

Study Guide: Nietzsche and the Physical World

LART602

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The Search for Order: The Rational Eye

II. The Moderns

c. Nietzsche

Readings: *The Gay Science*, Book One: §§1-4, 11-14, 19, 21, 26, 28, 39, 54; Book Two: §§57-59, 75; Book Three: §§108-145; Book Four: §§276, 277, 283, 285, 289, 290, 326, 327, 333, 335, 340-342; Book V: §§343-349, 355, 371-374, 377, 383

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

- Nietzsche is one of the most enigmatic of Western philosophers. His writings have inspired a wide range of thinkers from Nazi nationalists to Beat poets. He is by turns vilified as an advocate of elitist tyranny and celebrated as a champion of individualism and human freedom, an iconoclast on the one hand and a prophet of the human future on the other. He is perhaps all of these things.
- Nietzsche was the son and grandson of Lutheran ministers. Nietzsche was a boy when his father died and he was raised in a household including his mother, two aunts, and a sister. He was a delicate but precocious and intelligent child. He excelled in school and came to study philology (the study of ancient languages). His brilliant work as a student and early scholar earned him a position at the University of Basel while still in his early twenties. Health difficulties would ultimately lead him to resign his post.
- Nietzsche's training in classical literature (Greek, Latin) acquainted him with an ethos distant and more inspiring to him than his own. The feats of ancient Greek story-telling were his first significant scholarly subject.¹ The heroic age, and the surpassing quality of ancient art remained important influences on his thought.
- Nietzsche's declining health led to a mental collapse in 1890; he died ten years later.

Central Themes

- A number of themes may be identified as central to Nietzsche's thought. His thought is unsystematic, so that we find hints and traces of these ideas, as well as their more direct expression, throughout the aphorisms that compose the bulk of his work.
- Nietzsche is an important critic of modern culture. On his account, European humanity languishes under the miasmatic influence of a decaying and corrupt moral

¹ See his *The Birth of Tragedy*, a study of the origin of that ancient theatrical style in a struggle between a Classical rationalism and a Dionysian passion.

- code. The Judeo-Christian ethic, specifically, has become a means of suppressing the power and creativity of the human spirit. See §125 for a famous instance of this theme.
- The Judeo-Christian ethic is part, for Nietzsche, of a broader problem in the Western intellectual tradition. This is a problem found in logic, language, and metaphysics: we tend to mistake the eternal, formal, abstract, and objective for what it merely symbolizes, namely, the dynamic, chaotic, powerful world of change. That is, where Plato identifies the forms of thought as ultimate reality, Nietzsche sees only the abstract means of our thinking about the radically unstable world of change. Nietzsche would agree with Plato that the material world is essentially at odds with the formal nature of thought; but rather than abjuring the physical, Nietzsche rejects the primacy of the ideal: reality is dynamic and chaotic, and our best hope of managing it involves a mental process that must falsify its object in order to come to grips with it. Our basic metaphysical principles, including such concepts as *identity*, *sameness*, *persistence*, *causation*, etc., are “useful errors,” Nietzsche thinks – errors insofar as nothing in reality corresponds to these ideas; useful in that by thinking in these terms we are able nonetheless to capture and control much of the world around us. See §§109-111 for examples of this trend in his thought.
 - There is an important strain of naturalism in Nietzsche’s thought. Naturalism is the broad view according to which all phenomena with which we are familiar are parts of broad, natural systems composing this world as a whole. These systems include those described in the disciplines of physics, chemistry, and biology, as well as those of anthropology, sociology, and psychology. The period of Nietzsche’s life was one in which the social sciences, in particular, were rapidly advancing and, notably, increasingly integrating with the physical sciences. History came to mesh increasingly with archaeology and geology; anthropology with biology; psychology, a nascent science, with chemistry. It was, that is, increasingly possible to think of humans as part of the natural, physical order; Nietzsche’s thought is particularly strongly influenced by evolutionary theory: he frequently looks to the origins of our behavior for its explanation.²
 - In this context, Nietzsche’s doctrine of the Will to Power is fundamental to his thought. On this view, all phenomena are expressions of a motion to accrete and exert power. We see this most plainly in plants, perhaps, the spread of whose roots and limbs graphically suggests the inevitable pursuit of influence over an immediate environment. Human affairs, too, are readily interpreted in terms of the insatiable struggle for power – in some cases more frank and brutal while in others, more subtle and delicate. See §§349, 110, e.g.
 - Combining Nietzsche’s naturalism with his criticism of idealism, we encounter a form of naturalized epistemology: what is it for one part of a natural system, itself composed, to put it bluntly, of so much “goo” – what is it for this part of nature to come to “know” any other part? What are we to make of “mental states” and the evident resemblance that they bear to our surroundings? What is it, in

² See his *Genealogy of Morals*, in which he develops his account of how we came to subscribe to the Christian ethos dominant today.

other words, for humans to be rational animals? Nietzsche likens our knowledge to other complex biological systems. It might be compared with the ant-nests referred to earlier in this course. Human rational knowledge is, like the ant-nest, a complex system excreted by a certain animal, a system of certain connections among certain products of that animal, “ideas”, where both involve an interaction with the animal’s environment. In short, our reasoning and thinking about the world is itself a natural product of the world, and must be understood in these terms if it is to be understood clearly at all. Do human ideas and knowledge capture the objective nature of reality? Nietzsche would perhaps say, no, not exactly. What they are is a particular, elaborate way that we have of interacting with our environment, one that has become particularly successful, as it happens, on this planet. See in this connection §57-59, for instance.

- A further, central theme in Nietzsche’s thought concerns the status of particular moral codes and their significance for the peoples holding them. In line with his naturalism, Nietzsche views morality as a phenomenon of nature, an important feature of a certain, social organism. The moral code of a people identifies as valuable those behaviors tending to promote the continued existence of that people while discouraging those that tend to threaten its continuation. Often, the moral code of a people is reflected in its deities and their behavior. While a people naturally promotes and protects its integrity via its mores, change is inevitable, as in all natural phenomena, and while it may be resisted, a people, like other things, must undergo a form of death in order to continue to exist. See, e.g., §§4, 21, 26.

Cosmic Order

- What is the significance for our study of cosmic order of Nietzsche’s thought?
- To what extent does rational order exist in the world, as Nietzsche sees it?
- What knowledge of what order is possible for humans, on Nietzsche’s view?