicit in the very structure of language itself.<sup>39</sup> Unless the masters do not possess reason and speech (*logos*), unless we are to suppose that they are beasts and not men, it is implausible to maintain that they are not also subject to these *fundamental errors*.

I suggest, then, that Nietzsche's distinction between masters and slaves is more complex and dialectical than it appears to be at first – it is a tool for philosophical analysis, not a clear distinction between fixed natural types. The idea of a human being wholly free of utilitarian calculation, moral resentment or bad conscience is a fantasy, for which Nietzsche fails to supply any clear historical example, because none exist. Everyone is a *master* and a *slave* in relation to those over whom they have power or to whom they exist in relations of dependence and subordination. The captain who lords it over his underlings may be fearful and obsequious when dealing with his superiors and jealously suspicious and calculating among his *equals*. Indeed, one may well be a *master* and a *slave* in relation to the *same* person, albeit in different ways. Human life is an intricate web of obedience and command, power and dependence, which manifests itself in endlessly complex ways, in the family, in society, in religion, in politics and in war. Moreover, even those who engage in gleefully wanton behavior of the kinds which Nietzsche depicts in *OGM* still tend to want (albeit inconsistently) to think of themselves as *morally* superior to those whom they subjugate and mistreat.

In his discussion of *OGM* in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche claims that each of its three treatises begins in a way that is *calculated to mislead*.<sup>40</sup> The first treatise begins by proposing two criteria for a genealogy of morality, psychological tenability, and historical demonstrability. Nietzsche makes it clear that psychology has a certain methodological priority to history – a *psychologically untenable* hypothesis can be dismissed for that reason alone, with no further need to examine the historical evidence, while a *psychologically*

<sup>37</sup> *OGM* 1:2.

<sup>38</sup> *OGM* 1:11.

<sup>39</sup> *OGM* 1:13.

<sup>40</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, transl. by D. Large, Oxford 2007, p. 79. Translation modified.

*tenable* hypothesis may nonetheless turn out to be *historically* falsifiable.<sup>41</sup> Nietzsche himself then presents two accounts of *the slave revolt in morality* – a psychological and a historical account. But we have seen that, while the psychological account may be *tenable*, the *historical* hypothesis is manifestly questionable. This is not to deny that Nietzsche believes that Judaism and Christianity have played a unique historical role in elevating *values* such as self-denial, humility, and compassion. But he engages in deliberately misleading hyperbole when he writes as if the very existence of *slave morality*, in the basic sense of morally charged *ressentiment* at perceived injury, was an invention of the Jews, rather than a basic aspect of human psychology, rooted in feelings of powerlessness which are certainly not absent from those who hold positions of political authority. The purpose of Nietzsche's philosophical fantasy of an ancient world ruled by wholly self-affirmative *masters* is to teach the careful reader how deeply *slave morality* is bound up with any recognizably human life, such that any liberation from slave morality will inevitably be partial and highly qualified, and achievable only through constant reflection on the *fundamental errors of reason*, not through a thoughtless and bestial embrace of the instincts. The conflict between the masters and slaves in the first treatise of *OGM* prepares us for the portrayal of the philosopher in the third treatise, whom Nietzsche intimates is the human type who reconciles in the most satisfactory way conceivable the reflective and self-negating interiority of the slave with the instinctual self-affirmation of the master.

Why, then, does Nietzsche appear to celebrate the most brutal excesses of *master morality*, while also polemicizing indignantly against *slave morality*? Let us note an important point of dramatic irony in his presentation. The distinctive negative affect of master morality is *contempt*, while the distinctive affect of slave morality is *indignation*. Nietzsche doesn't distinguish between unjustified, self-serving resentment and righteous moral indignation – he conflates them insensibly in the catch-all category of *ressentiment*. Having done so, he proceeds to conduct a *morally indignant polemic against the morally indignant as such*. Nietzsche's rhetoric seeks to provoke *indignation* at the fact that, instead of tormenting *others*, the masters have been tricked *through the very invention of moral indignation itself* into tormenting *themselves* with feelings of guilt at their own natural impulses. Nietzsche's rhetoric aims to whip the reader into a fury at the slaves, who trick their masters into having a *bad conscience* about their wanton behavior and thereby dupe them into restraining their violent and sadistic impulses, which prior to *the slave revolt in morality* they freely satisfied.

Moral indignation directed against morality itself is a paradoxical but seductive and powerful phenomenon which has played an important role in radical political movements on both the left and the right. In different forms, it can be found both among communists, and others on the radical left, who attack morality itself as a *bourgeois illusion* used by the economically privileged to keep the lower classes in their place, by convincing them they have a moral duty not to rebel against their superiors, and among fascists, and others on the radical right, who attack morality itself as a stratagem of the

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *OGM* 1:2-3.

weak to convince the naturally strong they have a moral duty not to *subjugate, exploit, and torture the weak and helpless* (to cite Strauss once again). In both cases, the very idea of morality *itself* is treated as though it were a self-serving and morally reprehensible stratagem, used for nefarious purposes, while the performative contradiction involved in such an attitude goes unnoticed.

When Nietzsche was writing in the 1880s, the radical left-wing form of this peculiar phenomenon, morally charged indignation directed at morality itself, was already a powerful force, promoted by writers such as Marx and Engels. Nietzsche's rhetorical genius consisted in more or less single-handedly inventing its radical right-wing form. However, unlike the fascists whom he would influence, Nietzsche was well aware of the inconsistency inherent in this kind of stance. If morality itself is an illusion, why should it be any more morally reprehensible for the weak to dupe the strong into subjugating and tormenting *themselves* than for the strong openly to subjugate and torment others (or for the *bourgeoisie* to dupe the *proletariat* into accepting oppressive economic inequalities)? In *BGE*, Nietzsche writes, *Every morality is, as opposed to laissez aller, a bit of tyranny against 'nature'; also against 'reason'; but this in itself is no objection, as long as we do not have some other morality which permits us to decree that every kind of tyranny and unreason is impermissible*.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, if indignation is an essentially slavish affect, then wouldn't someone who is indignant that the slaves have tricked the masters into restraining their desires not himself be a kind of slave? The unreflectively indignant partisan of the masters, furious at the trickery of the duplicitous slaves, is comically un-self-aware. Nietzsche's polemic against slave morality is in fact an implicit satire *avant la lettre* of a crucial aspect of what would become the fascist sensibility, even as his rhetoric itself contributes to the very emergence or *creation* of such a sensibility.

But if Nietzsche was well aware of the performative contradiction and comical lack of self-awareness inherent in such a stance, why did he write in this way? Why did he contribute to the emergence of a moral-political sensibility through the use of rhetoric which implicitly satirizes the very sensibility it knowingly cultivates?

I suggest there are two broad reasons for Nietzsche's rhetorical approach. First, in his capacity as investigator and teacher, Nietzsche intends to educate the potentially philosophical reader by first playing with and even deceiving such a reader, before gradually disclosing his deeper teaching. Nietzsche encourages us to be swept up in the passion of his attack on the cunning slaves, to share in his rage at their hypocrisy and to embrace the ideal of unrestrained self-affirmation and *masterly* conduct. But if we stop to reflect, begin to read more closely, and thereby become aware of the performative contradiction into which Nietzsche's passionate oratory has seduced us, we will have learned in a grippingly visceral and personal fashion just how difficult it is truly to *overcome morality*. The reader will become vividly aware of how the kind of rhetoric which encourages us simply to leave morality behind, *in the dustbin of history*, whatever form it might take (whether left-wing or right-wing, Marxist or Nietzschean), leads us rather to adopt

<sup>42</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil...*, p. 100 (aphorism 188).

a moral stance which is exceptionally un-self-aware because it fails to recognize itself *as* a moral stance. For the reader whom Nietzsche leads through this educative process of self-oblivion followed by self-recognition, his morally charged attack on morality itself will serve as a tool for self-knowledge. Such a reader will acquire a visceral appreciation of just how deeply *slave morality* is rooted in human nature, such that any attempt to *overcome* morality *tout court*, as Nietzsche frequently urges us to do, cannot be a simple matter of embracing our most brutal animal instincts, gleefully encouraging others to do the same and indignantly (or contemptuously) reprimanding the *slaves* who reproach us for it. Rather, it will be a *lengthy secret work*, a *self-overcoming of morality*, to which only *the most subtle and the most honest consciences of today* are called.<sup>43</sup>

However, although Nietzsche was writing *above all* for the careful and thoughtful reader, who would gradually come to understand Nietzsche's *own* cunning literary stratagems and thereby receive the benefits of his tutelage, he also wanted to have an impact on the broader culture and politics of late modern Europe. Nietzsche's aggressively anti-egalitarian rhetoric was not *simply* playful or ironic. Much like the *German nihilists* of the interwar period, Nietzsche was disgusted by the leveling tendencies of mass industrial civilization, which he feared would lead to a fatal weakening of all hierarchies or value-standards, not merely political but also cultural and spiritual, and thereby to the abolition of higher culture. Unlike the *German nihilists*, Nietzsche's deepest concern was not with *blood, sweat, and tears*, but with the survival of philosophy. However, for those who were not able to become philosophers, Nietzsche wanted to contribute to the formation of a novel political alternative, which harnessed the energy of moral indignation directed at morality itself, not towards egalitarian goals, as the Marxists had done (albeit without Nietzsche's irony or playfulness), but towards the preservation of a sense of hierarchy or rank-ordering (*Rangordnung*). In a world in which traditional religion appeared to be declining, and the securing of comfortable self-preservation was recognized by increasingly large numbers of people as the only legitimate goal of politics, Nietzsche wanted to encourage the emergence of a passionately anti-egalitarian and anti-liberal, yet modern and radically secular political sensibility, not as an end in itself, but as a *countermovement to nihilism*, a force of resistance to the most culturally debasing effects of liberal modernity. In this spirit, he speaks of the need for an atheistic *party of life*, to fight against the alternatives which had emerged after the French Revolution – *the party of order*, the traditional right-wing defenders of throne and altar, and *the party of reason*, the left-wing defenders of secular egalitarianism, whether moderate or radical.<sup>44</sup>

Nietzsche couldn't possibly have known exactly what such a movement would look

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 45 (aphorism 32). My emphasis. Translation modified.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. F. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo...*, p. 48. One of the profound ironies of Nietzsche's reception lies in the fact that he has been even more enthusiastically received among progressive and radically left-wing thinkers than among the radical right, despite his vehemently expressed contempt for socialism, liberalism, and the modern democratic movement. The question of why Nietzsche has provoked so many left-wing thinkers to transform him into a champion of egalitarianism, rather than to denounce him as an elitist, would be a worthy theme for a different study.

like. Richard Wolin wisely notes, *Among postmodernists it has become fashionable to read Nietzsche as a poet, a stylist, an aesthete – as anything but a political thinker. Yet in Nietzsche's oeuvre there are extended discussions of 'breeding,' 'hierarchy,' 'race,' and war that have been conveniently excised from the postmodern canon. If one wants to understand the radicalization of Germany's right-wing intellectuals, an appreciation of Nietzsche's influence as a political thinker is indispensable.*<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, Nietzsche doesn't offer a clear political program for direct implementation, but rather a provocative and multifaceted rhetorical experiment, a kind of cultural hand-grenade, the effects of which he knew would be unpredictable: *I am not a man, I am dynamite.*<sup>46</sup> Nietzsche hoped to encourage a broad movement of passionate resistance to dogmatic egalitarianism; he wasn't particularly concerned with the political or institutional details. Nietzsche's rhetorical goals have certain affinities with those of a very different writer, Alexis de Tocqueville, even as Tocqueville's measured plea for the preservation of some of the virtues of an aristocratic society *within* the newly emerging democratic world contrasts sharply with Nietzsche's far more radical and urgently expressed call for an aristocratic rebellion against the very existence of that world in the name of *hierarchy* and the dominance of *masters over slaves*.

Nietzsche calls for a kind of *master revolt in morality*, which according to the terms set by his own presentation would be something deeply paradoxical, because those who are in revolt are by definition *slaves*. Nietzsche's playful indifference to the concrete details of the movement of resistance which he tried to call into being differentiates him from the fascist ideologues whom he influenced, while at the same time rendering him open to the charge of grave rhetorical irresponsibility. Certainly, none of the fascist parties which emerged in interwar Europe, including the NSDAP, could reasonably have claimed to be Nietzsche's *party of life*. Yet powerful encouragement for their most brutal tendencies can certainly be found in his texts, however ironic and even satirical the proto-fascist aspects of his rhetoric may appear to the careful reader. *Postmodernists* are right to see Nietzsche as a fundamentally playful writer, but Wolin is *at the same time* right to emphasize the earnestly political dimension of his writing. The combination of philosophical playfulness and political earnestness in Nietzsche's rhetoric reflects the combination of seriousness and play, or gravity and levity, which Plato suggested was the characteristic mark of the philosophical life. In the case of a writer like Nietzsche (or Plato), for whom the philosophical life is the highest theme of any philosophical book, one can expect that such a book will imitate this combination, in surprising and unpredictable ways. Yet the author of such a book has a weighty political responsibility, proportionate to his rhetorical powers and his ability to influence many different kinds of reader, and Nietzsche often used his extraordinary gifts as a writer in unjustifiably reckless ways.

<sup>45</sup> R. Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism*, Princeton 2006, p. 295.

<sup>46</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo...*, p. 88.

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