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Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Critical Guide
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At the end of the 1990s, in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996), Bernd Magnus and Kathleen Marie Higgins pointed out that *Zarathustra* appeared to be “the Nietzschean work least popular among philosophers, at least in the Anglo-American tradition” (p. 39). Over time, the negative judgment appears to have softened to some extent, though, as Dirk J. Johnson noted in *The New Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019), “today the text still receives its share of criticism and even scholars sympathetic to it remain skeptical of its virtues” (p. 174). In contrast to those interpreters who sidestep *Zarathustra* in favor of more systematic works like *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) or *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Johnson observed that numerous scholars have instead concentrated on *Zarathustra*, striving to decipher its complexities, particularly the enigmatic concept of eternal recurrence. According to Johnson, these scholars believe that “Zarathustra goes to the heart of the philosopher’s concerns and his historic importance resides in the dense fabric of that work” (p. 174).

Three years later, *Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra, A Critical Guide* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2022) was published, with the aim of remedying “this current neglect of TSZ by highlighting its importance for a fuller understanding of Nietzsche’s contribution to philosophy” (p. 1). The authors of the eleven essays that make up this volume, while sometimes holding divergent positions on the central ideas of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, are unanimous in considering this Nietzschean work the “only place where he presents the constructive and affirmative solutions to the questions and problems he poses in the critical, skeptical, and polemical books that came later” (p. 4).

The critical guide examines multiple aspects of Nietzsche’s work, such as its stylistic register and the author’s metaphilosophical commitments, while repeatedly addressing the key themes of the text: the *Übermensch*, the eternal recurrence, and the will to power. In the final section of the guide, attention is given to exploring the political aspects of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and exa-

mining its contributions to the transhumanist debate and contemporary environmental philosophy. Each chapter is structured with its own distinct objectives and focus, which contributes to the diverse and multifaceted nature of the essays in the guide. Nevertheless, this diversity does not lead to a disjointed or fragmented collection of philosophical insights. On the contrary, the essays are interconnected through frequent cross-references and shared thematic links, creating a cohesive intellectual dialogue.

The impression gained from reading this critical guide is that of a detailed overview of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, made possible by a range of viewpoints and perspectives often intertwined with one another. As stated by the editor in the introduction, the primary purpose of the essays is to illustrate why “philosophers today should care about TSZ” (p. 2). For this reason, the chapters do not offer purely exegetical treatments of the text, but they address academic issues concerning its place in the history of philosophy or in Nietzsche’s philosophical development.

A significant contribution is Katsafanas’s essay, the first in the collection specifically dedicated to the theme of eternal recurrence. The essay has two main strengths. The first is its proposal of an innovative criterion for addressing the issue of eternal recurrence and for evaluating the validity of some of the most influential contemporary interpretations of this concept. This is the adequacy criterion, which holds that “an acceptable interpretation of eternal recurrence must explain why it is more difficult to affirm recurring lives than singular lives” (p. 66). Using this concept Katsafanas examines and rejects the pessimistic perspective on eternal recurrence, then analyzes and refutes the interpretations of Nehamas, Reginster, and Jenkins. According to these scholars, affirming a recurring life would be more difficult because everything is interconnected (Nehamas), because the eternal recurrence of our lives nullifies the possibility of permanently achieving any goal (Reginster), and because eternal recurrence causes the constant re-experience of past harm that the avenged person seeks to compensate for (Jenkins).

Katsafanas’ distinction between conditional affirmation and absolute affirmation is also illuminating, as it seeks to explain the greater difficulty in affirming a recurring life. In Katsafanas’ view life affirmation is conditional when it depends on the possibility of excising objectionable elements from the object of affirmation. Absolute affirmation of life, on the other hand, is exemplified by Zarathustra, who affirms life unconditionally (p. 63). Since humans tend to affirm life conditionally, a recurring life would be harder to affirm because, whereas in a singular life the elimination of objectionable elements may seem possible, in a recurring life the objectionable element will always return. Katsafanas thus views eternal recurrence as having a diagnostic function: by con-

fronting us with the prospect of life's repetition, it can reveal the objectionable elements that condition the way we affirm life, thereby exposing "provisionality, deficiency, or incompleteness in one's relation to life" (p. 76).

One issue I find with the essay lies in how the concept of conditional affirmation of life is formulated. This concept focuses exclusively on the idea of removing objectionable elements but overlooks the possibility of a conditional affirmation of life that does not necessarily reject objectionable elements. Instead, this would rely on the presence or acknowledgment of positive elements those that inspire us to say yes to life. In this perspective, it would still constitute a conditional affirmation of life, but unlike Katsafanas's interpretation, this redefinition would not make affirming a recurring life more challenging or violate the adequacy criterion. Both singular and recurring lives would then focus on embracing these positive elements, whose presence would not be undermined by eternal recurrence but rather affirmed by it. Thus, affirming a recurring life would not become more difficult. Although Katsafanas's distinction between conditional and unconditional affirmation of life is conceptually valuable, it requires revision to align with the adequacy criterion. This would allow for the recognition of conditional affirmations of life that do not involve the negation of objectionable elements.

Two noteworthy essays in this volume are those by Matthew Meyer and Paul S. Loeb. Both address the theme of eternal recurrence, but unlike Katsafanas, they approach it from a naturalistic cosmological perspective. The essays present profoundly engaging reflections on the interplay between Nietzsche's naturalism and the question of agency. Meyer argues that Nietzsche's naturalism entails a form of necessity that negates the conception of agency underlying the system of moral values: in the absence of a supersensible metaphysical dimension where Schopenhauer's "*will-in-itself*" freedom operates, only natural determinism remains. This leads, on one hand, to a naturalized conception of the self, where the agent cannot stand above and control nature, and on the other, to "a childlike state of innocence beyond good and evil" (p. 123). Loeb, however, contends that from a naturalistic and cosmological conception of eternal recurrence, one can arrive at a notion of agency that is not only not neutralized but actually reinforced. Through their mnemonic abilities, humans could, according to Loeb, recognize the radical flux and realize that the thoughts fading away are the same ones entering "the realm of the 'is.'" From this awareness, Nietzsche's notion of retrospective willing could develop, enabling individuals to have a causal influence on past thoughts and affirm, "Not only 'Thus I willed them!' but also 'Thus I will them!'" (p. 144).

Numerous philosophical contributions in this guide warrant close analysis. Thus far, the essays reviewed have concentrated primarily on the theme of

eternal recurrence or on the stylistic and metaphilosophical dimensions of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The final essay I wish to examine is Kaitlyn Creasy's contribution, which forms the concluding chapter of the volume. Like the two preceding essays, Creasy's work is distinguished by its clear and well-defined focus, enabling it to stand out while maintaining a strong connection to the other chapters in the guide. There are many references to earlier essays, such as the discussion of disinterested understanding examined by Christopher Janaway in Chapter 4 or the theme of the *Übermensch* explored by Gabriel Zamosc in Chapter 10 and in the context of Nietzsche's political philosophy by Paul Franco. In her essay *Nietzsche on the Re-naturalization of Humanity in Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Creasy explains how Nietzsche's critique of human exceptionalism and his proto-ecocentric, positive vision of the "naturalization of humanity" could offer contemporary environmental philosophy "a novel perspective from which to critique anthropocentric conservation ideologies" (p. 225). The central thesis of the essay is that Nietzsche seeks, on the one hand, to de-humanize nature by overcoming the anthropocentric attitude that projects human values and concepts onto nature and, on the other hand, to propose a naturalization of the human being that requires the development of ecological conscience. According to Creasy, this ecological consciousness entails recognizing humanity as living thing among living things (p. 243) and as an entity that, like other-than-human beings, wills power in the world as will to power (p. 244). Acknowledging that we inhabit an ecosphere "full of other-than-human beings willing power whose end-directedness and purposeful striving we share" (p. 246) would also help resist two forms of nihilism: the otherworldly nihilism that arises when humanity is considered the sole source of value, and the nihilism of self-denial that involves the suppression of instincts or the dissolution of the will (p. 246).

Particularly striking is the contrast Creasy highlights between humanized nature and naturalized humanity, which she associates with Nietzsche's classic dichotomy between the common man and the noble. Creasy suggests that, for Nietzsche, "humanized nature is the will of the weak, life-denying individuals who cannot accept themselves and affirm themselves as pieces of nature" whereas "naturalized humanity is the will of strong, life-affirming individuals" who understand themselves as pieces of nature (p. 239) and become more akin to the other-than-human. This interpretation of the contrast between the noble and the common man is particularly intriguing due to the metaethical framework Creasy proposes as underlying this opposition. From Creasy's perspective what determines the validity of a mode or system of evaluation is the recognition of the natural world as "the condition of possibility for a stronger and healthier humanity" (p. 244) and the incorporation of other-than-human

sources of value (p. 236). From a metaethical perspective, Creasy adopts a form of axiological vitalism that identifies the good as “everything that enhances the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself” (p. 235) and situates this within a perspective that emphasizes the necessity of ecological conscience and the overcoming of anthropocentric ethical-environmental frameworks.

The *Cambridge Critical Guide to Thus Spoke Zarathustra* stands out, even in its concluding chapter, as an invaluable resource for those seeking to comprehend and critically engage with one of Nietzsche’s most profound works. This volume offers a diverse array of conceptual tools that, while not entirely free from limitations, succeed in opening new and original pathways for philosophical exploration. By the time the reader completes this collection, they will have acquired a deeper appreciation of numerous facets of Nietzschean thought. The guide provides not only a meticulous examination of the central themes of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* but also a comprehensive overview of the contemporary debates surrounding Nietzsche’s philosophy. This is particularly significant for a text that, despite its seminal importance, has often been unjustly sidelined in academic discourse. Through its insightful analyses and diverse contributions, the guide underscores why *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* warrants renewed attention and a more rigorous analytical approach. I am convinced that both its individual essays and the volume as a cohesive whole have successfully fulfilled their mission of reinvigorating interest in this masterpiece and advancing the study of Nietzschean philosophy.