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**A Model of Anti Modernism: An Introduction to Nietzsche's
Rationalistic Rejection of Liberal Democracy**

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**A Model of Anti Modernism: An Introduction to Nietzsche's
Rationalistic Rejection of Liberal Democracy**

by

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Abstract

A Model of Anti Modernism: An Introduction to Nietzsche's Rationalistic Rejection of Liberal Democracy

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The thought of Friedrich Nietzsche is often taught, but seldom sufficiently understood, and thus what ought to be most challenging to us about Nietzsche – that is, the rationalistic basis of his rejection of liberal democracy – is not squarely confronted. I propose to lay the ground for such a confrontation.

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The thought of Friedrich Nietzsche is often taught, but seldom sufficiently understood, and consequently what ought to be most challenging to us about Nietzsche – that is, the rationalistic basis of his rejection of liberal democracy – is not squarely confronted. My aim is to lay the ground for such a confrontation. But why is such a confrontation necessary, let alone desirable? It is to that question which this introductory inquiry will address itself, first through an assessment of the state of contemporary liberalism's response to non-liberal critics, and then through a survey of the contemporary scholarly response to Nietzsche.

Contemporary Liberalism and Its Critics

The failure to adequately confront, let alone respond to, Nietzsche is symptomatic of failures within contemporary liberal thought as a whole, which in many (not to say all) respects fails to enrich, or assist, liberal politics. It fails to do so because, although liberal theorists increasingly aim at acknowledging and accommodating critics of liberalism, they nevertheless resist confronting those critics on their own terms. To take a paradigmatic example, John Rawls's "political liberalism" aims at resolving the potential for conflict between Enlightenment secularism and religious orthodoxy not by engaging the competing claims made on either side, but by bracketing both out of political debate. Rawls aims at accomplishing this end through his device of "public reason" – that is, norms of political discourse which do not require citizens to hold liberal convictions in any deep or comprehensive sense, but rather only to "translate" their beliefs into terms which would be acceptable to all citizens of the liberal state. In order to make

this suggestion plausible, Rawls has to assert that a broad range of liberal and non-liberal beliefs can form an “overlapping consensus” capable of justifying the liberal state, without thereby justifying any particular liberal or non-liberal doctrine: this distinction is expressed in Rawls’s famous claim that his liberalism is “political, not metaphysical”. But Rawls’s distinction proved to be not entirely tenable, as indicated by the fact that the last decade of his career was marked by a process of being forced to address illiberal opposition ever-more deeply, all the while attempting (not altogether coherently) to retain some sort of limit on the extent of that engagement¹. The logic of “political liberalism” thereby directs us ever-more closely towards a direct engagement with opponents of liberalism, even as it declines to engage in such an exchange itself². This two-fold, or conflicted, position adopted by Rawls continues to be characteristic of liberal political theory as a whole, an additional example may serve to illustrate.

Rawls’s “political liberalism” put the project of developing a satisfactory concept of “public reason” at the center of the map of contemporary liberalism. That being said, some of the difficulties with Rawls’s own position are now commonly admitted by liberal theorists and who have consequently tried to correct it in various ways, especially by constructing models of public reason that would be less “exclusionary”, i.e., that would allow non-liberal (primarily religious) doctrines to be admitted into political discourse more fully, and explicitly assign to them an essential role in enriching liberal political culture. The most prominent figure here is Jurgen Habermas, who in recent years has begun to argue that, in contrast to the secular tradition of Western philosophy, religious traditions are the bearers of semantic resources required to address

¹ See the progression from Rawls ([1993] 1996 to 1997 to 2001).

² For a detailed demonstration of the ways in which Rawls himself admits that political liberalism ultimately cannot avoid – though it can and does do a great deal to conceal the need for – direct engagement with critics of liberalism, see (Fortier 2010).

the challenges of contemporary politics (specifically, biotechnology's impact on our understanding of human nature, and the thorough-going rejection of Western modernity symbolized by Islamic terrorism)³. Because Habermas thereby makes central to his argument a view according to which the continued presence of non-liberal traditions within liberal democracies constitutes not only a mere fact, but also an asset, and even an indispensable asset, for liberal politics, his rhetorical and intellectual posture towards those traditions is quite distinct from that of Rawls. But, at a practical level, its implications for liberal politics are not much different, because Habermas essentially follows Rawls's "translation" requirement without qualification⁴. What is most significant for our purposes, however, is to see why he follows that requirement – which, it seems, is not simply in order to maintain the "neutrality" of the liberal state, but also because he does not believe that the very non-liberal beliefs whose introduction into the public sphere he is welcoming are ultimately susceptible of rational assessment⁵. Let me spell this last point out a bit, in order to show how Habermas intensifies, rather than ameliorates, the basic tension in Rawls that we identified above.

Habermas wants to uphold the secular liberal state, but he also admits that the resources of secular philosophy are insufficient for healthy political life; moreover, he holds that their content comprises a cognitive sphere separate from, and not commensurate with, the religious

³ For the most concise statement his position, see (Habermas 2006). For more detailed treatments, see (Habermas 2003; 2008).

⁴ The argument is sometimes made that Habermas's translation requirement is less demanding than that of Rawls, because it is only meant to apply to those institutions and activities that are more-or-less directly involved in crafting, executing or enforcing state laws (Habermas 2006: 9-10). But, in fact, this is the direction in which Rawls was already heading by the end of his career (Rawls 1997).

⁵ See Habermas (2006: 17). For a more thorough canvassing of Habermasian texts that bear on this complicated issue, see (Chambers 2007: 212, 215-221; Cooke 2006: 194-95).

traditions which do contain the resources that contemporary politics requires. Thus, there is a need for those traditions to be “translated” into secular terms in order to make them compatible with the needs of the liberal state (by conveying the “meaning” of those traditions to citizens of all manner of religious convictions – or lack thereof – and thus providing the semantic resources necessary to address questions concerning biotechnology and human nature, for instance). The process of “translation” is, however, only a process of communicating “meaning”, not truth: thus, the content of the religious traditions being translated (their “truth claims”) remains impervious to philosophical evaluation⁶. The peculiarity of this position is evident first of all on Habermas’s own terms, since – as noted by Maeve Cooke (2007: 228-29) – the discursive model he is best known for was meant to be interactive and dynamic (i.e., to encourage the possibility that, through public deliberation, citizens would inform and transform one another’s respective beliefs), whereas the translation model is static (and its presumption of incommensurability seems designed to ensure that no such transformation will ever occur). For present purposes, however, our aim is not to engage in a detailed examination of the many nuances of Habermas’s thought, but rather only to highlight a basic tension which characterizes contemporary liberalism. That tension, evinced first by Rawls, and then magnified by Habermas’s attempt at correcting Rawls, is this: given that liberals are compelled to admit the importance of acknowledging and even accommodating the persistence of beliefs emanating from outside of the liberal tradition, is their insistence on limiting the extent of engagement with those non-liberals tenable? Liberalism’s process of ever-greater concessions to such worldviews (e.g., within the work of Rawls, and then in Habermas’s attempted correction of Rawls) suggests that the process amounts to something of a “slippery slope”, thus making each attempt at limiting further engagement

⁶ The question of how (or whether) “truth” can be consciously (or unconsciously) abstracted from “meaning” is outside the scope of this brief summary.

appear arbitrary. Moreover (as the criticism noted by Cooke, above, helps to draw out), precisely Habermas's conviction that such worldviews may have something essential to contribute to liberalism's self-understanding makes not only the necessity, but also the desirability, of limiting such engagement appear to be questionable as well.

Now, if it is the case – as my brief analysis of Rawls and Habermas has aimed to suggest – that the tendency of contemporary liberalism is to be drawn into ever-deeper admissions of the need to acknowledge and accommodate various forms of non-liberalism, while simultaneously (and, therefore, increasingly questionably) striving to resist actual engagement with critics of liberalism, then a question naturally arises as to what the outcome of a direct confrontation between the competing worldviews might be – and also as to what avoiding such a confrontation might cause liberals to lose in terms of their ability to understand the full significance of their own commitments, as well as that of their critics. Of course, any proposal for a “confrontation” between liberalism and illiberalism at the practical level would be cause for concern.

Fortunately, it is not necessary to make such a proposal in order to address the questions that I have just raised. For it is in fact the case that contemporary liberalism has been developed in response to a series of powerful critiques emerging from within the Western tradition. By understanding more clearly the character of those critiques – and especially by investigating the ways in which liberalism has failed to adequately appreciate or respond to them – we can gain a clearer picture of liberalism's standing vis-à-vis its critics, thereby equipping us to understand more fully what is at issue in such practical conflicts as may occur.

Nietzsche as a Model of Anti-Modernism

An invitation to engage in the sort of investigation just outlined can be found in almost any introductory textbook or undergraduate survey course dealing with the tradition of Western political philosophy, given that both will typically include, towards their end, a section on Nietzsche. And yet Nietzsche is a radical critic of the Western tradition – and not simply of its philosophical tradition, but also of the political regime which he sees as the practical consequence of that tradition, namely, liberal democracy. In fact, as I would argue, Nietzsche intended his writings to serve as the catalyst for a series of radical political movements – emphatically including wars and revolutions – aimed at overthrowing liberal democracy. Moreover, for Nietzsche overcoming the politics of Enlightenment rationalism (in the form of liberal democracy) is part-and-parcel of overcoming the entire tradition of Western rationalism (of which the Enlightenment is the culmination). Nietzsche therefore provides us with what is arguably the most comprehensive attack on modern thought and politics available. Thus, by examining how contemporary readers have responded to Nietzsche we can learn what sort of criticisms contemporary liberals are most unsettled by – and, perhaps still more tellingly, by examining the ways in which they have conspicuously failed to respond to Nietzsche, we can learn what criticisms they might be most vulnerable to.

How, then, have contemporary readers responded, and failed to respond, to Nietzsche? By attempting, as it seems to me, to strip Nietzsche's critique precisely of its fully comprehensive character – with the particular aim, as I suggested at the outset of this introduction, of downplaying or denying the rationalistic basis of Nietzsche's rejection of liberal democracy. This is done primarily in two ways, the first of which is to effectively deny that Nietzsche is a rationalist at all. This approach is especially evident in the numerous "post-

modern” appropriations of Nietzsche, which often acknowledge Nietzsche’s rejection of liberal democracy forthrightly, only to argue that it is an unnecessary (and even illogical) inference from his justified rejection of Western rationalism⁷. More traditionally-minded liberal commentators, on the other hand, hold that Nietzsche’s rejection of liberal democracy is precisely a consequence of his rejection of Western rationalism, and therefore testifies to the need for a rationalistic defense of liberalism⁸. Despite their differences, what these responses to Nietzsche have in common is a failure to appreciate the *rationalistic* basis of his rejection of liberal democracy, and this failure follows from a failure to see the rationalist quality of his thought as a whole. But if I am correct that Nietzsche’s attack on liberal democracy is meant to be in the service of rationalism (as distinguished from the tradition of Western rationalism) – and if (as I would like to argue) there is a persuasive power to his claim that liberal democracy is an obstacle to the life of reason – then it is the case that recovering the rationalist aspects of Nietzsche’s thought will help us to see the potential challenges to liberalism more clearly than is visible in commentary on Nietzsche to date.

The way in which Nietzsche must therefore be approached, I would like to suggest, is by beginning with an attempt at teasing out, and elucidating, the rationalist aspects of his thought – aspects which are in need of clarification because (as their neglect by the aforementioned authors indicates) they are somewhat concealed behind his emphasis on the role of the will in philosophy, a role which he accuses the Western tradition of having denied or obfuscated. My suggestion, however, is that if we compare what Nietzsche says about the willfulness of

⁷ The most notable examples here are (Connolly 1988; Rorty 1991 cf. Ansell-Pearson 1994; Honig 1994; Warren 1988).

⁸ The most influential exponent of this line of argument is (Habermas 1987; cf. Beiner 2010; Berkowitz 1995; Yack 1986).

philosophy in the critique of previous philosophers which opens *Beyond Good and Evil* with the terms in which he characterizes his own thought and activity towards the end of the same work, we can see clearly that his moral-political side is balanced, and undergirded, by a rationalist-contemplative side. The bare outlines of this comparison may be sketched as follows: the first chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil* is titled “On the Prejudices of Philosophers”. Chief among those prejudices is said to be the assertion that “a ‘drive to knowledge’ is the father of philosophy”: to the contrary, Nietzsche insists, it is to the philosopher’s morality and concomitant drive to mastery that we must look if we seek to understand his thought (aphorism 6). As he will go on to say: philosophy “always creates the world in its own image; it cannot do otherwise” (9). The early sections of the work (extending through the second chapter) elaborate on this claim at length; towards the second half of the last chapter of the work, however (265ff), a picture of philosophy emerges which sharply contrasts with that which opened the work. For instance, here we learn that it is most naturally the experiences of the “common man” which shape humanity (268); that “higher men” are more likely to waste their lives away than to set out to remake the world, let alone do so successfully (274); that the self-understanding of the philosopher is so remote or uncanny that he is more likely to seek to be misunderstood than to be understood (289, 290, 292, 296); that he is therefore distinguished by his solitude (284); that his relation to humanity is one of playful distance and contingency (likened to a star or an all-too-human divinity) (285, 295). Through comparison of the opening and closing of the work we can thus see that the politics of Nietzsche’s philosophy – his drive to recreate the world – coexist with a commitment to a more contemplative “life of the mind”, from which perspective he suggests that a philosopher’s political engagement is never entirely serious, nor entirely successful. Nietzsche’s writings, in other words, simultaneously amount to a form of philosophic

engagement with politics, and a reflection on the inherent limits to such engagement⁹.

Establishing this basic framework for interpreting Nietzsche through a comparison of the opening and ending of *Beyond Good and Evil* should enable us to see that the political project outlined in the remainder of the work complements, and is determined by, his understanding of rationalism: for instance, in the manner in which Nietzsche suggests that, in a post-liberal democratic regime, religion may have a valuable role mediating between philosophy and politics.

As this last remark indicates, however, a treatment of Nietzsche as a rationalist thinker necessarily leads to a consideration of his arguments about the sorts of societies – and the sorts of *political institutions* – which are most conducive to, and which most inhibit, the life of reason. It requires, in other words, tying Nietzsche’s rationalism directly to his political thought. And it is precisely on this last point that many contemporary readers have found another method of stripping Nietzsche’s thought of its fully comprehensive character: not, in this case, necessarily by denying Nietzsche’s status as a rationalist (in the manner of the interpreters discussed above), but rather by denying or downplaying the necessary link between Nietzsche’s philosophy and his politics. Indeed, at least since Walter Kaufmann introduced Nietzsche into the American academy after the Second World War, the most influential interpreters have tended to “depoliticize” Nietzsche’s thought, arguing that it is best interpreted in terms of individual self-development and “aesthetics”¹⁰. What is thus called for, in response, is a demonstration of how Nietzsche’s philosophy leads directly, and necessarily, to his politics.

⁹ In this respect, it might be said that they are not post-modern so much as “classical”, at least as reflected in the understanding of philosophy’s relation to politics presented so memorably in a passage of Plato’s *Laws* (803c-804c) which aphorism 295 of *Beyond Good and Evil* powerfully echoes.

¹⁰ E.g., (Kaufmann 1950; Nehamas 1995; Solomon 2003; Thiele 1990).

Before proceeding any further, however, we ought to note that the reading of Nietzsche pioneered by Kaufmann has already come under a considerable degree of criticism in recent years¹¹. Yet I want to argue that even those critics have failed to come to terms with the full extent of Nietzsche's position. The extent of the difficulty can perhaps be best illustrated through a brief engagement with the work of Laurence Lampert. There are several reasons for focusing on Lampert: in the first place, he is a leading contemporary authority on Nietzsche, having published outstanding, and exceptionally detailed, commentaries on Nietzsche's two major works (Lampert 1986, 2001), and then used his reading of Nietzsche as the basis for a powerful interpretation of the whole history of Western political thought (Lampert 1993, 1996, 2010). Moreover, Lampert's reading of Nietzsche is in considerable agreement with my own, and that agreement follows in part from our shared assessment that Leo Strauss's single, sixteen-page essay on *Beyond Good and Evil* "is the most comprehensive and profound study ever published on Nietzsche" (Lampert 1996: 1-2). This means (among other things) that Lampert is concerned with countering "apolitical" interpretations of Nietzsche¹² – and he does this in part by insisting that precisely what is most extreme and offensive to modern sensibilities in Nietzsche's thought is also indispensable to it. Moreover, and still more uniquely, Lampert also presents his work as a thorough-going *defense* of the normative force of those aspects of Nietzsche's thought, and, more generally, he emphatically asserts the necessity and desirability of the whole political program – in the service of, and guided by, philosophy – which Nietzsche proposes, going so far as to say that, despite all of the criticism which his political thought has endured, "Nietzsche's

¹¹ See, e.g., (Abbey & Appel 1999; Appel 1999; Beiner 2010; Conway 1997; Detwiler 1990).

¹² This is, in different ways, a commonplace in studies of Nietzsche which take some measure of influence from Strauss (e.g., Berkowitz 1995; Cooper 2008: Part Three; Pangle 1986; 1987; Rosen 1995: esp. 56-57).

future still lies in our future” (Lampert 2001: 302; cf. 2010: 415-17). Indeed, Lampert presents his own willingness to follow Nietzsche in this project of world-transformation as being what ultimately distinguishes his understanding of Nietzsche from that of Leo Strauss. Lampert’s reading of Nietzsche thereby comes to sight as a singularly *political* reading. And yet, despite the fact that Lampert is at such pains to bring the question of Nietzsche’s politics to the fore, there is arguably no respect in which his interpretation proves to be less satisfactory; there is certainly no respect in which it is less fleshed-out. For, as it turns out, although Lampert draws out with exceptional clarity the *importance* of political questions in any attempt at coming to terms with Nietzsche, he is nevertheless (given the great weight which he places on those questions) extraordinarily vague and evasive with respect to the question of what Nietzschean politics would actually consist of. For instance, Lampert *appears* to defend Nietzsche’s defense of slavery – but, on closer examination, he seems to be defending a “spiritualized” (and also “individualistic”) understanding of that defense, i.e., one whose institutional implications are unclear, and perhaps non-existent (Lampert 1993: 429-32). In general, Lampert tends to cast Nietzschean politics in very broad terms which might not be entirely unobjectionable to contemporary liberals¹³, without explaining what their effect on liberal institutions might be¹⁴.

¹³ e.g.: “the highest ideal is... loyalty to the earth”, a “love of the natural order of which we are dependent parts”; additionally, an “aware[ness] of the unity of our species”, and recognition that it is bound up with the “common fate” of “all species” (Lampert 1996: 180).

¹⁴ Andrew (1996: 634) and Beiner (2010: 390n 50) provide important examples of where Lampert seems to be covertly, but consciously, “liberalizing” Nietzsche. An additional example may be found in Lampert’s commentary on *Beyond Good and Evil*, which treats each aphorism of the work individually (excluding Part Four). The only exception to this pattern is to be found in Lampert’s analysis of the notorious discussion of women which concludes Part Seven: here Lampert presents himself as robustly and unqualifiedly defending Nietzsche’s remarks, and yet he in fact omits (and does not refer to) several aphorisms from this section – without mentioning that omission, or commenting on its significance. This is not to say that Lampert is simply a disguised liberal democrat, however (see, e.g., Lampert 1986: 94-98, 274-75; 1993: 277, 333-34, 414; 2001: 248-49); in fact, he goes so far as to apparently endorse a philosophic politics of

And yet Nietzsche himself was very explicit about such questions. Thus, although Lampert's work provides essential insights into the rationalistic character of Nietzsche's thought, he shies away from clarifying its implications for the very political questions whose centrality he has done so much to bring to our attention¹⁵.

Summation

The preceding discussion has attempted to advance two basic claims: first, that the trajectory of contemporary liberal thought leads us, willy-nilly, towards a direct confrontation with critics of liberalism; second, that what scholarship on Nietzsche – one of the most prominent such critics – has failed to illuminate about his thought is the way in which his attack on liberal democracy is meant to serve the cause of rationalism. And – as the case of Habermas allows us to see most clearly¹⁶ – the possibility that the rejection of liberal democracy might have a rationalistic basis is one that liberals as a whole have failed to adequately confront. And it

“imperialism”, linked specifically to the (purported) influence of Socrates on Alcibiades and Aristotle on Alexander the Great (Lampert 2002: 259; 2010: 137-38). But, again, it is difficult to understand what Lampert would expect such politics to entail in the our “Nietzschean future” – especially since, as the example of slavery indicates, Lampert evidently thinks that Nietzsche's endorsement of given historical practices may be interpreted in “spiritualized” terms for the contemporary world (cf. Lampert 2002: 238-39). (Lampert's criticisms of the misappropriations or misunderstandings of Nietzsche represented by political movements linked to Martin Heidegger and Leo Strauss, respectively, only serve to beg this last question more strongly [see, e.g., Lampert 1996: 430-31]).

¹⁵ Laurence Cooper's recent study of *Beyond Good and Evil* suffers from a similar difficulty: Cooper reads the work as a point-by-point response to Plato's *Republic*, and thus necessarily highlights its deeply political character. And yet Cooper concludes by vaguely announcing that, although “I don't mean to suggest that Nietzsche's political thought is liberal or democratic”, nevertheless it “may not *in principle* be incompatible with liberalism”, “not altogether unlike” “an extended and more remote” version of “Jefferson's ‘natural aristocracy’” which could “conceivably” exercise its power “even on behalf of a liberal regime” (Cooper 2008: 321).

¹⁶ Both in his misguided dismissal of Nietzsche as an anti-rationalist and in his insistence on “bracketing” the question of the validity of the “truth claims” which might be advanced by non-liberal religious traditions, despite the fact that this “translation” requirement fits poorly with his thought as a whole.

is in light of these facts that I would claim to justify the suggestion which I advanced at the outset of this introduction, as to the necessity of laying the ground for such a confrontation. And this will require – as suggested above – both elucidating the rationalist character of Nietzsche’s thought, and showing how that understanding of rationalism leads to the specific forms of political organization that Nietzsche endorses. And this will, in turn, have the benefit of allowing us to consider more concretely the manner in which liberal democracy might act as an obstacle to rationalism – or, at least, the trade-offs which are made are involved in deciding for and against particular political orders and particular understandings of the life of reason (for Nietzsche’s understanding of that life is not, of course, the only vision of it available to us) – and thus understanding more clearly the sources of possible objections to liberal democracy.

By way of conclusion, I would like to add the following consideration: it might be objected that if we know in advance that Nietzsche’s thought will lead us to a radically anti-liberal conclusion, then we ought not to pursue that path – even if avoiding it comes at some cost to our own self-understanding – since that path cannot (if taken altogether seriously) help but lead us to a rejection of what most people today appear to be convinced is the only tolerable political order available to us. To this objection, I would like to reiterate a point raised above, namely, that, just as it is crucial to understand the precise nature and significance of Nietzsche’s politics, it is also essential to see that his politics coexist with a commitment to a contemplative “life of the mind”, from which perspective he suggests that a philosopher’s political engagement is never entirely serious, nor entirely successful. Now, in that case that, despite Nietzsche’s ability to retain some degree of philosophic detachment from politics he nevertheless insisted that certain political orders could be known to be superior to others, and –

as I will argue – he intended his own writings to serve as the catalyst for the creation of such orders, i.e., his writings must themselves be understood as political acts. Because Nietzsche’s writings thereby exhibit the dualistic character indicated above – namely, amounting to, simultaneously, a form of philosophic engagement with politics, and a reflection on the inherent limits to such engagement – they are worthy of consideration by the adherents of any given political order. At the same time, this observation begs the question: if Nietzsche understood that there were necessary limits on all political action, why did he nevertheless engage in it – and (at least explicitly) to an extent that few if any other philosophers have? This question is perhaps the deepest puzzle which any confrontation with Nietzsche must attempt to answer.

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