



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,