



Nietzsche

LIFE AS LITERATURE

Alexander Nehamas

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More than eighty years after his death, Nietzsche's writings and his career remain disquieting, disturbing, obscure. His most famous views--the will to power, the eternal recurrence, the *?bermensch*, the master morality--often seem incomprehensible or, worse, repugnant. Yet he remains a thinker of singular importance, a great opponent of Hegel and Kant, and the source of much that is powerful in figures as diverse as Wittgenstein, Derrida, Heidegger, and many recent American philosophers.

Alexander Nehamas provides the best possible guide for the perplexed. He reveals the single thread running through Nietzsche's views: his thinking of the world on the model of a literary text, of people as if they were literary characters, and of knowledge and science as if they were literary interpretation. Beyond this, he advances the clarity of the concept of textuality, making explicit some of the forces that hold texts together and so hold us together. Nehamas finally allows us to see that Nietzsche is creating a literary character out of himself, that he is, in effect, playing the role of Plato to his own Socrates.

Nehamas discusses a number of opposing views, both American and European, of Nietzsche's texts and general project, and reaches a climactic solving of the main problems of Nietzsche interpretation in a step-by-step argument. In the process he takes up a set of very interesting questions in contemporary philosophy, such as moral relativism and scientific realism. This is a book of considerable breadth and elegance that will appeal to all curious readers of philosophy and literature.

Nietzsche: Life as Literature Details

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From Reader Review Nietzsche: Life as Literature for online ebook

Daniel says

I wasn't impressed. I just couldn't buy his thesis.

Thomas Dineen says

Can anyone who concludes a scholarly work about Nietzsche by dismissing him as a "miserable little man" really be trusted to give a balanced assessment of the great philosopher? No, Alexander Nehamas can't.

To him, Nietzsche was "[c:]rue and heartless, neither protective nor respectful of the sensibilities of others." The pathetic curmudgeon was "[d:]isdainful and contemptuous of the values and lives of most people....[and:] has offended and hurt many and will doubtless continue to do so in the future." (Speaking of contempt, in a 1998 interview Nehamas struck another low blow against Nietzsche by deriding him as a "philosopher of adolescence.") In the last, schoolmarmish pages of this book, he continues to chide Nietzsche for his "cruelty, his attacks on many of our ideas and values, on our habits and sensibilities."

To whom is Nehamas referring when he pompously invokes this royal "our"? Did Nietzsche really hold all of his readers' ideas, values, habits, and sensibilities in contempt...or just those of certain readers like Nehamas and other sissified academic leftists of his ilk, whom he despised in his own day as careerists or worse?

Poor Prof. Nehamas. He apparently expects Nietzsche to have maintained a tone of measured politesse while single-handedly changing the course of moral philosophy and profoundly affecting the aesthetic milieu of the 20th century and beyond. I guess it wasn't easy for Nietzsche to remain sensitive to everyone's feelings when he was philosophizing with a hammer.

Nietzsche would no doubt be gratified that such whining--clear evidence of slave morality--comes from no less an eminence than the Edmund N. Carpenter II Class of 1943 Professor in the Humanities at Princeton. This in itself proves Nietzsche's prescience. He would point out that, for him, launching "attacks" on herd animals like Prof. Nehamas was both a cardinal pursuit and an exquisite pleasure. More than a century after his death, Nietzsche still has the power to upset the more weak-stomached of the scholarly horde.

Unless you're a Nietzsche-hater, avoid this unsympathetic, condescending tome!

Andy Arnold says

A different interpretation of Nietzsche and one not without its critics. But, I found it compelling and inspiring. Highly recommend this book to students of philosophy and readers of Nietzsche. Read twice, and I almost never read a book twice.

William West says

This has become one of the most respected and referenced interpretive works on Nietzsche and I can see why. It was first published in 1985, and Nehamas does a fine job of seeing past the competing extremes of Nietzsche interpretation to arrive at a mature, thoughtful portrayal that takes the best aspects from various modes of Nietzsche scholarship. Nehamas's Nietzsche is neither the "secular-humanist in disguise" that an existentialist like Walter Kaufman would present us with, nor is he the "executioner of the subject" that the post-structuralists claimed him to be. Rather, Nehamas argues, Nietzsche opened up the philosophical subject to relentless critique, but the role of the individual, evaluating consciousness is still paramount in his cosmos.

Nehamas locates the heart-beat of Nietzsche's thought in his perspectivism; the notion that interpretation could not be transcended. This, Nehamas acknowledges, begs the question of whether, for Nietzsche, there is anything to interpret, and therefore whether Nietzsche's thought constitutes a working philosophy at all. What is this world that we can only interpret, and does even asking that question mean that we are seeking to transcend interpretation?

According to Nehamas, the world is, for Nietzsche, the unmeasurable excess of all things acting upon all things. Every thing that happens to a person or thing shapes, absolutely and definitely, what that person or thing can become. This is not fatalistic determinism but its opposite. The subject is, after all, a thing in the world. The subject, therefore, acts upon the world and shapes it unalterably. The world is the invention of the self as much as the self is shaped by the world. But what is the self?

It, too, is the rationalized consumption of an excess. The body is the site of a violent ordering (acknowledgment and repression) of conflicting drives, simultaneous impulses, memories and hopes. The assertion of a self is the same as the assertion of any truth about any other object in the world. To say, "I am this way" is no more or less complex an operation of affirmation and negation as to say "that tree is this way" because someone looking at the same tree from a different perspective could see something very different in the tree. The assertion of Self X or Tree X are both wills to truth: the violent assertion (on ourselves) of one way of reading our countless drives and impressions. The will to truth (which is also the will to denial, to ignorance of the excluded) and the will to power are the same thing. The subject selects the impression and drive that is most beneficent for its particular mode of survival.

So how are we to answer, what is the thing that is interpreted? We can only answer by saying that it is the thing that is interpreted, and to give that answer any meaning we can only offer a history of the different ways it has been interpreted in different epochs. We can only offer a genealogy of how it came to be interpreted in the ways in which it is currently.

The mode of survival for the weak is, for Nietzsche, that of the herd. The herd interprets its fear of the world as a strength, and in a sense, it is a strength in so far as it is a mode of survival. For a unified horde of weaklings can gang up on and kill a mighty, solitary predator. But they must assure their absolute unity and crush not only specific dissent, but any instinct outside of that of the herd.

In one stage of history, what is good for the herd may, at a later stage, be bad for it. But as the herd can never allow for the possibility that anything could ever have been (or become) different than the way they say it is, they must offer a new interpretation, a new history, of how some things have "always been bad or always been good."

It would appear, then, that Nehamas views Nietzsche as a kind of godless Kant, asking of humanity no more from its thought than it must give to sustain itself. Indeed, this is what one of Nietzsche's most direct philosophical heirs, Michel Foucault, always imagined himself to be.

But it is also clear that Nietzsche has to be asking more than this from humanity, and Nehamas quickly acknowledges this. For not only is the role of subjective will, desire, and taste, which imply the possibility of dissenting from the herd, foundational for Nietzsche's thought, but Nietzsche also offers the concept of the Superman, that individual who not only makes others follow him, but who sees through the faulty concepts of good and evil while at the same time re-defining them for the herd; He who is both within and outside the historical moment. In other words, an authentic truth creator- He who has seen.... the Truth.

Nehamas thinks Nietzsche fulfills this role because through his writing he seduced a large segment of the world, the “philosophical public,” into re-writing the history of morality.

I am not so sure. I see in Nietzsche a figure so ground-breaking that his work was, in the most ultimate sense, bound to failure. I mean failure, of course, in the most glorious sense. For Nietzsche foresaw the death of the subject, the fact that we cannot fully liberate ourselves from our cultural assumptions even when we come to realize the “mortality” of those assumptions, their fully provisional nature, but could not fully let go of the ghost of a “transcendental philosophical subject” that could see beyond its own limitations. That would take, perhaps, another couple generations. Perhaps, we have not gotten there yet, even in the realm of philosophy. And never, I think, will we get there in the realm of life. Sorry, Fred.

Lawrence says

FALSE

????? ???? says

Matt says

Fascinating, leaves me with a lot to think about. What more can one ask from a book than that?

Michael says

In *Life as Literature*, Alexander Nehamas lays out a convincing, readable thesis for interpreting Nietzsche's philosophical project. Nehamas argues that for Nietzsche literature, both as creative and as an interpretive act, illuminates the major concepts that animate his work. By interpreting *Will to Power*, *Eternal Recurrence*, *Genealogy*, and *Perspectivalism* in turn, Nehamas presents a comprehensive overview of Nietzsche's philosophy.

Adam says

This is the best book I've ever read on Nietzsche. Nehamas' explication of Nietzsche's thinking is clear and thoughtful, and helps to make sense of one of the modern era's most important, but least systematic, thinkers -- a thinker who has been unfairly accused of all sorts of misanthropy and dangerous ideas. As someone interested in Rorty's neo-pragmatist approach, I found the discussion of Nietzsche's perspectivism particularly compelling. Nehamas' central argument that Nietzsche views the world as a text to be interpreted helps to situate him as the forerunner of current thinkers such as Rorty and especially Derrida, and goes a long way to explain the hyperbole and aggression in much of his writing. This book is also valuable for its thorough debunking of the notion that the eternal recurrence was ever intended as a cosmological hypothesis, and shows that, to the extent he even believes a concept like free will is serviceable, that determinism is essential to free will and personal identity. I recommend this book unhesitatingly to anyone interested in Nietzsche.

Will says

A wonderful introduction to Nietzsche and a rewarding read for those already in the know. Nehamas is one of those writers who can cram every sentence full without slowing you down. Highly recommended.
