

FOREWORD

Enter almost any bookstore today, and you are likely to find its philosophy section crowded with Nietzsche's works. That wasn't always so. It is, in large part, the accomplishment of Walter Kaufmann's *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, whose first edition appeared in 1950, when its author was not yet thirty, and its fourth, which is being reissued here, in 1974. Kaufmann's book brought about a radical reversal of the popular image of Nietzsche as a ranting, totalitarian anti-Semite and gradually made it possible for philosophers, who had long ago dismissed Nietzsche as a mere "poet" or "prophet," to take him seriously once again. It marks a major turning point in Nietzsche's posthumous reputation.

Friedrich Nietzsche was born in a small town in Germany in 1844. In 1869, not yet twenty-five, he was appointed a full professor of Classical Philology at the University of Basel—an event unprecedented in the history of European classical scholarship and academic practice more generally. Despite his meteoric rise, though, his early works, particularly *The Birth of Tragedy*—no less a hymn to Richard Wagner's music and cultural aspirations than a controversial account of ancient Greece—were a deep disappointment to his academic colleagues. In 1879, having broken with Wagner, Nietzsche resigned his position and spent the next ten years—ill, lonely, and almost completely unknown—living nomadically, in France or Italy in winter and on the peaks of central Europe in summer. During that time, he added two parts to *Human, All-Too-Human*, which appeared in 1879, wrote eleven other books (including *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, and *The Antichrist*), several poems, countless letters, and thousands of pages of notes. In January 1889, he collapsed on the street while trying to shield a horse that was being flogged by its coachman. When he came to, he was no longer in control of his mind. From then on, he lived as an invalid, cared for by his mother and, eventually, his sister, Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche, the widow of a leading German anti-Semite, who controlled his works and his reputation jealously until her death in 1935.

Nietzsche himself died in 1900, completely unaware that in the meantime he had become a major figure in European intellectual life. And not only in Europe. In the United States, too, Nietzsche was being read widely as the new century began. His

message, according to H. L. Mencken's influential interpretation, was a call to individualism, urging us to throw off "the morality invented by some dead race to make its own progress easy and pleasant" and replace it with "a workable personal morality" of our own.¹

All that changed when both sides in the First World War took Nietzsche's philosophy to be, in the main, an endorsement of German militarism and imperialism. Things only got worse when both Italian Fascism and German National Socialism claimed him as their own during the 1930s and the Second World War. Nietzsche was now seen as a philosopher of heartless cruelty, a thinker in harmony with Nazi ideology who, according to the Harvard historian Crane Brinton, "damned democracy, pacifism, individualism, Christianity, humanitarianism [and] praised authority, racial purity, the warrior spirit and practice, the stern life and the great health."² He "obviously had forty different kinds of inferiority complex," Brinton charged, and, had he been alive when Hitler came in power, Nietzsche "would have been a good Nazi, eager to cleanse Germany of the Jewish race."³

Brinton's views were somewhat qualified, but the net effect of his book, the Nazis' lionization of Nietzsche, and the philosophers' neglect convinced the American public that Nietzsche—psychologically flawed if not totally insane, totalitarian, irrationalist, and anti-Semitic—was simply to be ignored or, if not ignored, denounced. What else, after all, could one do with ideas like the Superman, the Master Race, the Antichrist, or the Will to Power—ideas that seemed to reek of racism and ruthless violence?

That was the "legend," as he characterized it, that Kaufmann undertook to dismantle, tracing its creation in part to the poet Stefan George and his followers but mostly to Nietzsche's sister, who picked and chose which of her brother's texts to publish, when and how, and even changed his language when it suited her purposes. Kaufmann shows that *The Will to Power*, which Elizabeth edited and published, is an arbitrary selection from Nietzsche's notes, taken out of context and chronological order and stitched together according to her own crude understanding of her

¹ H. L. Mencken, *Nietzsche* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1993; orig. pub. 1913), p. 93.

² Crane Brinton, *Nietzsche* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965; orig. pub. 1941), p. 216.

³ Brinton, *Nietzsche*, pp. 42, 230.

brother's thought. And yet both the Nazi Party, of which she was an avid supporter, and the philosopher Martin Heidegger, himself not an uninterested bystander, considered *The Will to Power* as Nietzsche's own outline of a projected but unfinished magnum opus. The Nazis, in particular, claimed to find in it sanction for their ideology and their inhuman policies.

According to Kaufmann, Nietzsche acquired his reputation for heartless cruelty, anti-Semitism, and pervasive self-contradiction only because his critics felt free to quote snippets of his pithy, lively, and often exaggerated language without concern for their original context. For him, Nietzsche's aphoristic style indicates a specific approach to philosophical questions: it expresses the desire to look at things from as many different points of view as possible and the willingness to "experiment" with ideas—to test them by trying to live as they suggest. By calling his concerns "existential," Kaufmann was able to connect Nietzsche to the existentialism of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre, which was very popular during the 1950s.

Popular, yes, but not quite academically respectable. And in order to give Nietzsche an undisputed place within the philosophical canon, Kaufmann proceeds to the most controversial element in his interpretation. His Nietzsche is a rationalist heir and not, as he had been thought to be, a romantic critic of the Enlightenment. His ideal type is not Napoleon (and it certainly wouldn't have been Hitler) but Goethe—someone who conquered not the world but himself and used his power not to subjugate others but to achieve his own "totality; he fought the mutual extraneousness of reason, senses, feeling, and will . . . he disciplined himself to wholeness, he created himself." Nietzsche's philosophy, as Kaufmann reads it, has its roots in Kant, Hegel, and, most surprisingly, Socrates, who "became little less than an idol for him."

Although Nietzsche had charged that only "scholarly oxen" would ever think so, the superman, or, as Kaufmann prefers, the overman was usually interpreted as a biological category referring to a German master race whose will to power would lead it to exploit the rest of the world for its own aggrandizement. Kaufmann demolishes—there is no other word for it—that interpretation. He shows that the overman is neither a biological nor a racial concept: it indicates a type of person who "overcomes" not others but himself. Although he admits that Nietzsche sometimes invites misunderstanding, Kaufmann insists that overcoming involves the sublimation of our baser impulses—the cruder forms of the

will to power—into the effort “to develop foresight and to give consideration to all the impulses, to organize their chaos, to integrate them into a harmony—and thus to give man power: power over himself and over nature.” What guides this effort? Nothing other than the will to power itself—but in the guise of rationality, which is for Kaufmann its “highest” manifestation and “gives man mastery over himself.” So conceived, the overman is able to face Nietzsche’s notorious thought of “the eternal recurrence,” which Kaufmann takes, controversially, to hold that the universe repeats itself in exactly the same way over and over without end, without purpose or resting point. Only the overman, according to this interpretation, can bear the thought that the world has no inherent purpose and life no intrinsic meaning, for the overman *gives* his life a meaning of its own.

Kaufmann’s Nietzsche is an enemy of all versions of the state, totalitarian as well as liberal: he is an “anti-political” thinker for whom the value of individualism trumps all collective good. His judgments are measured and reasonable. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he pits Apollo, the form-giving god, against Dionysus, the god of formless frenzy, and “if he favors one of the two gods, it is Apollo.” In Nietzsche’s later works, Apollo gives way to Dionysus, who has become, in the meantime, a synthesis of the two, “passion controlled.” The *Genealogy* explains our morality as the transformation of an earlier form of Homeric “noble” or “master” values into a “slave” morality aimed at safeguarding the interests of the weakest member of society but Nietzsche, despite his disdain for the “sick” and the powerless, again takes no sides: “Nietzsche’s own ethic is beyond master and slave morality. He would like us to conform to neither and become autonomous.” In his attack on Christianity, Nietzsche distinguishes between the historical Jesus and the Christ of Paul’s epistles, and repudiates only the latter. And though he can be sometimes be suspicious of truth, Nietzsche “does not condemn . . . the passion for truth but declares truth to be ‘divine.’”

It can be argued—it has been argued—that in trying to reverse the legend, Kaufmann went too far in the opposite direction and gave us a Nietzsche who is all too “gentle” (in contrast to the “tough” Nietzsche of his opponents, in Brinton’s terminology). To some extent that is true, but it doesn’t detract from the importance of his achievement. The book created a genuine sea change in the way Nietzsche was, and continues to be, read. Perhaps, given the ignorance and prejudice that had to be overcome, it was

necessary to overemphasize the “gentle” aspects of his thought in order to show the public that Nietzsche *could* be read without embarrassment or misgivings and eventually convince philosophers that Nietzsche *should* be read with pleasure and profit.

But Kaufmann’s *Nietzsche* is important for other reasons as well. It is a book that everyone seems to be familiar with but few have actually read, as if, having succeeded in upending the traditional picture of Nietzsche, it can now be safely ignored. But reading it (or rereading it) repays the effort. Kaufmann’s own views are considerably more nuanced than I have been able to suggest, and his accounts of Nietzsche’s dependence of Goethe, of his naturalism—the view that human beings are continuous with the rest of the animal world, in the spirit of Darwin—the mechanisms of sublimation, and his affinities with American pragmatism are genuine and lasting contributions to our understanding of this still seductive and enigmatic philosopher who is now, thanks to this book, part and parcel of our intellectual heritage. Kaufmann’s Nietzsche is still very much alive, and for that reason his *Nietzsche* deserves to come alive once again.

Alexander Nehamas
Princeton University