

# Philosophy & Sanity

*Nietzsche's Titanism* — By ALASDAIR MACINTYRE

WHEN NIETZSCHE finally became insane in January 1889, he wrote to Jacob Burckhardt,

*Dear Herr Professor,* when it comes to it I too would very much prefer a professorial chair in Basle to being God; but I did not dare to go as far in my private egoism as to refrain for its sake from the creation of the world.

Is a letter like this merely a comic symptom of a tragic mental condition? Was Nietzsche's madness as irrelevant to the interpretation and truth or falsity of his theories as Marx's carbuncles or Darwin's gastric pains are irrelevant to the understanding and evaluation of their theorising? Or was Nietzsche's madness perhaps in some way the outcome of thinking Nietzsche's thought?

When a philosopher's life is relevant to the understanding of his philosophy, a special interest attaches to the work he did *not* publish, to first drafts, to notes and jottings. So it is with Pascal and so pre-eminently with Nietzsche. Between 1883 and 1888 Nietzsche kept notebooks on theories which he hoped to embody finally in a book called *The Will to Power*, perhaps sub-titled *Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values. The Antichrist*, written in 1888, was for a time thought of as the first of four books of a work to have the latter title. But in 1888 he abandoned the project of *The Will to Power*. When after Nietzsche's death his nasty sister, Frau Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, published her collected editions of Nietzsche's works, she included successive versions of a book made up out of Nietzsche's notes which she entitled *The Will to Power* and represented as Nietzsche's crowning achievement, as the final version of

his "system." She thus falsified in three ways simultaneously: she represented as being in finished form and as intended for publication what were private drafts and notes; she gave the impression that the stylistic form which derived from their being notes was an intentional aphoristic device; and she presented the material in an order that was hers and not Nietzsche's.

To restore the original order would be difficult, and perhaps impossible. Nietzsche did not fill his notebooks systematically. So the text as given in the 1911 edition can be used, provided one remembers its provenance. But Walter Kaufmann has now produced an English translation (in collaboration with R. J. Hollingdale)<sup>1</sup> which is also a masterly re-edition of the whole. There is no edition of *The Will to Power* in German which matches Kaufmann's beautiful, devoted and scholarly work. Here, so far as is possible, we have Nietzsche himself. What do we have?

THE FOUNDATION OF Nietzsche's doctrine was a profound philosophical conception, derived partly from Kant and Hume, partly from Protagoras and Heraclitus.

Logic is bound to the condition: assume there are identical cases. In fact, to make possible logical thinking and inferences, this condition must first be treated fictitiously as fulfilled. That is: the will to logical truth can be carried through only after a fundamental *falsification* of all events is assumed... (512).

That is, we can only reason on the assumption that the same object or event can be clarified and classified by means of the same descriptive expression; but in fact, so Nietzsche tells us, following Heraclitus, everything changes and nothing remains the same, there are no like cases, and therefore the assumption on which all reasoning rests is false. This scepticism is of course self-defeating; speech itself, and not only reasoning, presupposes a universe of stable persons and objects. Were the world what

<sup>1</sup> *The Will to Power*. Trans. by WALTER KAUFMANN and R. J. HOLLINGDALE. Edited with commentary by W. KAUFMANN. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 65s.

Some aspects of this review are discussed this month in "Column," pp. 45-47.—*Ed. Note.*

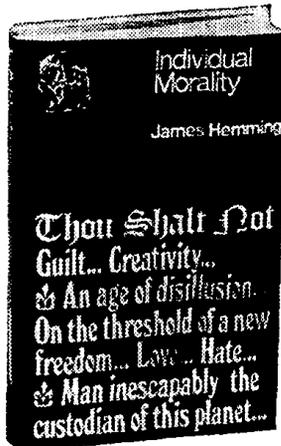
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CONSTABLE

Nietzsche takes it to be, meaningful speech would be impossible and so this scepticism could not itself be meaningfully stated. In expressing such a scepticism, therefore, the sceptic is found to presuppose the falsity of what he is announcing. Yet the temptation has been persistent in the history of philosophy to envisage a gap between the forms of speech and reasoning and the formlessness of a reality which speech and reasoning aspire to grasp, but must falsify. If Nietzsche in being seduced by this image has many predecessors, he made use of it for distinctive purposes of his own.

The most important of these also seems at first sight to embody a contradiction. For he wishes to use this general scepticism to underpin a more particular scepticism about all systems of moral values; yet the point of this sceptical enterprise is to introduce a new system of values. The transitions from a spirit of corrosive scepticism to one of intense affirmation are difficult enough to make at the level of style; at the level of argument surely Nietzsche must once again be involved in inconsistency? I believe that he is, but that the inconsistency was one not private to Nietzsche's thought, but central to the culture of which he was a part and against which he was trying to revolt. We can identify this inconsistency in a number of writers, but most clearly perhaps in one of Nietzsche's most hated and despised targets, Kant.

KANT, AS NIETZSCHE SAW, was a representative German figure. (Nietzsche believed that Locke and Hume were "too bright, too clear" for the Germans, and that epistemological doubts had to be clothed in a sufficiently convoluted style to be acceptable in Germany; it is a pity that Heidegger in writing about Nietzsche has never considered what Nietzsche would have said about Heidegger.) He rightly connects Kant's morality with that of Rousseau, although also understanding its native German provenance. The central notion of Kant's moral philosophy is that of a moral law which every rational being utters to himself. This law is unconditionally binding upon all rational beings and what it enjoins us to is the doing of our duty for no other motive than that it is our duty; we must not obey the precepts of the moral law out of interest or in the pursuit of happiness. Furthermore, our knowledge of the moral law is prior to and independent of our knowledge of the divine will; we are in fact able to judge that what God commands is right only because we have an independent moral view of what rightness is. At the centre of this autonomous morality there lies the notion of a body of precepts which have the force and

authority of law, but which no one utters to us except ourselves. But how can I be the author of the moral law? How can any body of precepts which I utter to myself be unconditionally binding upon me?

It is not just Kant who poses this problem, but the whole liberal individualistic tradition. If the individual is made sovereign in the realm of values, if everyone has the right to declare what principles have authority over him, then what authority do any principles have over anyone? To put this problem in another way, can the scepticism which liberalism turns against its predecessors be prevented from corroding liberalism too? The liberal refuses to treat the divine commandments as a final criterion in moral matter; the divine commandments must themselves be justified by reference to *his* criterion. But what about the ultimate criteria of the liberal? They are simply to be affirmed or chosen; there is no further justification, for all attempts at rational justification, such as the Kantian do in fact fail. Here Nietzsche's critique of liberalism begins.

I have already suggested that Nietzsche reproduces within his own standpoint the same contradiction on which liberalism founders. That he did not perceive this was perhaps partly due to his fastening upon the false objectivism of liberalism as one of its vices. Liberalism, like Christianity, like (according to Nietzsche) socialism, degrades the strong individual by imposing on him an allegedly objective scheme of values. The content of this scheme is bad in several respects. The appeal to selflessness is an appeal to the qualities of the unsuccessful and the defeated; the appeal to an idealised view of human nature obscures what men are actually like; the appeal to human equality expresses both an attack upon and a parasitism upon the strong. But this false scheme of virtues is indicated by Nietzsche not only for its content, but also on account of its form, of its claim to authority as a scheme of *the* virtues.

Yet although Nietzsche offers sceptical arguments against the false objectivism of such moral philosophies as those of Kant, of Rousseau, and of the Christians, what he offers himself is surely offered as a rival scheme of *the* virtues. Indeed Nietzsche's virtues are often recognisably as traditional as those which he condemns: the virtues of courage, loyalty, and self-affirmation are indeed only recognisable by us—or by Nietzsche—as virtues because of the part these dispositions have played in human life. (It is also relevant that Nietzsche's recognition of these as only aristocratic virtues, as class virtues, runs counter to our historical experience of the importance of these virtues to men as men.)

## essays east and west.....

Ian Hamilton's selection of lively, lucid essays from *The Review* appears under the title **THE MODERN POET** (35s) *The Review* is the most important of today's poetry magazines, and the essays are by the best and most influential of today's critics including A. Alvarez, Donald Davie and Christopher Ricks. The TLS has called it "the best guide available to recent poetry". British and American poets including Thom Gunn, Philip Larkin, Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell are discussed with "the rigorous approach of Scrutiny" (Bernard Bergonzi)

While *The Review* is freely circulated in the uncensored West, Mihajlo Mihajlov's **RUSSIAN THEMES** (42s) has brought its author a four year prison sentence which he is currently serving in Belgrade for the essay "Why We Are Silent". His voice, said the TLS, "is one speaking to us from the bottom of the test tube of reason, much as Dostoevsky's man challenged reason from his underground". He is "an able and discerning critic" (Sunday Times) of Russia's leading young writers struggling for expression in a Communist society

NB What Kenneth Allsop has called "an important historical monument" will be completed on 24th April, publication day of Henry Williamson's **THE GALE OF THE WORLD** (30s) fifteenth and final volume in his great panorama of English life, *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*

MACDONALD

But why should we treat these virtues as having any more of a claim on our moral allegiance than the virtues which Nietzsche rejected? Nietzsche's answer is that we shall find a reason in the way these virtues are affirmed by a new form of culture-hero, the superman, whose will to affirm will triumph.

IF MY ARGUMENT IS CORRECT, then the Nietzschean hero turns out to be a particularly loud-mouthed and effective moral subjectivist in a culture of moral subjectivists created by that very liberalism which it is the task of the Nietzschean hero to overcome and transcend. That an argument as subtle and sophisticated as Nietzsche's does issue in such vulgarity receives some confirmation from the fact that he was half prepared to treat Napoleon as a hero. That a mind as splendid as Nietzsche's should reach so banal a conclusion is perhaps a further sign that it was the dilemma of a whole culture and not merely a private problem with which he was struggling.

WHAT IS SPECIFICALLY Nietzschean is the heroic dimension which Nietzsche's version of the struggle against the dilemma of moral individualism exhibits. The notion of a transvaluation of values by an affirmation of the will does imply a more-than-human act of creation. This requirement suggests two comments on Nietzsche himself. The first is that, although his hostility to anti-Semitism, to pan-Germanism and to all those lumpen-proletarian tendencies of which Hitlerism was the expression makes the charge that he was the direct ancestor of Nazism one that is in any crude form false, he does license a moral titanism which is all too vague in content and was all too easily put to the service of Nazism. Nietzsche would have disowned Nazism, but he cannot entirely disown intellectual responsibility for making the ideological task of the Nazis easier.

Moreover, the prophetic task of the transvaluation of values is one only to be undertaken by someone whose sense of his own mission is at least on the scale of those who taught that they were sent by God or spoke with His voice. Nietzsche was all too uneasily aware of the scale of his own claims and that this belonged to the nature of his task and had nothing to do with questions of personal vanity. When it came to it, he would very much have preferred a professorial chair in Basel to a task that carried with it the danger of self-deification. But he did not for that reason refrain from trying to create a new moral world; and in so doing perhaps destroyed his own power of reason.

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