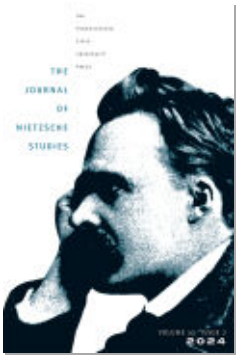


Nietzscheâ€™s Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Critical Guide ed. by Keith Ansell-Pearson and Paul Loeb (review)



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Book Reviews

Keith Ansell-Pearson and Paul Loeb, eds., *Nietzsche's* Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge Critical Guides)
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. xii + 280 pp. ISBN: 978-1-108-49084-9 (cloth); 978-1-108-79648-4 (paper). Cloth, £75.00; Paper, £24.99.

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Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (*Z*), written in instalments between 1883 and 1885, has had a tremendous impact within and outside of academic philosophy. A text that famously was distributed to German soldiers in World War I by military order, *Z* has been discussed and praised among philosophers, literary theorists, and artists. Nietzsche himself considered the book to be his crowning achievement, not-so-modestly describing it as "the greatest present that has ever been made to [mankind] so far" (*EH* P:4). Nevertheless, contemporary Nietzsche scholars disagree about the text's philosophical and aesthetic quality, and about its overall importance in Nietzsche's corpus. On one end of the spectrum, some commentators find *Z* overblown, laborious to get through, and beyond these perceived aesthetic flaws, lacking in philosophical quality and (perhaps thankfully) inessential to understanding Nietzsche's philosophical aims. In an introduction to a relatively recent edition, for example, Robert Pippin describes *Z* as "in large part a failure" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], xiii). On the other end of the spectrum, some commentators take Nietzsche at his word, finding *Z* to be a literary wonder, marking a new epoch of the use of German language, preceded in the modern period only by Goethe and Luther. But further, and more relevant for philosophers, this faction take *Z* to be of the upmost importance for unlocking Nietzsche's philosophy proper, and in particular, to reveal the solutions he constructed

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for various philosophical problems and existential challenges for the human being that he merely diagnoses elsewhere in his corpus.

Keith Ansell-Pearson and Paul Loeb's critical guide brings together an impressive lineup of Nietzsche scholars in an attempt to reinforce the view that *Z* is not only useful but in fact *essential* to understanding the key themes of Nietzsche's philosophy; that, as they put it, *Z* "needs to assume a central role in any informed appreciation of his style of philosophical practice as well as of the fundamental content of his core ideas" (1). Comprising eleven essays, most of which are well-argued and tightly focused on well-selected controversies, this attempt is largely successful, though I have some reservations, which I shall get to below.

As the editors explain in their opening remarks, this collection does not aim at introductions, overviews, or mere walk-throughs of *Z*. Nor does it aim at a comprehensive account of *all* of the exegetical controversies surrounding the text. Rather, the more reasonable goal of the collection is to facilitate a "philosophical discussion of the topics that are the subject of interest today in the field of philosophy" (2). Given *Z*'s difficult and unusual style—the intricacies of which are taken up in Benedetta Zavatta's insightful contribution exploring Nietzsche's deployment of satire and parody to form a new kind of critique—and the expected philosophical, literary, and historical labor Nietzsche (and the editors) demand in order to fully appreciate it, this is an admirable undertaking for the contributors. Many essays skillfully draw out the issues of contemporary interest and demonstrate Nietzsche's relevance to ongoing fundamental philosophical debates. The editors are to be commended for their careful selection of quality essays in this respect.

For example, Neil Sinhababu convincingly argues that *Z* provides the most compelling critique in Nietzsche's corpus of various rationalist theses; for instance, that reason is central to explaining moral motivation, moral knowledge, moral agency, and moral subjecthood. As Sinhababu presents Nietzsche's brand of sentimentalism—a tradition more frequently addressed in the Anglophone world by way of figures such as Hume, Hutcheson, and Smith—it has the conceptual resources, moreover, to resist contemporary rationalist objections as they arise in the work of those such as Christine Korsgaard and John McDowell.

Nietzsche's primary strength as a thinker is arguably in the subtlety of his psychological acumen, and it is therefore unsurprising that other essays in the volume that seek to draw out the contemporary relevance of *Z* address themes in moral psychology. Scott Jenkins's welcome contribution

focuses specifically on the phenomenon of self-contempt, which he correctly recognizes as central to the self-critical dispositions criterial of higher humans, as Nietzsche outlines in the Prologue. With impressive argumentative rigor, Jenkins helpfully distinguishes between various types of unhealthy contempt, such as contempt for the body and physical world rooted in vengefulness on the one hand, and what Nietzsche calls the "great contempt [grosse Verachtung]" (*Z* "Prologue" 3) of would-be life-affirmers on the other, explaining how the latter concept is in fact a motivating form of self-love, for Nietzsche. Although Jenkins does not mention it, some of the distinctions at work in this interpretation of *Z* seem to be anticipated by Schopenhauer. In a reflection upon misanthropy, Schopenhauer expresses an aspiration to have contempt for humanity, but not to hate them:

> To be able deservedly to despise those who merit it, that is to say five-sixths of humanity, the first condition is that we do not hate them and therefore must restrain our hatred; for we do not entirely despise what we hate. On the other hand, the surest way not to hate men is simply to despise them, to have for them an utter contempt, the result of an absolutely clear and distinct insight into the incredible pettiness of their mental attitude, of the enormous limitation of their intelligence, and of the boundless egoism of their hearts, from which arise blatant injustice, livid envy and malice, and sometimes even cruelty. (*Manuscript Remains in Four Volumes*, ed. Arthur Hübscher, trans. E. F. J. Payne [New York: Berg, 1988], 495–46)

The ways in which contempt and mere hatred—particularly as the latter intertwines with disgust—can come apart, even to the extent that contempt can "*restrain* our hatred" (emphasis mine), is reflected in Zarathustra's encounter with the "fool" outside the city walls in Book III, when the former says of the latter's complaints about the city's inhabitants and their behaviors that "I have contempt for your contempt" (*Z* III "Passing By"). In other words, and as Jenkins helpfully draws out, Zarathustra considers the fool's contempt as ignoble or of lower estimation in some respect(s). That Zarathustra has a similar aspiration to the arch-pessimist Schopenhauer for his contempt to "ascend from love alone" and not "from the swamp" (*Z* III: "Passing By")—that is, that it not be mere hatred born from vengefulness—is an interesting direction for further exploration.

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In an interesting final essay of the collection, Kaitlyn Creasy makes the case that *Z* offers the tools to construct an ecological ethic, one from which we may (perhaps surprisingly) draw lessons for contemporary environmental philosophy and the practical aim of conservation. Indeed, Creasy shows that the "proto-ecocentric strains" (245) in Nietzsche's thought, and particularly in *Z*, are ripe for closer attention. Creasy sets the stage nicely for what would make a lucrative comparative analysis between the ecocentric sympathies of Zarathustra and the holistic "Land Ethic" of Aldo Leopold and his contemporary defenders.

Other contributions to the critical guide are more focused on specific exegetical concerns and how Nietzsche's arguments in *Z* fit into his broader corpus. Christopher Janaway's and Paul Katsafanas's contributions deal, in different ways, with Nietzsche's response to the problem of pessimism. Janaway usefully expounds a Schopenhauerian perspective on *Z*, analyzing how Zarathustra's critical approach to compassion, the self, the will, salvation, and to suffering, might have been received by Schopenhauer. Janaway convincingly challenges the mainstream interpretation of the character of the "soothsayer [der Wahrsager]" of Parts II and IV as straightforwardly representing Schopenhauer. Instead, Janaway argues that this identification is "at best over-simple" (83), because the soothsayer's function in *Z* is multifaceted. The final sections on how to understand Nietzsche's rejection of compassion (*Mitleid*) are especially fruitful.

Katsafanas asks what makes the affirmation of life *difficult*. Beginning with an account of what the thought of eternal recurrence is supposed to *do* for one who ponders it, Katsafanas provides a compelling argument for rejecting traditional answers (for example, because suffering is ubiquitous, because all events are interconnected, because we are vengeful by nature) in favor of the view that affirming life is difficult because it must be affirmed *unconditionally*, that is: without eliminating particular features of life. What this reveals, and is most clear in *Z*, Katsafanas argues, is Nietzsche's interest in what sustains our *commitment* to "higher values," and how this commitment is tested against the thought of an eternally recurring life *as it has been*. One potential methodological issue here is that Katsafanas's discussion does not situate Nietzsche's eternal recurrence *qua thought-experiment* in the context of the nineteenth-century pessimism dispute, where an answer to it was routinely taken to be criterial of a position on the value of life by pessimists and anti-pessimists alike. Acknowledging this point leaves open the possibility that Nietzsche is redeploying an *existing* thought experiment but delivering as

starkly opposed an answer as possible, and, furthermore, that this redeployment has intended rhetorical force which is useful for his project of affirmation, and which requires only an intuitive grasp of what it means to live one's life over again. Nevertheless, Katsafanas's well-argued case certainly shifts the onus onto defenders of alternative interpretations to move the debate forward.

Matthew Meyer's and Paul Loeb's respective essays address the theme of naturalism in Nietzsche's philosophy, though they end up with very different positions. Due in no small measure to interpretive work undertaken in Brian Leiter's *Nietzsche on Morality* (London: Routledge, 2002), most Nietzsche scholars now accept that Nietzsche was a naturalist in *some* sense; the tricky part is the substantive issue of identifying in which ways and to what extent this is true. Challenging an interpretive tendency to conceive of *Z* as in tension with Nietzsche's naturalism, Meyer makes the case not only that can they be reconciled, but that it is a crucial text for understanding naturalism's essential character and scope, which Meyer argues is primarily a response to Schopenhauer's view of the necessity of metaphysics for ethics. Loeb, on the other hand, takes a pervasive anthropomorphism of nature to be the root of a collection of human sufferings to which naturalism is the solution. Both Meyer and Loeb take up what is now an outlier interpretation in the secondary literature on the intended scope of eternal recurrence, each taking the truth of the cosmological reading of eternal recurrence to be entailed by Nietzsche's naturalism. The cosmological reading of eternal recurrence, as Meyer presents it, "makes a truth claim about the cosmos: all events repeat themselves in the same order and in the same way, and these events have already happened an infinite number of times in the past and will happen an infinite number of times in the future" (110). While this view is likely to find few sympathizers—either as a representative interpretation of Nietzsche, or as an independently plausible position—Meyer and Loeb each argue that the cosmological reading uniquely facilitates life affirmation. For Meyer, this takes the form of obtaining a state of innocence beyond good and evil that comes with abandoning a nonnatural concept of the self and of agency. For Loeb, affirmation comes from obtaining a *stronger* sense of agency because a conception of time as circular enables causal influence upon the past. A question for commentators is whether these things can be achieved without accepting the truth of the cosmological reading.

Two final observations about the framing of contemporary engagement with *Z* are worth making. First, Ansell-Pearson and Loeb suggest that what matters when reading *Z* is that we approach it "as a philosophical resource

that has much to teach us in whatever way we are best inclined to learn from it" (14). It is surely the case that *Z* has a multitude of lessons it aims to teach, and that its aesthetic form—for instance, as *Bildungsroman*, as a puzzle, as satire or parody, as a narrative, as a self-help manual, etc.—is multifaceted. Yet the suggestion that we ought to proceed to learn from *Z* "*in whatever way we are best inclined to learn from it*" is curious. It is sensible advice for contemporary readers from a diverse range of disciplines. But depending on how we unpack this suggestion, it is not a strategy that I think Nietzsche would have intended or necessarily appreciated, given his consistent demand for only certain psychological "types" to read him, and for those that do read him to ruminate slowly and carefully on his intended meaning—a demand reflective of his broader frustration with flippant and ahistorical interpreters who believe texts have no intrinsic meaning. If we should take Nietzsche at his word, as the editors suggest, the claim that lessons can be drawn from *Z* in any way the reader sees fit creates an intriguing tension.

Second, Ansell-Pearson and Loeb understandably rest much of the importance of *Z* on Nietzsche's own claims that the text contains his most important and useful philosophical insights. But of course, Nietzsche may himself be wrong about this. It is doubtful whether it is as straightforwardly true as the editors present, for instance, that the reason why *Z* tends to receive less attention from contemporary philosophers than, say, *GM* or the first sections of *BGE*, is the "difficulty" of reading *Z*, the "aesthetic displeasure [scholars] feel when studying" it, or scholars' "lack of talent or expertise for dealing with the complex literary strategies" it employs (9). While this might explain some reluctance, it might plausibly be rather because the project of genealogical reconstruction and analysis, or diagnosing the extent and implications of the restrictive nature of language in philosophizing, for example, are much more hotly contested and promising avenues for discussion among contemporary ethicists, aestheticians, epistemologists, and philosophers of mind, language, and psychology, and that sustained treatment of these occur elsewhere in Nietzsche's corpus.

Nevertheless, Ansell-Pearson and Loeb's well-curated and timely volume is a sophisticated exploration of some key Nietzschean themes and arguments. The virtues of the essays I have mentioned, as well as some I have unfortunately not had the space to discuss, ensure that this critical guide will be of interest and use to advanced students of Nietzsche's philosophy, and of nineteenth-century thought more broadly, and to those interested in select contemporary issues.