



Part 7. Nietzsche as a Proto-Nazi

34. Anti-individualism and collectivism

We know that the National Socialists were thoroughly collectivistic and strongly anti-individualistic. For them the relevant groups were the Germanic Aryans—and all the others. Individuals were defined by their group identity, and individuals were seen only as vehicles through which the groups achieved their interests. The Nazis rejected the Western liberal idea that individuals are ends in themselves: to the Nazis individuals were merely servants of the groups to which they belong.

The anti-individualism of the Nazis was most blatant in their treatment of Jews. They did not see Jews as individuals with moral significance and rights—rather they saw members of a group they wished to destroy. This meant, as a matter of policy, that the Nazis were uncaring about the lives of individuals and were willing to kill as many individuals as was necessary to achieve their group's advantage.

Even within their own group, the Nazis did not see Aryan/Germans fundamentally as individuals. They saw them as members of the *Volk*, the German people, the group to which they owed service, obedience, and even their lives.

Nietzsche has a reputation for being an individualist. There certainly are individualist elements in Nietzsche's philosophy, but in my judgment his reputation for individualism is often much overstated.

When we speak of philosophies as being individualist or collectivist, three key points are at issue.

First, we ask: Do individuals shape their own identities—or are their identities created by forces beyond their control? For example, do individuals have the capacity to decide their own beliefs and form their own characters—or are individuals molded and shaped primarily by their biological inheritances or culturally by the groups they are born into and raised by?

Second, we ask: Are individuals ends in themselves, with their own lives and purposes to pursue—or do individuals exist for the sake of something beyond themselves to which they are expected to subordinate their interests?

Third, we ask: Do the decisive events in human life and history occur because individuals, generally exceptional individuals, make them happen—or are the decisive events of history a matter of collective action or larger forces at work?

Let us take the first issue—whether individuals shape themselves significantly or whether they are the product of forces beyond their control. Only in an attenuated way does Nietzsche believe that individuals shape their own characters and destiny—to a great extent he is determinist, believing that individuals are a product of their biological heritage. As he puts it in *Beyond Good and Evil*, “One cannot erase from the soul of a human being what his ancestors liked most to do and did most constantly.”¹⁰⁷ Any given individual’s thoughts, feelings, and actions, are an expression of an underlying set of traits that the individual inherited. Whether one is a sheep or a wolf is a matter of biology—one does not choose or shape oneself significantly—so to that extent it makes no sense to hold individuals responsible for who they are and what they become.¹⁰⁸

What about the second issue—does Nietzsche believe that individuals are ends in themselves, that they exist for their own sake? Emphatically not. Here I think many casual read-

¹⁰⁷ BGE 264.

¹⁰⁸ “There is only aristocracy of birth, only aristocracy of blood” (WP 942).

ings of Nietzsche get him dead wrong. Take an initial obvious point: Nietzsche has nothing but contempt for the vast majority of the population, believing them to be sheep and a disgrace to the dignity of the human species. Their individual lives have no value in themselves. This is Nietzsche's point in the following quotation, in which he denies explicitly that his philosophy is individualistic: "My philosophy aims at ordering of rank not at an individualistic morality."¹⁰⁹ Nietzsche believes that most individuals have no right to exist and—more brutally—he asserts that if they were sacrificed or slaughtered that would be an improvement. In Nietzsche's own words: "mankind in the mass sacrificed to the prosperity of a single stronger species of man—that would be an advance."¹¹⁰ And again: "One must learn from war: one must learn to sacrifice many and to take one's cause seriously enough not to spare men."¹¹¹ It is hard to see as an individualist anyone who sees no value in the lives of the vast majority of individuals. And it is hard to see as an individualist someone who would sacrifice those individuals in the name of improving the species. *Improving the species* is a collectivist goal, and measuring the value of individuals in terms of their value to the species and sacrificing those who do not measure up—that is textbook collectivism.

This connects directly to the value Nietzsche sees in the few great individuals who crop up in each generation. It is his powerfully poetic rhetoric in speaking of those exceptional individuals that gives Nietzsche his reputation for individualism. But it is important to note that Nietzsche does not see even those exceptional individuals as ends in themselves—and he does not exempt them from the sacrifice either. The point of becoming exceptional is not to advance one's own life but to improve the human species—in fact to get beyond the human species to a higher species-type: the overman. As Nietzsche

¹⁰⁹ *WP* 287. Morality is a social product: it arises "when a greater individual or a collective-individual, for example the society, the state, subjugates all other single ones ... and orders them into a unit" (*HH* 1.99).

¹¹⁰ *GM* II:12.

¹¹¹ *WP* 982.

says repeatedly, “Not ‘mankind’ but overman is the goal!”¹¹² Nietzsche’s goal is a collectivist one—to bring about a new, future, higher species of man—overman. This is the significance of his exhortations about the *Übermensch*, the overman, the superman.

So it seems that for Nietzsche *none of us*, whether weak or strong, exist for our own sakes. In direct contrast to individualists who believe that individuals’ lives are their own to find and create value within, Nietzsche’s belief is that our lives have value only to the extent we fulfill a goal beyond our lives—the creation of a stronger species. And on that general collectivist end, Nietzsche has an important point in common with the Nazis.

There is also the third sub-issue of individualism—whether the decisive events in human life and history occur because individuals, generally exceptional individuals, make them happen, or whether individuals are pawns of greater historical forces. Here the Nazis’ theory and practice were a combination of both. They believed in and utilized mass-movement politics, seeing their political movement as the vehicle through which a powerful cultural force—the German *Volk*—was asserting its historical destiny. At the same time, the Nazis held that those powerful historical forces singled out some special individuals to perform special tasks and that destiny spoke through those special individuals. This, at any rate, was Hitler’s firm belief when he made statements such as the following: “I carry out the commands that Providence has laid upon me”; and “No power on earth can shake the German Reich now, Divine Providence has willed it that I carry through the fulfillment of the Germanic task.”¹¹³

In invoking Divine Providence, Hitler is drawing upon a long philosophical tradition that goes back most famously to the German philosopher Georg Hegel, with his World-Historical Individuals—those individuals such as Julius Caesar

¹¹² *WP* 1001.

¹¹³ Hitler, quoted in Langer, <http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/documents/osssection1.htm>.

and Napoleon Bonaparte, who, on Hegel's view, were vehicles through which the Spiritual forces of history operated. That tradition goes back even further in religious interpretations of history.

Think, for example, of religious prophets. Prophets are special individuals within a religious tradition. The prophet, though, is not special *as an individual*—he is not an individual who has acquired his powers through his own efforts and who has created his own new and unique vision. Rather the prophet is special *only* because God has chosen him and because God is speaking through him. The prophet is totally a tool of God—his power comes from God and he is a mouthpiece through which God speaks his message. He is a localized vehicle through which the real force—namely, God—works.



Now let us return to Nietzsche. Nietzsche is an atheist, yet he offers a secular version of the same theory.

Nietzsche's power force is not religious or spiritual force, but a biological one. His great men—prophets like the Zarathustras who may be among us and those who are to come—are special individuals in whom powerful evolutionary forces have converged to create something remarkable. And those powerful evolutionary forces are working through those Zarathustras to achieve something even more remarkable—the overman. Such exceptional individuals do not develop and use power; power develops and uses those individuals. Individuals are only the tools, the vehicles. This is what Nietzsche is getting at when he says that every “living creature values many

things higher than life itself; yet out of this evaluation itself speaks—the will to power.”¹¹⁴

Note what Nietzsche is saying the real causal power is: The *will to power* works *through* those individuals; it is *not* that those individuals develop and use power.

There is legitimate controversy among scholars over this interpretation of Nietzsche, but to the extent this interpretation is true it does undermine Nietzsche’s reputation as an individualist and strengthens the claim the Nazis have on him as a philosophical forerunner.

35. Conflict of groups

A second major point of agreement between Nietzsche and the Nazis is their view of conflict. For both, conflict is the fundamental human reality. Both believe firmly that life is a matter of some individuals and groups gaining at the expense of others.

The Nazis were clear about this in theory and practice. They did not believe it possible for Aryans and Jews to live in harmony. Nor did the Nazis believe that Germany could live in harmony with the liberal capitalist nations of the West.

In the liberal capitalist nations, by contrast, many economists and politicians had come to believe that conflict and war may become a thing of the past. The productive power of the Industrial Revolution was creating great wealth and surpluses, and those surpluses were leading to increased trade between nations that was mutually beneficial. Trade was a powerful harmonizing force, leading nations to want to do business with each other rather than make war.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Z 2:12.

¹¹⁵ For example, the great British politician Richard Cobden argued that commerce is “the grand panacea, which, like a beneficent medical discovery, will serve to inoculate with the healthy and saving taste for civilization all the nations of the world” (Cobden 1903, p. 36). Consider also Norman Angell, speaking to the Institute of Bankers in London on January 17, 1912,

The Nazis rejected that view and argued that recent economic history was a matter of the Jews and the capitalists advancing their interests at the expense of Germany's.

Nietzsche shares wholly with the Nazis the general point about zero-sum conflict. In his words, “The well-being of the majority and the well-being of the few are opposite viewpoints of value.”¹¹⁶ But even more strongly, he believes that this conflict is not merely a matter of historical and cultural accident but is built into the requirements of life:

“Here one must think profoundly to the very basis and resist all sentimental weakness: life itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of peculiar forms, incorporation and at the least, putting it mildest, exploitation.”¹¹⁷

The horse eats the grass; the lion kills the horse; the man rides the horse and kills the lion. Life is an ongoing struggle between strong and weak, predator and prey. Cooperation and trade are possible, but they are superficial interludes between more fundamental animal facts about life. As Nietzsche again puts it: “‘Life always lives at the expense of other life’—he who does not grasp this has not taken even the first

on “The Influence of Banking on International Relations”: “commercial interdependence, which is the special mark of banking as it is the mark of no other profession or trade in quite the same degree -- the fact that the interest and solvency of one is bound up with the interest and solvency of many; that there must be confidence in the due fulfillment of mutual obligation, or whole sections of the edifice crumble, is surely doing a great deal to demonstrate that morality after all is not founded upon self-sacrifice, but upon enlightened self-interest, a clearer and more complete understanding of all the ties that bind us the one to the other. And such clearer understanding is bound to improve, not merely the relationship of one group to another, but the relationship of all men to all other men, to create a consciousness which must make for more efficient human co-operation, a better human society” (quoted in Keegan 1999, pp. 11-12).

¹¹⁶ *GM*, end of First Essay note.

¹¹⁷ *BGE* 259.

step toward honesty with himself.”¹¹⁸

On this key point, Nietzsche and the Nazis agree.

Given that conflict is inescapable, the next question is: How will the conflicts be resolved?

36. Instinct, passion, and anti-reason

Hitler was fond of saying, in private, “What luck that men do not think.”

Another significant point of agreement exists between Nietzsche and the Nazis: both agree that the great conflicts will not be solved rationally, through the processes of discussion, argument, persuasion, or diplomacy. Both Nietzsche and the Nazis are irrationalists in their view of human psychology—and this has important social and political implications.

Think about democracy for a moment. In particular, think about how much confidence in the power of reason that democracy requires. Democracy is a matter of decentralizing political power to individuals by, for example, giving each individual a vote. The assumption of democracy is that individuals have the ability to weigh and judge important matters and cast a responsible vote. The expectation is that members of democracies will have ongoing discussions and arguments about all sorts of issues, and that they will be able to assess the evidence, the arguments and counter-arguments. And they will be able to learn from their mistakes and, when appropriate, change their votes the next time around.

It is not an accident that neither Nietzsche nor the Nazis were advocates of either democracy or reason.

Hitler considered a highly-developed intellect to be a weakness and too much reliance on reason to be a sickness. Germany’s recent problems, he believed, stemmed from too much thinking. “The intellect has grown autocratic, and has become a disease of life.” What Germany required was *passion*,

¹¹⁸ WP 369.

a storm of emotion arising from deeply rooted instincts and drives: “Only a storm of glowing passion can turn the destinies of nations, but this passion can only be roused by a man who carries it within himself.”¹¹⁹ Consequently, German training and propaganda were not directed toward presenting facts and arguments but rather to arousing the passions of the masses. Reason, logic, and objectivity were beside the point. “We are not objective, we are German,” said Hans Schemm, the first Nazi Minister of Culture.¹²⁰

Here again there is an important connection to Nietzsche. Nietzsche too sees an opposition between conscious reason and unconscious instinct, and he disparages those who stress rationality—those who engage in what he calls the “ridiculous overestimation and misunderstanding of consciousness.”¹²¹ In his own words, it is “‘Rationality’ against instinct,”¹²² and he believes that rationality is the *least* useful guiding power humans possess. Humans came out of a long evolutionary line that relied on drives and instincts—and those drives and instincts served us well for millennia. Yet men eventually became settled, tamed, and civilized, and they lost something crucial:

“[I]n this new world they no longer possessed their former guides, their regulating, unconscious and infallible drives: they were reduced to thinking, inferring, reckoning, co-ordinating cause and effect, these unfortunate creatures; they were reduced to their ‘consciousness,’ their weakest and most fallible organ!”¹²³

Note that Nietzsche says our unconscious drives are *infallible*, if only we can find them within ourselves again. It

¹¹⁹ Hitler, quoted in Langer, <http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/documents/osssection1.htm>.

¹²⁰ Schemm, quoted in Mosse 1966 xxxi.

¹²¹ GS 11.

¹²² EH: “The Birth of Tragedy” 1.

¹²³ GM II:16.

is our strongest, most assertive unconscious instinct that we should let rule our lives: “‘instinct’ is of all the kinds of intelligence that have been discovered so far—the most intelligent.”¹²⁴

And on this score, Nietzsche and the Nazis are in agreement: Both are fundamentally irrationalists—they do not think much of the power of reason, and they urge themselves and others to let their strongest passions and instincts well up within them and be released upon the world.

37. *Conquest and war*

Now put the above three points together: collectivism, conflict, and irrationalism. What will the social results be?

If you believe wholeheartedly and passionately that your identity is found by merging yourself with your group—and that your group is locked in a mortal, zero-sum conflict with other groups—and that reason is superficial and that passion and instinct drive the world—then how will you assert yourself in that conflict?



“Smash the Enemies of Greater Germany!”

For much of the nineteenth century, Western liberal capitalists had begun to wonder, hopefully, whether war was a thing of the past. In their judgment, progress had been made: During the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, much of the West had embraced the idea of individual rights—the idea that each individual has rights to life, liberty, property, the pursuit of happiness. In the nineteenth century, those rights had been extended in practice to women and slavery had been eliminated. Also in the nineteenth century came the full real-

¹²⁴ BGE 218.

ization of the power of the Industrial Revolution and the idea that through technology and capitalism, economic production could be increased dramatically.

As a result, the liberal capitalists of the nineteenth century came to believe that we could solve the problem of poverty and eliminate most of our conflicts over wealth. They believed that with rising wealth and education, rational people could learn to respect each others' rights, that there was more to be gained from trade than from war, and that peace was a natural state that mankind could achieve. The horrors of war could become a thing of the past.¹²⁵

We know from tragic twentieth-century history the National Socialists' eagerness to use war as their primary tool for achieving their international goals. We know their praising as fundamental the martial spirit and the beauty of the warrior soul. We know of their total recasting of education of children to achieve, as Hitler wanted "a brutal, domineering, fearless, cruel youth. Youth must be all that. It must bear pain. There must be nothing weak and gentle about it. The free, splendid beast of prey must once again flash from its eyes."¹²⁶

¹²⁵Richard Cobden in 1835: "The middle and industrious classes of England can have no interest apart from the preservation of peace. The honours, the fame, the emoluments of war belong not to them; the battle-plain is the harvest-field of the aristocracy, watered with the blood of the people." Also John Stuart Mill: "It is commerce which is rapidly rendering war obsolete, by strengthening and multiplying the personal interests which are in natural opposition to it" (1909). Again Mill: "Finally, commerce first taught nations to see with good will the wealth and prosperity of one another. Before, the patriot, unless sufficiently advanced in culture to feel the world his country, wished all countries weak, poor, and ill-governed, but his own: he now sees in their wealth and progress a direct source of wealth and progress to his own country. It is commerce which is rapidly rendering war obsolete, by strengthening and multiplying the personal interests which are in natural opposition to it. And it may be said without exaggeration that the great extent and rapid increase of international trade, in being the principal guarantee of the peace of the world, is the great permanent security for the uninterrupted progress of the ideas, the institutions, and the character of the human race" (1909, Book III, Chapter XVII, Section 14).

¹²⁶Hitler, 1933.

The “beast of prey” phrase is again rhetoric inspired directly by Nietzsche. On the importance and nobility of war, Nietzsche and the Nazis were in almost full agreement. Nietzsche praised war and urged its coming. He wished for a great purge that would wipe out most humans whose lives he thought worthless and an embarrassment to the human species. “All-too-many live, and all-too-long they hang on their branches. Would that a storm came to shake all this worm-eaten rot from the tree!”¹²⁷

But he also longed for war as a means to inspire those humans who have potential to advance us toward the overman. To that end, Nietzsche believed that war is absolutely indispensable:

*“War essential. It is vain rhapsodizing and sentimentality to continue to expect much (even more, to expect a very great deal) from mankind, once it has learned not to wage war. For the time being, we know of no other means to imbue exhausted peoples, as strongly and surely as every great war does, with that raw energy of the battleground, that deep impersonal hatred, that murderous coldbloodedness with a good conscience, that communal, organized ardor in destroying the enemy, that proud indifference to great losses, to one’s own existence and to that of one’s friends, that muted, earthquake-like convulsion of the soul.”*¹²⁸

And against those who believe that we have entered a more peaceful era and that perhaps war is no longer necessary, Nietzsche reminds us, in an especially chilling quotation: “The beginnings of everything great on earth [are] soaked in blood thoroughly and for a long time.”¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Z, First Part, “On Free Death”

¹²⁸ HAH 477.

¹²⁹ GM II, 6.

On this score, the Nazis were thoroughly Nietzschean. Rather than pushing for a recognition of the mutuality of human interests, as Western liberal capitalists had been doing for much of the nineteenth century—and rather than seeking reasonable and peaceful diplomatic solutions to the normal collisions of international politics—the Nazis committed fundamentally to war as their primary means of self-regeneration and dominance over the rest of the world.

38. Authoritarianism

A fifth and final set of themes link Nietzsche with the Nazis. Both were anti-democratic, anti-capitalistic, and anti-liberal.

The Nazis were not friends of democracy, but they were extremely effective players of democracy. They announced from the beginning, in their 1920 founding Party Program, their authoritarian principles. Nonetheless, finding themselves in the democratic system that was the Weimar republic, they played mostly by the rules and out-democracied the other political parties. They used democracy to achieve anti-democratic ends.

Nietzsche's political views are less developed and more ambiguous, but it is clear he favors some sort of aristocracy. "What is serious for me," Nietzsche wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil*, is "the 'European problem' as I understand it, the cultivation of a new caste that will rule Europe."¹³⁰ Again, while Nietzsche is unspecific, he does not necessarily mean an official political aristocracy—he more likely means the *de facto* rule by an exceptional few, whatever the formal and official political



"Be true to the Führer"

¹³⁰ BGE 251.

structures are. In this way, even though Nietzsche despises the impulses that give rise to democracy, he does not worry much about the actual political dominance of democratic forms of government. Those forms of government, he believes, will simply become instruments through which the exceptional individuals, most likely from behind the scenes, will achieve their goals. As Nietzsche puts it, democracy will be a tool of “a master race, the future ‘masters of the earth’ ... philosophical men of power and artist-tyrants” who will “employ democratic Europe as their most pliant and supple instrument for getting hold of the destinies of the earth.”¹³¹

Nietzsche is not programmatic about what form the new aristocratic class will take or what specific goals it will pursue. He believes that will be up to the overmen themselves—they will create their own values and shape the vehicles of their realization. And Nietzsche did not think of himself as an overman—merely as a herald of their coming. But Nietzsche is extremely clear that any social method, however brutal, will be legitimate should the new aristocrats desire it. A healthy aristocracy, he puts it forcefully, “accepts with a good conscience the sacrifice of untold human beings, who, for its sake, must be reduced and lowered to incomplete human beings, to slaves, to instruments.”¹³²

That is certainly anti-liberal and fits well with Nietzsche’s self-assessment that he is “not by any means ‘liberal’.”¹³³

In addition to dismissing liberalism, Nietzsche dismisses capitalism as a dehumanizing economic system¹³⁴ and rejects individualism when it comes to matters of marriage and procreation. Marriage, he thought, should not be based on “idio-

¹³¹ Note for *BGE*, quoted in Hunt 1991, p. 39.

¹³² *BGE* 258.

¹³³ *GS* 377.

¹³⁴ *D* 2 6.

syncrasy”—that is, upon love and personal sexual attraction.¹³⁵ Rather, he suggested, marriage should be state-organized for breeding purposes.¹³⁶

On all those points, the Nazis can and did find inspiration in Nietzsche.

39. Summary of the five similarities

Again to summarize: we have five significant connections between Nietzsche and the Nazis:

1. The Nazis were strongly collectivistic, and Nietzsche, with some qualifications, also advances strongly collectivistic and anti-individualistic themes.
2. Both Nietzsche and the Nazis see zero-sum conflict as inescapable and as fundamental to the human condition.
3. Both are irrationalists in their psychological theories, downplaying radically the role that reason plays in life and emphasizing the power and the glory of instincts and feelings.
4. Both Nietzsche and the Nazis accept willingly—even longingly—that war is necessary, healthy, and even majestic.
5. And finally, both Nietzsche and the Nazis are anti-democratic, anti-capitalistic, and anti-liberal—and so, come the 1930s, the Nazis were in fundamental opposition to those nations to the West that were still broadly committed to democracy, capitalism, and liberalism.

¹³⁵ *TI* 9:39.

¹³⁶ *BGE* 251.