



Part 6. Nietzsche against the Nazis

27. Five differences

Now we can ask the big pay-off question. After surveying National Socialist theory and practice and engaging with Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy, we can ask: How much do Nietzsche and the Nazis have in common? Or to put it another way: To what extent were the Nazis justified in seeing Nietzsche as a precursor of their movement?

We know that Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, and most of the major intellectuals of National Socialism were admirers of Nietzsche's philosophy. They read him avidly during their formative years, recommended him to their peers, and incorporated themes and sayings from Nietzsche into their own writings, speeches, and policies. To what extent were they accurate and justified in doing so?

In my judgment on this complicated question, a split decision is called for. In several very important respects, the Nazis were perfectly justified in seeing Nietzsche as a forerunner and as an intellectual ally. And in several important respects, Nietzsche would properly have been horrified at the misuse of his philosophy by the Nazis.

Let us start with the key differences between Nietzsche and the Nazis. Here I want to focus on five important points.

28. On the “blond beast” and racism

Take the phrase “the blond beast.”

In recoiling from what he saw as a flaccid nineteenth-century European culture, Nietzsche often called longingly for

“some pack of blond beasts of prey, a conqueror and master race which, organized for war and with the ability to organize, unhesitatingly lays its terrible claws upon a populace.”⁸⁷ And he spoke of “[t]he deep and icy mistrust the German still arouses today whenever he gets into a position of power is an echo of that inextinguishable horror with which Europe observed for centuries that raging of the Blond Germanic beast.” And again inspirationally about what one finds “at the bottom of all these noble races the beast of prey, the splendid blond beast, prowling about avidly in search of spoil and victory; this hidden core needs to erupt from time to time, the animal has to get out again and go back to the wilderness.”⁸⁸

What are we to make of these regular positive mentions of the “blond beast”? It is clear what the Nazis made of them—an endorsement by Nietzsche of the racial superiority of the German Aryan type.

But for those who have read the original Nietzsche, that interpretation clearly takes Nietzsche’s words out of context. In context, the “blond beast” that Nietzsche refers to is the lion, the great feline predator with the shaggy blond mane and the terrific roar. Nietzsche does believe that the Germans once, a long time ago, manifested the spirit of the lion—but they were not unique in that regard. The spirit and power of the lion have been manifested by peoples of many races.

To see this, let us put one of the quotations in full con-

⁸⁷ GM 2:17.

⁸⁸ GM 1:11.

text. The quotation begins this way: “at the bottom of all these noble races the beast of prey, the splendid blond beast, prowling about avidly in search of spoil and victory; this hidden core needs to erupt from time to time, the animal has to get out again and go back to the wilderness ...”

Now let us complete the sentence as Nietzsche wrote it: “the Roman, Arabian, Germanic, Japanese nobility, the Homeric heroes, the Scandinavian Vikings—they all shared this need.”⁸⁹

So Nietzsche clearly is using the lion analogically and comparing its predatory power to the predatory power that humans of many different racial types have manifested. Nietzsche here lists six different racial and ethnic groups, and the Germans are not special in that list. So while Nietzsche does endorse a strongly biological basis for cultures, he does not endorse racism of the sort that says any one race is biologically necessarily superior to any other.

This is a clear difference with the Nazis. The Nazis were racist and thought of the Germanic racial type as superior to all others the world over. Nietzsche disagreed.

This leads us directly to a second major point of difference.

29. On contemporary Germans: the world's hope or contemptible?

While the Nazis put the German-Aryan racial type first, Nietzsche is almost never complimentary about his fellow Germans. In Nietzsche's view, Germany has slipped into flabbiness and whininess. Germany once was something to be awed and feared, but Germany in the nineteenth century has become a nation of religious revivalism, socialism, and movements towards democracy and equality.

Whatever special endowments the Germans once possessed they have lost. Nietzsche makes this clear when speak-

⁸⁹ GM 1:11.

ing about the Germany of the nineteenth-century: “between the old Germanic tribes and us Germans there exists hardly a conceptual relationship, let alone one of blood.”⁹⁰ So rather than being proud of their ancient history and accomplishments, Nietzsche believes Germans of his day should feel ashamed by comparison.

At the same time, German intellectual and cultural life is prominent the world over—and Nietzsche deplors that fact. Contemporary Germany is a center of softness and slow decay, so Nietzsche believes that Germany’s weaknesses are infecting the rest of the world. As he puts it in *The Will to Power*, “Aryan influence has corrupted all the world.”⁹¹

So rather than celebrating contemporary Germany and its power, as the Nazis would do, Nietzsche is disgusted by contemporary Germany.

This leads us to a third major point of difference.

30. On anti-Semitism: valid or disgusting?

The most repulsive sign of Germany’s decline, Nietzsche writes—and this may be initially surprising—is its hatred of the Jews, its virulent and almost-irrational anti-Semitism.

Nietzsche, we know, has said some harsh things about the Jews—but again, that is a set of issues that is easily misinterpreted, so we must be careful.

In connection with all of the negative things Nietzsche has said about the Jews, we must also note the following.

Nietzsche speaks of “the anti-Jewish stupidity” of the Germans.⁹² He speaks of those psychologically disturbed indi-



⁹⁰ GM 1:11.

⁹¹ WP 142; 145.

⁹² BGE 251.

viduals who are most consumed with self-hatred and envy. He uses the French word *ressentiment* to describe such nauseating individuals and says that such *ressentiment* is “studied most easily in anarchists and anti-Semites.”⁹³

Pathological dishonesty is a symptom of such repulsive characters: “An antisemite certainly is not any more decent because he lies as a matter of principle.”⁹⁴

So, to summarize: Nietzsche saves some of his most condemnatory language for Germans who hate Jews—he considers them to be liars, stupid, disturbed, self-hating pathological cases for psychologists with strong stomachs to study.

So it seems a reasonable inference that Nietzsche would have been disgusted by the Nazis, for the Nazis absorbed into their ideology the worst possible kind of anti-Semitism and pursued their anti-Jew policies almost to the point of self-destruction.⁹⁵

31. On the Jews: admirable or despicable?

But how does this fit with the harsh things we know Nietzsche said about the Jews? This takes us to a fourth point of difference between Nietzsche and the Nazis.

For all of the negative things Nietzsche says about the Jews, he also respects them and gives them high praise.

Here is a representative quotation from *Beyond Good and Evil*: “The Jews, however, are beyond any doubt the strongest, toughest, and purest race now living in Europe.”⁹⁶

⁹³ GM 2:11.

⁹⁴ A 55.

⁹⁵ Connecting here to the fascinating “What-if” history question: What if the Nazis had put the Holocaust on hold and devoted the vast resources used there instead to military purposes where needed in WWII?

⁹⁶ BGE 251.

Here is another, from *The Antichrist*: “Psychologically considered, the Jewish people are a people endowed with the toughest vital energy, who, placed in impossible circumstances . . . divined a power in these instincts with which one could prevail against ‘the world.’”⁹⁷

He again praises the Jews for having the strength to rule Europe if they chose to: “That the Jews, if they wanted it—or if they were forced into it, which seems to be what the anti-Semites want—could even now have preponderance, indeed quite literally mastery over Europe, that is certain; that they are not working and planning for that is equally certain.”⁹⁸

And in another book, Nietzsche compares the Jews favorably to the Germans—in fact, he identifies a way in which the Jews are superior to the Germans: “Europe owes the Jews no small thanks for making its people more logical, for cleaner intellectual habits—none more so than the Germans, as a lamentably *deraisonné* race that even today first needs to be given a good mental drubbing.”⁹⁹

But how can all this praise of the Jews fit with the rest of what he says about the Jews?

One important distinction here is between blaming the Jews of several millennia ago for devising the slave morality and foisting it upon the world—and between evaluating the Jews of today as inheritors of a cultural tradition that has enabled them to survive and even flourish despite great adversity. In the former case, Nietzsche assigns blame to the Jews and condemns them for subverting human greatness—but in the second case he would at the very least have to grant, however grudgingly, that the Jews have hit upon a survival strategy and kept their cultural identity for well over two thousand years. How many other cultures can make that claim? The list is extremely short. And for that the Jews deserve praise.

⁹⁷ A 24.

⁹⁸ BGE 251.

⁹⁹ GS 348.

32. *On Judaism and Christianity: opposite or identical?*

One more key difference between Nietzsche and the Nazis is important, and that is their views on Christianity. Nietzsche consistently states that Judaism and Christianity are allies, both stemming from the same source, both advocating a religious ethic that puts the weak, the sick, and the humble first. As with Judaism, Christian morality is a slave morality.

Christianity, he writes, is “a rebellion of everything that crawls on the ground against that which has height.”¹⁰⁰

The Christians, he writes, “did not know how to love their god except by crucifying man.”¹⁰¹ And for that great crime against humanity, Nietzsche says: “I condemn Christianity. I raise against the Christian church the most terrible of all accusations that any accuser ever uttered. It is to me the highest of all conceivable corruptions.”¹⁰²

So Christianity does not escape Nietzsche’s wrath, just as the slave morality of the Jews did not escape his wrath—and for the same reason: Christianity is an extension and purification of moral themes first developed within Judaism. In Nietzsche’s own words: “In Christianity, all of Judaism . . . attains its ultimate mastery as the art of lying in a holy manner. The Christian, the *ultima ratio* of the lie, is the Jew once more—even three times more.”¹⁰³

This identification of Christianity with Judaism also separates Nietzsche from the Nazis, for the Nazis took great pains to distinguish the Jews and the Christians, condemning Judaism and embracing a generic type of Christianity.

Early in the Nazi Party’s history, in its founding document, the 1920 Program, point 24 states the following: “The party, as such, stands for positive Christianity, without, how-

¹⁰⁰ A 43.

¹⁰¹ Z 2: “On Priests.”

¹⁰² A 62.

¹⁰³ A 44.

ever, allying itself to any particular denomination. It combats the Jewish-materialistic spirit.”

The use of Christian themes and imagery was prominent in Nazi propaganda throughout the 1920s.

In Joseph Goebbels’s semi-autobiographical novel, the main character Michael is portrayed as a hybrid Christ-figure and German martyr. And in a 1935 interview, Goebbels was so concerned to separate Christianity from Judaism that he went as far as to deny that Jesus was a Jew.



Adolf Hitler argued that the Christians and Jews were fundamentally opposed religions¹⁰⁴ and himself sounded Christian moral themes explicitly in public pronouncements such as this one:

“When I came to Berlin a few weeks ago . . . the luxury, the perversion, the iniquity, the wanton display, and the Jewish materialism disgusted me so thoroughly, that I was almost beside myself. I nearly imagined myself to be Jesus Christ when He came to His Father’s temple and found it taken by the money-changers. I can well imagine how He felt when He seized a whip and scourged them out.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Hitler 1925, 307.

¹⁰⁵ Hitler, quoted in Langer, <http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/documents/ossec-section1.htm> (viewed July 25, 2006). Hitler also claimed: “By warding off the Jews, I struggle for the work of the Lord” (quoted in Lilla 1997, p. 38).

33. Summary of the five differences

We have five significant partings of the ways between Nietzsche and the Nazis:

1. The Nazis believe the German Aryan to be racially superior—while Nietzsche believes that the superior types can be manifested in any racial type.
2. The Nazis believe contemporary German culture to be the highest and the best hope for the world—while Nietzsche holds contemporary German culture to be degenerate and to be infecting the rest of the world.
3. The Nazis are enthusiastically anti-Semitic—while Nietzsche sees anti-Semitism to be a moral sickness.
4. The Nazis hate all things Jewish—while Nietzsche praises the Jews for their toughness, their intelligence, and their sheer survival ability.
5. And finally, the Nazis see Christianity to be radically different and much superior to Judaism—while Nietzsche believes Judaism and Christianity to be essentially the same, with Christianity being in fact a worse and more dangerous variation of Judaism.

Those five points identify important differences and lend support to those interpreters of Nietzsche who complain about simplistic identifications of Nietzsche as a proto-Nazi philosopher.¹⁰⁶

But there are equally important ways in which the Nazis were right on target in seeing Nietzsche as an intellectual ally.

¹⁰⁶ E.g., Walter Kaufmann 1954, p. 14.