NIETZSCHE AND OUR TIMES

By ROBERT SCHINZINGER

The question of survival or nonsurival
has perhaps never loomed so large as
today. If, in the face of a tormented
Europe, we draw attention to the fact
that October 15, 1944, was the hundredth
anniversary of Friedrich Nietzsche’s birth,
we do so because this “good European,”
though a true son of his own, the nineteenth
century, did not acquire his real significance
and influence until our twentieth century.

Like Janus, Nietzsche’s philosophy has
two faces: one turned back, with an ex-
quise feeling for historical reality, with a
keen, pitiless eye for all symptoms of deca-
dence and decline; the other face turned
forward, with a profound faith in life and
a courageous determination to master the
future. It is this antinomy in Nietzsche’s
nature which makes him appear so related
to our own age, in which realism and ideal-
is, skepticism and heroism, are linked in
a strange union. The spiritual situation of
Europe which, in spite of the horrors of two
world wars and the chaos of the intervening
period, has retained the will to live, the
will to master its future, is well represented
by Nietzsche, who traversed the bottomless
pits of Schopenhauer’s pessimism and fought
his way through to a philosophy filled with
a will toward life and the future. Pain and
suffering led the philosopher to his ultimate
depths and produced a renewed faith, a new
love of life which has nothing in common
with rose-tinted idealism or a naive optimis-
ism based on a belief in progress. Niet-
zsche characterizes his “new humanity” as
the feeling a warrior has on the evening of
the battle which has decided nothing and
brought him only wounds and the loss of
his friend—the feeling of this warrior, who
on the following morning, in spite of all
this, still salutes the dawn and his own
fortune.

INTERPRETATION AND MISINTERPRETATION

There have been three waves of Nietzsche’s
influence: fin de siècle, the period before the
Great War, and the period between the two
world wars. Each of these periods took
from Nietzsche that which conformed to its
own spirit.

The weary maturity of civilization at the
end of the nineteenth century, which has
been called the fin de siècle, found in the
magic of art that which other centuries had
sought for and found in religion. The
passionate frenzy of what was then the
younger generation sensed a deep, mysterious
relationship between Baudelaire’s poetry,
Wagner’s music, and Nietzsche’s philosophy.
As a pupil of Schopenhauer, the young
Nietzsche was convinced that life only had
a meaning if it produced great men, artists,
philosophers, and saints, who were able to
scorn life. The masses who, like ants,
assiduously believed in the progress and
happiness of mankind, were what Schopen-
hauer called the “factory goods of nature”;
Nietzsche, in Thus Spake Zarathustra, drew
them as the “last men”:

The time will come when man no longer casts
the arrow of his longing beyond man. . . . Then
the earth will have grown small, and on it hope
the last man, who makes everything small. His
race is ineradicable like the sand flea. . . . “We
have invented happiness,” say the last men and
blink their eyes. They have left the regions
where it was hard to live: for one needs warmth.
One still loves one’s neighbor and rubs shoulders
with him: for one needs warmth. . . . No herdsman
but a herd! Each has the same desires, all are
equal: he who feels differently voluntarily goes to
the madhouse.

Life was only truly worth living if it
proudly rose above itself. Art and philoso-
phy were means toward such self-liberation,
were means of escaping the iron ring of
necessity. This is the atmosphere in which
the young Nietzsche wrote The Birth of
Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music and his
Thoughts Out of Season. Richard Wagner
was for him at that time the prophet of a
new Dionysian art. He confessed that when
listening to this music he felt as if he had
reached the most blissful state of nirvana,
with all his former life lying far behind him
like a distant mist.
The romanticism of the nineteenth century had reached its peak, and all that Nietzsche taught as "amor fati," "will to power," and "superman" was interpreted, or misinterpreted, in this sense of exquisite aestheticism. Beyond good and evil, the artistic genius enjoyed the mature beauty of decadence, with an indifferent "après nous le déluge." This was the very opposite of what Nietzsche really meant.

The second wave of Nietzsche interpretation gave expression to the naturalistic trend of the period before the Great War. In the evolution from ape to man, the superman was the next step. What was entirely overlooked was Nietzsche's moral conclusion: that man would one day cause merriment and shame to the superman, just as the ape now offers it ridiculous and at the same time embarrassing sight to man. Nietzsche's fight against Christianity and Christian morals, as well as his doctrine of the will to power were accepted literally during that phase of naked, naïve naturalism. Only his demand for a brutal, healthy egoism was seen, not his fine distinction between common and lofty morality. There were not a few Nietzsche followers who believed themselves to be supermen once they had absolved themselves of all responsibility. They did not grasp that the superman is distinguished by superhuman responsibilities and duties. That Nietzsche had broken the old tables of moral values to set up a new, more honest and sounder ethical attitude in place of the old malice and hypocrisy, and how bitterly he condemned those materialistic trends of his time and the somewhat overbearing attitude of his own country and countrymen—all this was either not noticed or not taken seriously. The academic philosophy, on the other hand, was inclined to regard Nietzsche more as a highly imaginative thinker and dangerous author than as a philosopher.

THE THIRD WAVE

The third wave of interpretation came after the Great War. A new generation, which had passed through the experience of war, utterly disillusioned and yet filled with the desire for a new start, found itself in the very situation Nietzsche had felt coming. The bankruptcy of the old idols and values had become apparent. Christianity, although generally accepted, had not been able to prevent the world conflagration of Christian peoples. Something was funda-

mentally wrong, and the history of the last thousand years looked suspiciously like the "rise of nihilism" as Nietzsche had described it. To conquer this nihilism was felt by the new generation to be its moral and political duty. People became sensitive and distrustful toward great words and gestures on the part of all isms which were unable either to foresee or prevent the great catastrophe. The demand was raised for a philosophy which could stand the test of the most sophisticated skepticism, which was ruthless in unmasking, pitiless in its striving for truth, and which at the same time

Friedrich Nietzsche in 1899

opened up a new vision into the future. What was wanted was a philosophy which did not idealize the nature of man and yet led him beyond himself. Nietzsche was interpreted in the words of his Zarathustra:

The superman is the meaning of earth. Let your will say: the superman be the meaning of earth! I adjure you, my brethren, remain faithful to earth and do not believe those who speak unto you of superterrestrial hopes! Poisoners they are, whether they know it or not.

The new generation was looking for a philosophy which had man as its central point and at the same time turned the gaze inward toward the depths of the human soul, a philosophy filled with life and thoroughly human. And this was the path shown by Nietzsche, whose philosophy, to use the words of a Frenchman, gave expression to a "puissant besoin moderne." This
new need, felt everywhere in Europe, sought for forces impervious to the most ingenious psychology and skepticism, forces enabling one to endure and master life. People all over Europe are seeking for contact with the reality of life. Philosophers and authors are tiring of the abstract intellect and are seeking like Antaeus to gain strength from the soil. It was this trend that gave to philosophy a new life impulse, a new realistic tone and a sober concentration on the one question of modern philosophy: what is man?

THE PROS AND CONS OF HISTORY

Nietzsche, who began as a classical philologist, was early to realize the value and danger of historical knowledge. Only history can teach what man is. Only he who knows the past and the true forces of historical reality is able to affect the future according to his plans. Only from history do we learn what true human greatness is. If, as Schopenhauer says, the meaning of history is to produce great men, then this stimulating aspect may well represent the greatest value of historical knowledge. On the other hand, the feeling for history leads to everything of the past being loved simply because it is of the past; this aesthetic indulgence spoils the taste for what is new and for the things that are to come. To sit back and observe the vast spectacle of history is fascinating and at the same time paralyzing. Those who have learned to see things from all sides lose the naive onedimensionality of action and fall victim to a Hamlet-like indecision.

Nietzsche conquers the danger of historicism and relativism by following them to their logical conclusion and pushing suspicion and skepticism to their extremes. This leads him to the conviction that the Christian and Buddhist cultures of the last two thousand years have been heading toward nihilism. The task now facing man is to drive this nihilism to its extreme and thus to its conquest. “That which desires to fall should be pushed,” but the place of that which has fallen must be taken by something new and positive. Nietzsche seeks for a philosophy regarding the past and the future in one, combining an incorruptible eye for historical reality with a dauntless will toward the future. From the moral point of view: he feels himself to be a man looking back on thousands of years, but also looking forward to thousands of years. He feels himself to be the heir to the most lofty spirit of the past and at the same time the first ancestor of a new aristocracy. And this is the characteristic of the philosophy of the twentieth century: that it sees through the historical nature of all phenomena of human life and yet finds the courage to make a radically new beginning.

LIFE AND KNOWLEDGE

Of course, not all philosophers of our time have made history their chief subject. There is one section following the old idealistic tradition and studying the relationship between pure mathematics and logic (Couturat and Russell) or the logical foundations of the natural sciences (the Marburg school, Poincaré). The other section, which regards the problem of history as the fundamental problem of human existence and knowledge, can in turn be divided into three groups. The first of these champions a “philosophy of values” (Rickert, Münsterberg), the second the ideas of neo-Hegelianism (Gentile, Glockner). This second, but to an even greater degree the third group, is decisively influenced by Nietzsche and sees in the historical factor of human life its essentially metaphysical character. A new kind of metaphysics in the form of a philosophy of life or a philosophy of human existence is arising especially in Germany (Dilthey, Heidegger, Jaspers). The fact that knowledge, too, is in some way a function of life and not something abstract floating in a vacuum is no longer interpreted in the manner of narrow naturalism (as James still does); the historical orientation has resulted in a widened horizon. What is important is that this new ontological realism does not destroy the truth value and the logical integrity of knowledge.

Even from Nietzsche’s relativistic point of view, to regard knowledge as a function of life does not mean to deny the value of truth. Here, too, he arrives at something positive by following the negative point of view of relativism to its logical conclusion. It is possible that knowledge originally arose from the competition of fallacies, among which the more useful or more comfortable ones or those with the older tradition survived. Finally, however, truth evolved as the most useful fallacy. The urge toward truth gradually gained the upper hand over the fallacies because it was better suited for serving the purposes of life.
TRUTH AND FALLACY

Strictly scientific philosophical idealism teaches that the human mind formulates models and hypotheses whose consequences must coincide with our experiences. The experiment is a means of discovering this coincidence. If phenomena occur one day which cannot be explained by our "laws of nature," we must change our hypotheses.

Starting from another angle, Nietzsche arrives at the conviction that it is senseless to speak of absolutely true or absolutely false knowledge: there are only probabilities. There is no neutral authority to decide over the absolute truth or fallacy of our knowledge. Our only criterion is the conclusiveness of our knowledge and its fruitfulness in practical experience. Mathematics, Nietzsche says in his paradoxical manner, deal with exact figures (straight lines, circles, etc.) which are not to be found in that form anywhere in our actual experience; hence mathematics are based on "productive fallacies." According to Nietzsche, logic also arose from the fallacy that there are identical things. Moreover, it is essentially optimistic in so far as it arbitrarily assumes that our human thinking, by following its own (logical) laws, must hit upon the truth of reality. By pushing this sophistic skepticism to its extreme, he can say that truth is that measure of fallacy without which life cannot exist. But by pushing the relativity of truth to its extreme he also proves the relativity of fallacy, and all that remains is probability; i.e., a sentence may be regarded as true or as highly probable if it proves itself fruitful in the reality of life. But what does this mean? It means that because of its ontological nature the true conception must necessarily prove fruitful and victorious in competition with the false conception. Nietzsche did not say this in so many words, but it is the implied logical consequence.

RELIGION AND METAPHYSICS

One of the most difficult problems Nietzsche had to deal with was that, on the one hand, he characterized religion and metaphysics as fallacies and, on the other hand, realized that mankind cannot live without such fallacies. Without them no individual would want to plant trees bearing fruit in the remote future. So here, too, we have productive fallacies. At the end of the racing track the chariot must turn back again. At the extreme of modern skepticism one must return to religion and metaphysics. That is the idea of the circle. Nietzsche wrote his Zarathustra as metaphysics which are not metaphysics, and as a religion which is not a religion. What he calls "amor fati" and the "eternal recurrence of the same" is the expression of this new attitude.

Like all classical German philosophers, writers, and poets, Nietzsche sees in the early periods of Greek culture the finest flowering of humanity. His criticism of culture is even more radical than Rousseau's: with Socrates begins the decline, in Christianity nihilism is enhanced, and in modern times the crisis has been reached. Now it is a matter of returning again to the simplicity of the Greeks, who were so close to life and reality.

Just as any follower of a doctrine prefers to be attacked rather than tacitly ignored, so all fervent Christians of our times have learned from Nietzsche's polemic. They feel that Nietzsche's attack was directed less against Christ than against Christianity as a phenomenon of history, especially against the Church, which had for so long been used to keeping the mills of the state going that it had become estranged to its real tasks. Moreover, Nietzsche never denied how much he owed to his religious education. "One must have loved religion and art like one's mother and nurse—else one cannot grow wise."

In Nietzsche the religious crisis of our day has reached its climax, and this to many already means the transition to a "theology of the crisis." Above all, however, the new generation feels that Nietzsche, by destroying historical religion, has so to speak uncovered the religious roots of mankind.

THE WORK AS A WHOLE

Naturally the three waves of Nietzsche's interpretation we have mentioned correspond to a certain inner development in Nietzsche's thinking. But it would be wrong to regard the transitions from the romanticism of early works to the skeptical relativism of the aphoristical works and from this to the prophetic attitude of Zarathustra as disjunctive and unconnected. To understand Nietzsche means to understand the necessity for Nietzsche to discover and overcome nihilism in himself, to understand that he had to combat Schopenhauer's philosophy and Wagner's music as being the most sublime forms of a self-liberation which was purely negative, flight from reality, a
symptom of decadence. The new self-liberation of Nietzsche, however, represents a heroic effort to accept the iron ring of necessity and to include fate into our will. Hence what he later acknowledged of his earlier writings was his realization of how the ancient Greek spirit conquered pessimism, how the Greek tragedy celebrated an apotheosis of life over the chasm of existence.

Before he could proclaim his new philosophy of life he had to wage war upon those forces standing in his way. Nietzsche, the amoralist, antichrist, and relativist, is driven by a fanatical love of truth, by an "intellectual integrity" which forces him to push his skepticism to extremes and leave no stone unturned when it is a matter of revealing the rotten foundations of modern culture. The romantic pessimism bears fruit and destroys itself, and the moral impulse of intellectual integrity discovers a new, unshakable foundation in life itself and its evolutionary tendency. Here lie the roots of a new morality and new metaphysics, but they cannot be "made" artificially. What has been called Nietzsche's positivistic phase is the necessary connecting link between negation of life and affirmation of life. He knows that moral values do not become worthless by the fact that we realize that such natural motives as fear, vanity, egoism, or lust for power have brought men to acknowledge those moral values. Whatever may have been the psychological reasons for acknowledging a moral value, the value itself, the virtue achieved, by dint of the pure air it lets us breathe and the spiritual feeling of well-being it communicates, constantly ennobles the motives of our actions, and later we no longer carry out the same actions from the same coarser motives which formerly impelled us.

The "new humanity" Nietzsche teaches, his new tables of values, i.e., his new conception of man, is proclaimed in Thus Spake Zarathustra. He lack the words and terms to indicate the new; hence he speaks prophetically in allegories and poetical images. There is no doubt that his new doctrine caused a great deal of confusion, and perhaps not without his intention. He has a good measure of Socratic irony, and there were also not a few who would have liked nothing better than to poison him. The new light he kindled was to be a beacon for straying mariners on the ocean of doubt, but a will-o'-the-wisp for those who felt safe in the possession of absolute truth.

All in all it is less the concrete content of his philosophy than his ethical aspect and his basic attitude toward life and reality which he exerted such a decisive influence on the philosophy of the twentieth century. Even in France, where the traditional Cartesian dualism is still in fashion and where Nietzsche's philosophy is regarded as mysticism and German monism, even there Nietzsche the moralist is greatly admired (Th. Maulnier). The superman and eternal recurrence are interpreted as an ethical appeal, as a cosmological vision intended to raise man above himself (Andler). Although Bergson, before his death, reverted to Catholicism, his philosophy of the élan vital once had so world-wide an effect because it followed the course taken by Nietzsche.

Nietzsche, who wrote his philosophy in aphorisms, did not have the ambition of building up a system. On the contrary: according to Nietzsche, the will to evolve a system is the will to lie. The fundamental spiritual attitude of "intellectual integrity" makes it impossible to force facts into the straitjacket of a system. But several central ideas can be established:

1. Nietzsche objects just as much to the separation of appearance and the thing-in-itself, of semblance and essence, as he does to the belief in a transcendent god.

2. Life and reality have their value in themselves and have as a common characteristic a sort of family resemblance, the "will to power," i.e., power, fullness, force, and richness of life. Knowledge as well as morality arose in the service of this will to power.

3. Since there is no transcendent goal outside the earth, all existence is in the form of a circle; the end returns to the beginning. There is no means of escape from this circle of necessity. (Eternal recurrence of the same.)

4. Applied to man, this means that the will which is still opposed to reality and fate has not yet reached its most profound point. Only the heroic decision to say "Aye" to the iron ring of necessity and to accept fate achieves the highest form of human existence in the "amor fati." Nietzsche draws a distinction between this amor fati and that which he calls Turkish fatalism, which resigns itself to the opposition of will and fate. Amor fati is to experience the identity of will and fate.
The great philosopher Aristippus came to the court of Dionysius, the Tyrant of Syracuse, and showed himself quite prepared to follow the customs and manners of the court.

"I would like to know," the Tyrant said rudely, "why the philosophers come so often to the rulers and the rulers so seldom to the philosophers."

"Because," Aristippus answered, "the philosophers know exactly what the rulers need, but the rulers don't."