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## THE DISTORTED NIETZSCHE

Fredrich Nietzsche left a lasting impact in European thought throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the political sphere. Following the rise of the National Socialist Party, or Nazi Party, in the early thirties, they lead an effort to distort his writings that lead to the great consequence of the Second World War and the extermination of more than six million Jews during the Holocaust. Following his death in 1900, his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, gained control of his literary estate where she collected and compiled her brother's notes into *The Will to Power*, where it emphasized several of antisemitic and racist ideologies that was closely tailored to shape itself with Nazi ideology. This raises the issue of the power that philosophy has within the political realm where it has the ability to change the direction of certain states; this gives us room to entertain the relationship between these two disciplines as a powerful tool.

There are various interpretations of reading Nietzsche, but the Nazi interpretation is central to this understanding of political philosophy. It should be noted that Nietzsche did not have the biggest influence on the Third Reich's on the daily lives of everyone in Nazi Germany. What we do know, however, is his influence within Nazi culture.<sup>i</sup> The Nazis uplifted Nietzsche from a philosopher to a prophet of the Nazi cause due to a decline of the liberal policies of Europe and the rise of nationalism, a concept Nietzsche despised.

We see this within the first aphorism of the second part in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the eponymous character awakens from a dream of him and a mirror showing a devilish reflection. He understood that the dream was a warning, "my teaching is in danger...my enemies have become powerful and have distorted the image of my teaching,"<sup>ii</sup> where in the previous part, Zarathustra retreats to the mountain after telling his followers to lead their own path with the teachings he bestowed upon them. The enemies he speaks of are those who wish to weaponize his teachings and turn them on its head – where the teachings that Zarathustra gave to the people below the mountain are now empty words that are now in the hands of another, more dangerous teaching that will lead a person down a path contrary to what Zarathustra spoke of. This understanding of how manipulative an individual's philosophy can be for the power-hungry is startling for Nietzsche where his words within his writings can be distorted for another means to an end.

Prior to both World Wars, many of those who would be considered right-wing nationalists found Nietzsche's writings intriguing.<sup>iii iv</sup> The Weimer Republic after the First World War faced various difficulties within its internal border where many right-wing nationalists found solace in Nietzsche's work in the theme of overthrowing the status quo. The idea of which was very attractive to not only

those on the radical right, but to those on the left. Following the First World War, many monarchies fell due to radical political means, most notably the fall of the Russian monarchy by the Bolsheviks. This is introduced in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* where this idea of the will to power was raised by Zarathustra, “You do violence with your values and words of good and evil, you valuers...And whoever must be a creator in good and evil – truly, he must first be an annihilator and break values”<sup>v</sup>. In order to create new values, one must topple the status quo in order to establish a new value system; that is the will to power for Nietzsche.

This was the perfect recipe for the radical right to adopt within the Weimar period. Several antisemitic, nationalist right-wing parties rose and fell during this period, but the most prominent grew from the short-lived *Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*<sup>vi</sup> into the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*<sup>vii</sup>, or the Nazi Party. They saw Nietzsche’s attractive rhetoric in his work as a guide for them to take power in the early thirties. Within *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche discusses how the future Europeans must move from the liberalism that talks only of progress and equal rights that has no attractiveness, as well as moving away from conservatism since we are not conserving anything and have a want to move away from the grips of the past.<sup>viii</sup> “We who are homeless are too diverse and racially mixed in our descent, as ‘modern men’, and consequently we are not inclined to participate in the mendacious racial self-admiration and obscenity that parades in Germany today”.<sup>ix</sup> With liberalism and conservatism in conflict with one another, Nietzsche suggests that a new Europe must rise from the ashes of these two old fashioned ideologies that are plaguing Europe. However, this comes from his disdain of rising racism and nationalism within Germany where the German people see themselves as above other Europeans who live a very cosmopolitan, bourgeois lifestyle. Even then, those on the right found a German myth within Nietzsche’s writings where the words he wrote out would be a guide to create new Europeans for Europe, Germans for Germany – this would be what set them in the right direction for the *Volk* movement.<sup>x</sup>

Nietzsche established himself to be anti-antisemitic and sees that antisemitism as a poison that is rotting Europe, especially in Germany, “I have yet to meet a German who was well disposed towards Jews,”<sup>xi</sup> where he further states that, “But the Jews without a doubt the strongest, purest, most tenacious race living in Europe today. They know how to thrive in even the worst conditions.”<sup>xii</sup> Seeing that the Jewish people have endured so much suffering throughout history and even then, are able to survive through certain events because of their virtues whereas the antisemites of Europe would see these virtues as nothing more than corruption. Especially with the rise of nationalism in Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it led to a rise in antisemitic, nationalist parties – both concepts Nietzsche found repulsive. “The ones who set traps for the many and call them the ‘state’ are annihilators, they hang a sword and a hundred cravings over them.”<sup>xiii</sup> These “states”, as Nietzsche called them, were politically unstable; where they held their people hostage on the basis of the nationalistic ideals of the time. With these nationalist tendencies – they would be in conflict with other states that too held nationalistic ideologies where all of these countries would be under pressure. As a

result, Europe found itself in a state of war where monarchies fought monarchies for the purpose of national pride.

However, his disdain for nationalism dissolved when his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, arranged and published a series of notes her brother wrote after his death in 1900 titled: *The Will to Power*. Elisabeth herself was influenced by antisemitic and nationalistic ideals from her late husband Bernhard Förster. Bernhard was a prolific antisemite who sought to establish an Aryan colony in Paraguay as he was disillusioned with how the “old” Germany was plagued with the influence of the Jews.<sup>xiv</sup> The colony proved to be a failure due to inadequate farming and Bernhard, facing crippling unpaid debts, committed suicide in 1889—leaving the widowed Elisabeth returning to Germany.

Following Nietzsche’s death, *The Will to Power* proved to be very popular among the masses with a young Benito Mussolini praising the manuscript as he was inspired by Nietzsche’s attractive words of an individual toppling a long-standing institution in order to create a new power within a state.<sup>xv</sup> Within the manuscript it states, “The pious counterfeiters, the priests, among us became chandalas...the chandala of former times is at the time: foremost, those who blaspheme God, the immoralists, the nomads of every time, the artists, Jews, musicians – at bottom, all disreputable classes of men –”.<sup>xvi</sup> Nietzsche notes that the class of those like priests have become chandalas<sup>xvii</sup>, where those in “former times” such as Jews were in the position the priests are in. However, it is difficult to judge what Nietzsche was communicating in this particular aphorism both because a majority of these aphorisms in *The Will to Power* were assembled from Nietzsche’s notes and a lot of these notes were either incomplete or altered by Elisabeth.

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche notes that “Where the races<sup>xviii</sup> are mixed together, person will have the legacy of multiple lineages in his body...A man like this, of late cultures and refracted lights, will typically be a weaker person”.<sup>xix</sup> Where Europe has become a melting pot of different lineages, ranging from religion to race, in various state-empires. As a result of mixing diverse “moral values”, the people will become weaker as they start to lose their own identity. In the previous aphorisms, there is consideration about the Jewish people. “A People ‘born for slavery’ as Tacitus and the entire ancient world say, ‘the people chosen of all peoples’ as they themselves think...The significance of the Jewish people lies in this inversion of values...The slave revolt in morality begins with the Jews”.<sup>xx</sup>

The Jews, according to Nietzsche, are a people without a homeland as they have been subjected to centuries of suffering. The Jewish problem, as it was called, in Europe was prevalent because they never possessed any kind of homeland and was often used as the scapegoat if any type of conflict in Europe were to arise. However, the quote Nietzsche used in *Beyond Good and Evil* was attributed to Tacitus in *Historiae* was incorrect – the people that were “born for slavery” was instead aimed towards the Christians.<sup>xxi</sup> It is possible Nietzsche misquoted Tacitus intentionally with an emphasis on separating the Jews from Christianity as the latter split from the former in the context of understanding the rising antisemitism within Europe. Despite this, the Nazis used this idea found within these aphorisms

of devolving “moral values” to simply race as an opposition to race mixing. The values that the Nazis held, especially with them wanting to expand their movement, was that they wanted to move past a Christian social order and democracy as their view at the time was that liberalism was on the decline; leading to weaker individuals regarding their morality. <sup>xxii</sup>

However, the Nazis integrated Nietzsche within how they read his political and social philosophy that led to the deaths of over six million Jews all throughout Europe and a Second World War that led to the demise of Nazi Germany after only twelve years. After the fall of the Nazis and Germany after the Second World War, Nietzsche soon became someone that was celebrated to vilified within western philosophy. The Nazis distorted the words Nietzsche wrote from a man who praised the Jewish people, to that praise being. “foil” in order to encourage the next generation of leaders to reach their potential. <sup>xxiii</sup> Especially with Nietzsche explicitly praising the Jewish people while denouncing the rising nationalism, antisemitism, and racism throughout Europe, specifically within Germany, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even within the aphorism regarding the Jews, he states that they are “the slave revolt in morality” – showing that since the Jews received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, they were held to be slaves to God and are unable to assimilate to any kind of state-culture they reside in. “With a unified assertiveness even, is to be absorbed and assimilated into Europe; they thirst for some place where they can be settled, permitted, respected at last...in which case it might be practical and appropriate to throw the antisemitic hooligans out of the country”. <sup>xxiv</sup> But because the Jews refuse to assimilate, it gives those who are in power, specifically antisemitic politicians, the power to do whatever they please to pass antisemitic legislation.

Because of Nietzsche’s, almost ambiguity, with his relationship with the Jews, the Nazis took advantage of that ambiguity. Reading it as because the Jews are unable to assimilate within European society, then the option is for there to be a great war in order for society to begin anew; for there to be a leader, or *Führer*, where the German *Volk* would tear down a society that has entranced itself with nationalism. <sup>xxv</sup> And the issue that a lot of Nietzsche scholars had to grapple with is this application of his philosophy within a society that totally went against what he wrote down, especially when it led to the deaths of six million Jews and led to a Second World War.

Nietzsche was a revolutionary within contemporary philosophy who left an impact throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, political parties like the Nazi Party of Third Reich Germany cherry-picked and distorted Nietzsche’s writings to favor their own ideology – an ideology that Nietzsche found abhorrent, even within the political sphere. Philosophy has a power that can influence and point the people of various states in a direction from what a political party views as the right thing for the greater good.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany: 1890-1990* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1994), 233.
- <sup>ii</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 63.
- <sup>iii</sup> Robert C. Holub, *Nietzsche's Jewish Problem: Between Anti-Semitism and Anti-Judaism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 7.
- <sup>iv</sup> While they found Nietzsche's work attractive, those on the right found it difficult to acknowledge Nietzsche's condemnation of racism, antisemitism, and nationalism.
- <sup>v</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 90.
- <sup>vi</sup> German Workers' Party
- <sup>vii</sup> National Socialist German Workers' Party
- <sup>viii</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 241.
- <sup>ix</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 243.
- <sup>x</sup> Max Whyte, "The Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche in the Third Reich: Alfred Baeumler's 'Heroic Realism,'" *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 2 (April 2008): pp. 171-194, 176.
- <sup>xi</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 141.
- <sup>xii</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 142.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 34.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Ben Macintyre, *Forgotten Fatherland: The Search for Elisabeth Nietzsche* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), 114.
- <sup>xv</sup> Ben Macintyre, *Forgotten Fatherland: The Search for Elisabeth Nietzsche* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), 176.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York City, NY: Vintage Books, 1968), 71.
- <sup>xvii</sup> An individual who disposes the corpses of the deceased; typically found in the lower category of the Hindu caste system.
- <sup>xviii</sup> It should be pointed out that the idea of "race" was a relatively new concept in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What Nietzsche could be implying is ethnicity. Throughout the paper, the use of race will be used—but in the context of ethnicity.
- <sup>xix</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 87.
- <sup>xx</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 84.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Robert Aaron Rethy, "From Tacitus to Nietzsche: Thoughts and Opinions from Two Millennia," *Nietzsche-Studien* 26, no. 1 (December 1, 1997): 107–38, 107.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany: 1890-1990* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1994), 239.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Max Whyte, "The Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche in the Third Reich: Alfred Baeumler's 'Heroic Realism,'" *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 2 (April 2008): pp. 171-194, 186.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 142.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany: 1890-1990* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1994), 249.

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  9. Whyte, Max. “The Uses and Abuses of Nietzsche in the Third Reich: Alfred Baeumler's 'Heroic Realism'.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 2 (April 2008): 171–94.