

committed by humans against their fellow humans. Nietzsche, though, had a dim glimpse of what his intellectual destiny might hold. At the end of his career, he wrote the following: "I know my lot. One day, my name will be remembered in connection with something awesome – a crisis like no other on earth, a most profound collision of conscience, a decision exorcised against everything to date, that has been believed, demanded, and made holy. I am no person; I am dynamite."¹⁷¹

Nietzsche had in mind for himself an association with a great enlightenment, a great revolution, a traumatic moment of cultural growth, and a period of world-crisis that would issue in a glorious rejuvenation of humanity. He hoped that his name would be linked to one of the finest renaissances of culture. As things now stand, his name remains linked with one of humanity's most depressing performances, given how long people have had to cultivate their caring sensibilities for each other. One truly hesitates to imagine the macabre fate Friedrich Nietzsche's writings would have had, had the Nazis won the Second World War.

The contemporary shadows of Nietzsche

Nietzsche and Nazism

When considering the links between Nietzscheanism and Nazism, one of the first images that comes to mind is the 1934 publicity photograph of Adolf Hitler gazing at the bust of Nietzsche during a visit to the Nietzsche Archives in Weimar. This guilt by association did not help Nietzsche's reputation outside Germany before the War, nor did it help his reputation virtually anywhere afterwards. Previous to the Nazi inhabitation of the Nietzsche Archives, and a stimulus to it, was Nietzsche's sister's social ingratiation with Benito Mussolini and Hitler in an effort to spread her brother's ideas to a wider population, and which in the long run, probably damaged as much as they promoted Nietzsche's overall popularity.¹⁷² Academic study of Nietzsche's thought lagged during the post-Second World War era, needless to say, significantly on account of the Nazis' appropriation and linkage of his thought to their own anti-Semitic and nationalistic ideology.

Although some of Nietzsche's ideas can be interpreted as conforming with those of the Nazis, the differences between the two outlooks are more pronounced than the similarities, and it would be a mistake to understand Nietzsche's mature views as expressive of a strident, uncompromising, and aggressive German nationalism.

Chapter Seven

The young Nietzsche who stood under Richard Wagner's fatherly wing unequivocally asserted that German culture would lead the way to a healthier Europe, but by the end of his career, Nietzsche was thoroughly disillusioned with Wagner and the "German spirit":

Is Wagner a person at all? Is he not a sickness? Whatever he touches he makes sick – *he has made music sick.*¹⁷³

And so one understands the descent of the *German spirit* – from distressed intestines... The German spirit is an indigestion; it is never finished with anything.¹⁷⁴

I am such, that in my deepest instincts, I am alien to all that is German, so that even the proximity of a German inhibits my digestion...

As far as Germany extends, it *spoils* culture.¹⁷⁵

The German spirit is *my* bad air: I find it hard to breathe in the vicinity of what has now become an instinctive uncleanness in *psychologies*, which every word, every facial expression of a German betrays.¹⁷⁶

These anti-German, anti-nationalist, words are strong – at least in reference to the Germany Nietzsche observed during his lifetime – and one encounters Nietzsche enthusiasts citing them, fairly enough, in an effort to distance him from the Nazi nationalist doctrines that later surfaced. Indeed, Nietzsche's negative pronouncements on the German spirit might very well have led to his political execution had he been alive to give them public voice in Nazi Germany. Such defenders of Nietzsche accordingly aim to protect his view from association with the German government's mass murdering of Jewish, Gypsy, homosexual, infirm, mentally retarded, and other minority groups – crimes that were committed under Nazi rule several decades after his death. His attacks on anti-Semitism are also cited in his defense – attacks he directed towards his sister's husband, Bernhard Förster, and towards Richard Wagner, both of whom harbored hate for the Jewish people, and both of whom Nietzsche personally found upsetting.¹⁷⁷

Nietzsche's infamous remarks about "the beast of prey, the splendid *blond beast*" – those barbarian peoples of centuries ago who roamed, plundered, and raped throughout northern Europe –

are similarly downplayed as relatively insignificant slips on his part, given the generally sophisticated, refined, and generally humanly-sensitive tenor of his corpus. There remain a few "tough" interpreters of Nietzsche, but in the main, the "tender" Nietzsche has prevailed, with many mainstream Nietzsche scholars resisting, if only by means of remaining silent on the question, or by whitewashing the matter, acknowledgment of any substantial connection between Nietzsche and Nazism. The blame for this sinister association is, with some justification, usually placed squarely upon the shoulders of Nietzsche's sister, since he was either insane or already dead by the time his sister emerged within the public arena as his advertising agent.

As a consequence of such scholarly tendencies, readers of Nietzsche's works can be led quietly to believe that the connection between his ideas and those of the Nazis reduces to an unfortunate perversion of his true outlook, much like the Crusades and Spanish Inquisition can be regarded as transgressions of the Christian spirit of peace and love, as they stand in contradiction with Jesus' spiritual message. There is some truth in this comparison, but the doctrinal and historical affinities between Nietzscheanism and Nazism are not non-existent.

With respect to theoretical inspiration for National Socialism itself, one of the leading figures in the background to Nazi thought is the Englishman, Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855–1927) – a writer eleven years Nietzsche's junior who grew up in France, became an ardent Germanophile, and later married Richard Wagner's youngest daughter, Eva. Wagner's son-in-law was the author of *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899), a lengthy anti-Semitic volume which elevated the Teutonic people over the Jewish people, promoting the former as the future leaders of Europe, while prejudicially condemning the latter.¹⁷⁸ The book is difficult to locate these days, and it has largely been passed over in silence by contemporary scholars who specialize in Nietzsche's twentieth-century legacy in Germany, as if its ideas are too outrageous and intellectually shoddy to merit serious scholarly attention. From exclusively moral and critical-scholarly perspectives, the neglect is defensible.

The historical fact, though, is that Chamberlain's anti-Semitic volume was immensely popular in Germany, selling strongly during the First World War, and continuing with sales in the hundreds of thousands by 1938. From the standpoint of understanding German and European cultural history, Chamberlain's work cannot be ignored, as distasteful as some might find the proper examination of his thought to be. While Chamberlain's book enjoyed widespread publication, Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* fared even better: during the First World War, the German government issued to its soldiers, for inspiration, Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* along with the Bible. In terms of their comparative popularity in Germany, these two books were both on the best-seller list, so to speak, within the same country, and within the same population.

It is also a remarkable curiosity that Houston Stewart Chamberlain assumed the role within the Wagner family circle that Friedrich Nietzsche once enjoyed, adoring Richard Wagner as an inspiration, and developing a deep attachment to Wagner's wife, Cosima – a person towards whom Nietzsche had himself expressed feelings of endearment: Nietzsche's relationship with Wagner ended in the late 1870s; Chamberlain's interest in Wagnerian opera began only a few years later, in the early 1880s, immediately before Wagner's death in 1883. In 1888, Chamberlain met Cosima Wagner, and soon thereafter entered into the Wagnerian "inner circle"³ – a circle whose leadership had been assumed by Cosima, who in due time came to regard Chamberlain much as she would a son.¹⁷⁹

Most consequentially, Chamberlain, who eventually became a well-known German nationalist and anti-Semite, met with the young Adolf Hitler during the 1920s, and having been thoroughly impressed with Hitler's nationalistic enthusiasm and oratory talents, called upon him to be the future savior of Germany. Had Nietzsche not collapsed in 1888 – the year when Chamberlain began to assume a role in the Wagner family circle analogous to that which Nietzsche once had – he would have been linked with Hitler via Chamberlain's friendship with the Wagners, for at that late date, Nietzsche still harbored some strong affections for Cosima.¹⁸⁰ All in all, it seems that in view of historical considerations, Nietzsche never completely escaped from the Wagners' spiritual grasp:

although he officially disengaged himself from the Wagner circle in the late 1870s and remained ambivalent thereafter, his work later fell back into association with this Wagnerian, anti-Semitic circle after he lost the ability to speak for himself.

Appreciating the manifest discontinuities between Nazism and Nietzscheanism is not difficult. Nietzsche, for one, was not overtly anti-Semitic, and most of the negative remarks he made about the Jewish people are counterbalanced by positive judgments.¹⁸¹ During his intellectual prime, his attitude towards the Jewish people was nuanced and complicated: depending upon the subject and the context, his judgments varied. Nietzsche was inspired by many Old Testament personages, but he also realized that the Christianity he hated had its beginnings with Jesus, who was Jewish. Neither was Nietzsche ardently nationalistic during the 1880s, as noted. And even though he was, in principle, sympathetic to warriors and military types, his conception of the warrior was more closely linked to idealized classical heroics, courage, and daring, rather than to any soldiers who consider it their mundane business to massacre unarmed civilians.

What is additionally revealing, however, and what is far less attractive with respect to Nietzsche's position, is a consideration of the abstract format and rhetorical tone of many of his remarks, as they compare to what one typically finds in Nazi rhetoric. If we reconsider the comparison at this higher level of abstraction, some affinities emerge between Nietzscheanism and Nazism that are not readily noticeable when one remains content to cite their manifest doctrinal differences, of which there are sufficiently and significantly many. These discernible affinities obtain not only between Nietzscheanism and Nazism, but among a network of outlooks, all of which express characteristic "us vs. them" mentalities that set human beings against each other. If one considers the format and rhetorical tone of some of Nietzsche's remarks, especially during his last two years of intellectual activity, one can discern a conflictual, combative, self-glorifying, other-deprecating, and violence-affirming dimension that locates many of Nietzsche's views within a broad family of outlooks within which one can include Nazism.

It is important to qualify the above claim by noting that what is being considered here is a salient, but not thematically exhaustive, aspect of Nietzsche's thought. The Nietzschean philosophy is a prismatic, multidimensional, and complicated outlook, or more accurately, a set of outlooks in mutual tension, and it is a well-known problem that quotations can be ushered in to defend a variety of incompatible outlooks all counted as "Nietzsche's outlook." The Friedrich Nietzsche now under consideration is the "flourishing-affirming" rather than "existence-affirming" Nietzsche. Flourishing-affirmation is central to his intellectual stance, but it is arguably not the best perspective Nietzsche had to offer, since the existence-affirming perspective is more tolerant, more accepting, less aggressive, and probably more healthy, given the high, often self-destructive, pitch at which people's animalistic and aggressive energies can be exerted. Nietzsche's hard-line conception of flourishing might have been too extreme, if only because peacefulness and flourishing might be less antagonistic to one another than he supposed.

A straightforward way to consider the affinity between Nietzscheanism and Nazism is to recall Hitler's antagonism towards the Jewish people that he expressed in print¹⁸², and compare this to what Nietzsche said about groups – albeit different groups – which he himself deprecated. It is disheartening to discover a comparably intolerant, condemning, and biting mind. Nietzsche's remarks cited above about the Germans being responsible for "ruining" European culture wherever they go rhetorically match Hitler's remarks about how the Jewish people had supposedly degraded, poisoned, corrupted, and undermined the health of German culture.¹⁸³ Neither are the comments by Nietzsche cited above isolated instances, and they became more caustic as he drew closer to the end of his career.

Nietzsche's description of priests, particularly Christian priests (such as his father), for instance, as "the most dangerous kind of parasite, the real poison-spider of life" is typical.¹⁸⁴ Similar also are Nietzsche's claims that St. Paul was a "hate-inspired counterfeiter,"¹⁸⁶ that the principle that all people are equal stands against "all that is noble, gay, high-minded on earth,"¹⁸⁷ that the New Testament is so unclean that one needs to "put on gloves" when

reading it,¹⁸⁸ that industrial culture in its present shape (of 1882) is "altogether the most vulgar form of existence that has yet existed,"¹⁸⁹ that those who teach resignation are so repulsive that he (through the character of Zarathustra) says, "to whatever is small and sick and scabby, they crawl like lice; and only my nausea prevents me from crushing them,"¹⁹⁰ that the priestly, ascetic ideal has ruined European spiritual health more than either alcoholism and syphilis,¹⁹¹ and many other remarks that complain of European culture being polluted, sickened, weakened by particular kinds of people and belief systems, usually associated with the idea of, and the morality characteristic of, an all-powerful, all-good, all-knowing God.

Sometimes when reading Nietzsche, one feels that in his worst moments, the psychological venom with which he attacked Christians was comparable to the venom with which Hitler attacked the Jewish people. It is from the same bottle of poison that rabid racists attack those who are unlike them, and religious fanatics attack those who stand opposed to their doctrinal expansion. As expressed in the relatively small number of Nietzsche's most foaming-at-the-mouth passages, there is an anti-Christian mentality that is temperamentally foreign to neither the Nazi mentality, nor to extreme racist, religious, and nationalistic fanaticism: representatives of such views often call from the rooftops that the surrounding culture is becoming "polluted," that the situation is "now" at a crisis level, and that something radical needs to be done, lest disaster be the consequence. Among anti-Christians, anti-Semites, racists, and religious fanatics alike, subgroups engage in hate-speech directed at the supposedly polluting population, although there are always differences of opinion regarding who, exactly, is responsible for the cultural degeneration, and how this pollution is to be remedied.

Nietzsche, much to his credit, mostly advocated comparatively peaceful solutions that involved modifications in belief-systems, combined with a self-improvement program based on enhanced personal strength and greater aesthetic discrimination; Hitler dealt with his perceived situation as if he were battling a plague.¹⁹² Nietzsche, in his best moments, tended to regard his surrounding

culture with the high-minded, elitist sensitivity of an aristocratic and cultured physician; Hitler, on the other hand, formulated ruthless and brutal solutions that proved themselves to be self-defeating and inhuman. Both were, however, concerned generally with the same problem, namely, that of how to foster a spiritually healthy culture, either broadly conceived as the culture of the human species, or narrowly conceived as the exclusive health of a special subgroup of people. For better or worse, they both made themselves out to be cultural physicians.

When conceived in these abstract terms, a philosophical and practical question presents itself regarding the degree of violence that is, in principle, and in specific situations, required to develop and maintain social strength and individual health. Nietzsche (in a number of remarks) and Hitler were on the side of those who believe that unless people have an opposing group to look down upon and to define themselves against – a common enemy or common “other” – then they will grow weak. Buddha and Jesus were of a different mind, as preachers of universal non-violence. Nietzsche (in other remarks) sometimes more reflectively suggested that the violence and “looking down” necessary to developing and maintaining one’s health should be directed mainly against oneself, and not against others, so that one can grow beyond one’s former perspective in terms of the way one interprets the world. Also, Nietzsche’s existence-affirming perspective does not obviously require as much violence as does his flourishing-affirming perspective.

If the rhetorical affinity between Nietzsche’s caustic remarks against Christians and Germans and the Nazis’ anti-Semitism is recognized, there remains another aspect of Nietzsche’s views that draws him miles apart from the Nazi mentality. Moreover, one can argue that this aspect is stronger and more healthy than that through which Nietzscheanism and Nazism can be regarded as members of a loose-knit conceptual family. To appreciate this difference, it is first worth recalling once more a fundamental theme of Nietzsche’s thought, namely, that of “health vs. sickness.” As a philosopher of life-affirmation, the categories of “health” and “sickness” come to the foreground, often taking precedence over the distinction between “truth vs. falsity” and “pain vs. pleasure.” Here,

if lies and pain can serve the interests of health, then lies and pain acquire a positive value; if truth and pleasure run contrary to the interests of health, then they acquire a negative value. Health is the pivotal value in Nietzsche’s thought, and traditional moral values take a back seat.

When philosophizing in terms of health, one is led quickly to interpret the world using terms such as “disease” and “sickness.” When philosophizing in reference to social health, one naturally turns one’s attention to those social forces that suggest themselves as counter-productive and threatening to the social order. In some societies, the status quo persecutes the unemployed; in others, it persecutes the insane; in still others, it persecutes minority ethnic or religious groups. Whatever the group happens to be, their social deprecation often issues from a mentality that considers social organizations to be living organisms, and that acts like a doctor who identifies social ills and their likely remedy. So once Nietzsche set his thought along the path of “health vs. sickness,” and once he started to regard himself as a cultural physician, it was inevitable that he would identify certain aspects of the social order as undesirable, and as the causes of social disease.

This train of thought arises in most social theories – certain optimal social conditions are imagined and the present society is measured up against the proposed standard. What is at issue in Nietzsche’s philosophy in connection with the Nazis is the degree of violence and repression that his philosophy can be taken to prescribe or condone. According to Nietzsche, life – and he seems to be quite right here – involves some degree of competition and violence, and we must ask how much violence is necessary for health, given that some is unavoidable. Although one might be required to kill other living beings for food, circumstances still might allow one to choose to be either a herbivore or a carnivore or an omnivore. Comparable choices apply at the level of human communities in interaction. Sometimes drastic measures are needed to direct the society towards a desired end; sometimes they are not needed.

So if one’s body or community is under a threat of death, then one might be able to justify actions that intend to destroy the threat. If one’s body or community is in a weakened condition, then the

threat will increase proportionally. If one's body or community is in a strong condition, then the threat will decrease proportionally. At the maximum, if one were invulnerable, then one could not be threatened, and would be in a position to live peacefully with forces that would kill other, weaker types. Neither would the concepts of danger or fear make sense to such an invulnerable being. An absolute defense would amount to an absolute offense.

Given this logic, Nazism can be seen as the doctrine of a psychologically weakened and defensive society that felt threatened and vulnerable, for the rulers of that society saw the need to protect themselves and their followers by attempting to annihilate a perceived mortal threat. War and aggression, in other words, need not be expressions of strength, and can just as easily be expressions of fear and vulnerability. In some of Nietzsche's reflections, he perceived this kind of aggression as the expression of weakness, and he aspired to a different kind of strength — one where one is so strong that even poisoned waters cannot undermine one's health. This is a strength that can find a source of enjoyment in misery, that does not turn away from pain, and does not simply survive, but says “yes” to tragic life-episodes that would ordinarily be crushing. Such a person would not need to use violence as a defense, nor would such a person experience much hate. Nietzsche expressed such general ideas in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

When among people, whoever does not want to die of thirst, must learn how to drink from every glass; and whoever among people wants to remain clean, must know how to wash even with contaminated water.¹⁹³

And so I spoke to myself in consolation, “Well now, take courage old heart! A misfortune made things go wrong — savor that as your good fortune!”¹⁹⁴

Indeed, the human being is a contaminated river. To be able to absorb a contaminated river, without becoming unclean, one must already be an ocean. Look, I teach you the superhuman: he is this ocean; in him your great contempt can descend.¹⁹⁵

Note, in contrast, the relative weak-mindedness that shows itself to be characteristic of the noble type which Nietzsche describes in the

following canonical quote, also written when he was at the height of his career. This noble, or “master,” type still looks down on others, and still feels contempt for those who are more vulnerable:

Deprised are the cowardly, the apprehensive, the petty, those who are concerned merely with narrow utility; also the suspicious ones with their constrained look, those who lower themselves, the doglike types, who allow themselves to be mistreated, the begging fawners, the liars above all — it is a basic belief of all aristocrats, that the common folk are untruthful. “We who are truthful” — that is what the nobility in ancient Greece called themselves.¹⁹⁶

The point suggested here is that some of Nietzsche's characterizations of the noble, strong, or “master” type appear to have been written from a condition of less-than-perfect health and less-than-optimal strength. Despite this, there were occasions when Nietzsche realized that if one is super-healthy, and if one is thoroughly flourishing, then there is no need to project negative attitudes on other, less healthy, people — one could be so strong as not even to be bothered by a supposedly disintegrating culture. This would be the extreme limit of such an attitude — one where, culturally speaking, in one's “loneliest of loneliness,” one could still say “yes” to the culture, even though it might be in a questionable spiritual state. As Nietzsche said himself, it would be a condition where one could say “yes” to the world wholeheartedly, desiring that nothing should be changed, even those people whom one believed, truly or falsely, to be undermining the culture.

If one takes to their limit a salient cluster of Nietzsche's remarks on what counts as a healthy attitude towards life, one would be directed to become the opposite of the generally “Nazi” types, whose views are marked by discontent with the national or cultural condition, and whose fear for the health of the nation or cultural reach levels of absolute intolerance towards those who do not share their conception of health. In contrast to this mentality, a healthier person would accept the cultural situation as it is, and discover ways to flourish within it, with all of its perceived imperfections, however these are defined. This would display an even greater strength. From the outside, it might appear that one was “turning one's other

cheek” to the perceived threat, and behaving in a distinctively Christian way; from the inside, it would be that one was in fact so strong that the threat was nothing difficult to digest:

A stronger and more well-turned-out person digests his experiences (his ordinary actions and criminal actions included), as he digests his meals, even when he has to swallow some hard mouthfuls. If for some experience, he cannot “be done with it,” this kind of indigestion is as much physiological as the other – and in fact, it is frequently only a result of the other.¹⁹⁷

Nietzsche and twentieth-century French philosophy

As noted above, after his early retirement from the University of Basel at the age of thirty-four, Nietzsche spent the remainder of his intellectually active life moving gypsy-like from place to place. His center of gravity was in the Swiss Alps, and his travels extended to the sea and riverside towns of Italy; with a return north to Germany in most years to visit his mother. At this point in his life, Nietzsche developed into a more cosmopolitan thinker, and as his identification with southern Europe increased, his German nationalism diminished. Although Nietzsche was raised in Germany and wrote in the German language, he is not a prototypical “German philosopher,” for many of the cultures and ideas which inspired him – first and foremost ancient Greece – were located outside Germany. Much like the Jewish people had lived for centuries, Nietzsche had no proper homeland during the prime of his life, living in the places he stayed as much of an alien as he was a citizen.¹⁹⁸ If there was any culture that he tended to favor wholeheartedly, it was the French culture, even though he did not, strangely enough, travel extensively in France: “Fundamentally, it is a small number of old Frenchmen to whom I repeatedly return: I believe only in cultivation as it is understood by the French, and hold everything else in Europe that calls itself ‘cultivated,’ to be a misunderstanding; not to mention German culture.”^{199 200}

As was true of Nietzsche’s intellectual reception in the English-speaking countries, his reception in France during the twentieth century was initially sluggish. He was also less attractive to academic

philosophers, and had a more noticeable following among writers and avant-garde artists. Just as Schopenhauer became a philosopher for musicians during the later nineteenth century, Nietzsche became a philosopher for writers and poets during the early twentieth. Although the surrealistic movement of the 1920s directly owes much to Sigmund Freud’s influence, it was Nietzsche who led the way in his extended attention to the unconscious, often unspeakable, sexually-centered, instinctual “Dionysian” forces within people. Freud was not the first to assert that the core truth of the human psyche is to be explained mainly in terms of our instinctual energies.

Georges Bataille (1897–1962), writer and philosopher, used the “acephalic man” (headless man) as his hallmark, combining in a single image the guillotine bloodbaths of the anti-aristocratic French Revolution, the idea of disempowerment through castration, and Nietzsche’s anti-authoritarian call to remove the very “head” of reality, namely, God.²⁰¹ Nietzsche’s affirmation of life impressed Bataille with its full Dionysian flavor, and Bataille observed that life not only requires violence and killings, but also requires the production of waste products. Since living things necessarily generate waste, Bataille concluded that perfectly balanced, equilibrium-centered, self-contained, recycling, and stabilized systems run counter to what was for him, the excretory and excremental nature of life itself. Balanced accounting sheets contradict the style of life’s economy, because life always produces leftovers. Bataille consequently presented us with a Nietzschean philosophic vision that, imagistically-centered in the profusion of waste, accentuated Dionysian excess, superfluousness, expenditure, ecstasy, and overflowing rather than an Apollonian efficiency, controlled, perfected, rationalized, and tightly retained.

Within twentieth-century French philosophic thought, Nietzsche’s stress upon aesthetics and wisdom was adopted enthusiastically, and achieved further expression in the uniquely French existentialist manner. In the mid-century, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80), existentialist philosopher and designate for the 1964 Nobel Prize for Literature (which he declined), developed his philosophical position by attending closely to the aesthetic texture of our

day-to-day lives, locating the abyss – one that Nietzsche had once discerned in the meaningless chaos behind the apparently stable world – in a more obvious place. For Sartre, the upsetting aspect of the world is the reality of our day-to-day existence. It is the world of excretory products such as mucus, ear wax, phlegm, pus, bad breath, dandruff, vomit, scabs, urine, feces, dirty linens, small-minded bickering, petty betrayals, disillusionments, dried blood, bloated corpses, and buzzing flies. It is the daily world where people are mugged and murdered for only a few dollars. Such is the existential furniture in Sartre's version of mundane reality – his version of the paralyzing Medusa's face – that it is difficult to behold without repulsion, without excuses, and without comforting idealizations.²⁰² Overexposure to this harsh aspect of reality, as so many war stories illustrate, can turn a person's emotions into stone.

Although Sartre's abyss is aesthetically defined in reference to the repulsive quality of raw existence, the Sartrean experience of "existential nausea" stands as a form of wisdom, for it represents a necessary part of the truth of what it means to be alive. Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, cited above, expresses the same down-to-earth awareness as does Sartre, but with a far more loving and rationally-balanced temperament. The Sartrean awareness of existence, in contrast, was grounded in the frustrating recognition that the uniqueness of individual things defies one's strongest efforts to comprehend them fully. For Sartre, existing individuals are absurd, and even after one is dead, one's corpse remains annoyingly "in the way."

Albert Camus (1913–60), novelist and philosopher, grounded his philosophy on the same Sophoclean and Shakespearean questions as did Nietzsche: "Why live?" and "To be or not to be?" According to Camus, the problem of suicide is the one serious philosophical problem, and his answer to the question of whether life is, or is not, worth living, similarly fused aesthetics and wisdom in a Nietzschean manner: for life to be maximally meaningful, Camus believed that we should live every moment with the joyful exhilaration of a person who, having been just released from prison, inhales the fresh air, and feels the sunlight and ground below, as if it were the substance of heaven itself. The experience is aesthetic and ecstatic, and it is accompanied by the wisdom that in reference to

such an aesthetic experience – an experience available to all, at every moment – life becomes infinitely valuable, and that one should struggle to live as long as possible. Here, if one adopts a certain perspective, all moments are the same and are equally precious.

Camus concluded that the best life is the one that lasts the longest, throughout which one loves whatever happens. He believed that once a person realizes the infinite value of each moment in aesthetic exhilaration, considerations of "better or worse" will dissolve, and life will become only a matter of quantity. Being awake the longest is the best if one develops a positive attitude towards existence. For Camus and Nietzsche, existence itself can be perfection. Although their basic conclusions were same, the temperamental difference between them resided in Camus's more pronounced emphasis upon the utter absurdity and sharp awareness of the mechanical quality of daily life. Camus, for instance, upon looking at a person talking away wildly in a telephone booth, and in suddenly being struck by the "incomprehensible dumb show" of the person's gestures, would stop and wonder why the person even bothered to be alive.²⁰³

During the more socially turbulent and revolutionary times of the 1960s, Nietzsche's popularity in French academic circles increased, mainly due to the inspiration of his "death of God" idea. This provocative thought became philosophically attractive, owing to its rejection of a determinately specified, ultimate authority that defines the absolute truth. The "death of God" might not have directly expressed the French Revolutionary values of equality and fraternity, but it captured the idea of liberty well, even though it was a noticeably iconoclastic sort of liberty. Nietzsche's call for the death of all absolute authority confirmed the aims of social revolutionaries who protested against oppressive social conditions – conditions which were particularly offensive in how they presented themselves as the natural and best way to live. It also inspired philosophic-literary thinkers such as Roland Barthes (1915–80) and Jacques Derrida (1930–), who rejected the idea that in principle the meaning of a text is determinate, and is determined primarily by the text's author.

The personage of Nietzsche-as-iconoclast was especially inspirational to social reformers and critics who regarded the capitalist

status quo as a system well worth overturning. Nietzsche himself disapproved of Communism as much as he disapproved of Christianity, owing to what he perceived as their shared unrealistic visions of social harmony, peace, and equality. Nonetheless, the anti-capitalist, Marxist sentiments that ran as an undercurrent within twentieth-century French culture remained loosely compatible with Nietzsche's iconoclasm.

Another attraction of Nietzsche's thought in postwar France was his historical approach to understanding social phenomena. In *Human, All-Too-Human*, he stated controversially: "Everything, though, has become; there are no eternal facts: just as much as there are no absolute truths. From now on, therefore, *historical philo-
sophizing* is necessary, and with it, the virtue of modesty."²⁰⁴ It is not to Nietzsche's intellectual credit that this remark suggests self-underminingly, and somewhat entertainingly, that it is an eternal truth that there are no eternal truths, but his intent is clear: most of what we believe to be natural, true, unshakable, stable, and thoroughly reliable in our world is not that way at all. Just as a sheet of glass appears to be a solid, when it is in fact a very slowly flowing liquid, our social institutions, our labels for common things, our self-definitions, our value systems, only appear to be written in stone, when in fact they are, as a rule, or quite significantly, written only into the seashore sand. They are subject to change, and they are for the most part arbitrary, definitely malleable, and intrinsically eroding forms, not unlike our physical bodies. Perhaps, then, although one cannot assert coherently that absolutely everything is changing, a Nietzschean would hold, minimally, that almost everything is changing, especially those things that one holds near and dear.²⁰⁵

The thought that our world is fundamentally marked by transition, fluctuation, transformation, and other effects of time's passing can be found in early Greek philosophy in the vision of Heraclitus. The same idea of a prevailing impermanence to the world is also at the core of Buddhism. In Nietzsche, and in later twentieth-century French philosophy, this proposition assumes the form of a strong emphasis on and sensitivity towards philosophizing in view of historical change — a standpoint whose roots can be traced to German philosophy of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth

centuries in the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) and G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831).

Nietzsche developed his conception of historical philosophizing using background assumptions that were unlike those of his predecessors, many of whom conceived of historical change as the realization of a timeless, grand, moral plan of the world (where our historical progress ends in a perfect society and justice is finally done). Nietzsche, by contrast, considered social phenomena as mere happenings whose complicated and overlapping histories can be set within an array of diverse, often accidental, and typically natural and non-moral sources. Rather than regarding history as the materialization of a previously determined cosmic plan that issues from an intrinsically rational universe, Nietzsche considered history to be the human narrative construction of meanings from meaningless and innocent events, which is to say that in our world, global historical meaning is created only by us and is not discovered as the revelation of the intentions of a universal, godlike being whose existence precedes that of the human being, and whose infinitely knowing intentions determine human fate, one way or another. In contrast to his nineteenth-century predecessors such as Hegel and Marx, Nietzsche's historical philosophizing avoided grand historical projections.²⁰⁶ This dissolution of historically overriding aims was even more pronounced in those twentieth-century French philosophers who were influenced by these Nietzschean ideas, such as Michel Foucault (1926–84), who, like Nietzsche, interpreted the world in terms of fluctuating power-constellations.

Nietzsche's style of historical philosophizing, owing to its social revolutionary import, was also inspirational in French feminist thought during the post-Second World War period. Nietzsche himself might have had sexist tendencies, but his style of historical philosophizing fits the social, political, and moral interests of those thinkers such as Luce Irigaray (1931–), who assert that men should not be privileged over women in reference to social benefits, the availability of leadership roles, employment status, and power in general. By considering the history of sexism using the Nietzschean–Foucaultian style of historical analysis, one can argue that the dominant role men have taken in most societies has been

neither naturally preordained nor morally defensible, but has been a socially-constructed phenomenon that can be changed to everyone's overall benefit through concerted social activism and linguistic reflection.

Similarly, by tracing social phenomena back to their diverse roots using Michel Foucault's Nietzsche-inspired style of genealogical analysis – much like one would trace the history of a person through the details of their family tree – one can describe how the various definitions of the “outcast” and the “criminal” that different societies have adopted are not steadfast valuations, but temporary social constructions. It is common knowledge that what counts as criminal behavior in one culture is legal in another. Instead of concluding from this that some societies have value systems that are closer to the absolute truth, Foucault and Nietzsche suggest that there is no common, universal, natural valuation, with which all legalities ought to coincide. This measure of freedom and tolerance is admittedly too uncontrolled for strict partisans of the Enlightenment spirit, for it also implies that there are no “unalienable rights” and no universal good; for others, especially those who have suffered unjust oppression and who have been kept at an unfair disadvantage at the hands of a dominating society, such an iconoclastic position stands as a liberating breath of fresh air. Post-Second World War French thinkers tended to appreciate Nietzsche's emancipating thought in the latter, more radical manner.

Central to Nietzsche's reluctance to define any “absolutes” in social theory or elsewhere, is his observation that people experience the world through many different perspectives, and that living things in general also adopt many alternative perspectives on the world. It is an easy thought-experiment to consider how wildly different our daily world would look to us, had we the ability to see radio waves and x-rays in addition to light rays, or could hear the very high pitches that dogs can hear, or could smell food located miles and miles away, as can polar bears. As a matter of fancy, Nietzsche described some imaginative changes to the human condition, to illustrate how particularly set, and how noticeably arbitrary, our given orientation to the world happens to be. In the following excerpt, he imagined what it might be like if the human perceptual

uptake were slowed down considerably, as is done in the making of a time-lapse photograph or time-lapse movie.

If a person could make only 189 perceptions during the year, then the difference between day and night would completely fall away; the sun's path would appear as a shining arc in the sky, just as a glowing coal, when swung around, would look like a fiery circle; the vegetation would continually shoot up and then vanish again in a tearing hurry.²⁰⁷

Nietzsche's “perspectivism” – the thought that all knowledge is only knowledge gained within the frontiers of some presupposed background or other, and that those backgrounds are diverse – was inspirational for twentieth-century French philosophy, owing to its compatibility with the idea that networks of social values vary with time and place, and that no perspective is final, at least when referring to human beings and their cultural perspectives.

How, then, should one choose among perspectives, when several alternatives are available? This has been asked of Nietzsche and of his French followers in the twentieth century. Nietzsche usually considered the resolution of such questions to be a matter of taste, which makes the resolution a matter of judgment, discrimination, and sensitivity. He saw no easy answer to appeal to as a matter of rigid rule. It is possible to feed one's mind with information of all kinds, to adopt any of a number of perspectives, and Nietzsche believed that the kind of person one is, and in particular, the level of health one has, largely determines the perspectives one adopts. Making a choice among perspectives, or simply gravitating unconsciously or instinctively to one perspective or another, he believed, is a reflection of one's state of health – a state which is itself reflected in one's capacity for judgment and discrimination.²⁰⁸

A further way to explain Nietzsche's answer the question, “how should one choose among perspectives?” is to point out that words for “knowledge,” “wisdom,” and “taste” are closely related in their linguistic origins, and that to be a wise person is to be someone who has a fine capacity for judgment. This capacity is related to the discriminating powers of someone who is a connoisseur of food – a person who has “good taste.” A cluster of associated words reveals the connection. In French, “*connaitre*” means “to know,” but there is

also the word, “*connaisseur*,” which refers to a person of good taste. In French, the word “*savoir*” also means “to know,” as does the Spanish word, “*saber*.” In English, we have the related word “savor,” which refers to the act of fasting food carefully.

As a philologist, Nietzsche was aware of these etymological connections, and he added that “*sapiens*,” as in “*homo sapiens*,” which is usually understood to mean “that which knows,” actually means “that which tastes.” So “*homo sapiens*” has a meaning that resonates with “the man who has developed a sense of taste” or “the man who has the capacity for fine discrimination.”²⁰⁹ Having wisdom, then, entails having good taste, at least etymologically. Boorishness and crudity would be opposed to wisdom, so one would not expect wisdom to arise among those who identify with the least common denominator within society. Nietzsche’s aristocratic elitism, his distinct preference for “higher types,” and his continual emphasis on aesthetic matters of taste can in this way be traced to his understanding of the ancient meaning of wisdom. Accordingly, he urged us to be more discriminating, as far as our given powers will allow. Nietzsche’s emphasis on aesthetics and discrimination, as it was combined with his disposition towards understanding the world in terms of its minute historical detail, was inspirational to French thought of the later twentieth century.

In broad description, Nietzsche influenced twentieth-century French thought in his taste-related conception of wisdom, his open-minded perspectivism, his down-to-earth emphasis on historical philosophizing, his fearless attempt to look into the abyss, and his iconoclastic, authority-rejecting conception of freedom, which was linked with the “death of God.” French philosophers who transformed and accentuated these Nietzschean ideas include Georges Bataille, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, and Gilles Deleuze. Near the very end of the twentieth century, Nietzsche’s influence waned in France, as the concepts of equality and fraternity rose to greater prominence in social theorizing, and as Nietzsche’s aristocratic attitudes were increasingly regarded as being antagonistic to the enduring democratic spirit of the French Revolution.

Nietzsche, the jester of metamorphosis

Fate drew the shades on Nietzsche’s final decade of life with an ailment, probably either syphilis or a brain infection, that left him unable to write or communicate coherently. His tragic psychological downfall came on 3 January 1889, at the age of forty-four, when he collapsed in the Italian riverside city of Turin, never again to regain his mental health. After a short hospitalization in Basel, and a brief residence at a sanatorium in Jena, he lived out most of his remaining years in Naumburg with his mother, in the house he knew as a teenager. After his mother died in 1897, Elisabeth Nietzsche moved him and his collected papers to Weimar, where she and her brother lived until his death on 25 August 1900. Whether Nietzsche’s gradually intensifying illness significantly affected the content of his 1888 writings will remain a topic of debate, but the popular images of the bedridden Nietzsche during his last years of life hardly reflect his stature as one of the most important intellectuals of the nineteenth century. Perhaps it would be more intellectually proper to remember him as he was during his prime, between the years of 1880 and 1887, from ages thirty-six to forty-three – those fertile times when he wrote *Daybreak*, *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *On the Genealogy of Morals*. And, as has been suggested implicitly in the

Conclusion