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978-1-107-12026-6 - Nietzsche's Culture of Humanity: Beyond Aristocracy and Democracy in the Early Period

Jeffrey Church

Excerpt

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## Introduction

In a recent interview about his 2012 book *La civilización del espectáculo*, the Nobel Laureate Mario Vargas Llosa despaired over the transformation the concept of “culture” underwent during his lifetime.<sup>1</sup> For Llosa, culture once expressed what was common and “fundamental for humanity”; it unified society and repudiated sectarian strife and inhuman oppression. Culture once distinguished the “mundane and the execrable” from the “excellent,” providing a standard of and motivation for the best in human life. However, Llosa observes, culture gradually lost its focus on the right, the good, and the beautiful, replaced by spectacle, “entertainment and distraction.” This new culture leaves individuals mired in materialism and confused about a spiritual life, their sensibility hardened, untutored by great poetry and art, the conflicts among groups prone to violence without a common culture to humanize adversaries. In his eloquent defense of “high culture” over “mass” or “low culture,” Llosa revisits arguments developed by a long tradition of cultural critics including Matthew Arnold (1993), T. S. Eliot (1948), Ortega y Gasset (1985), Roger Scruton (2007), and many others.

Despite the eloquence of these critics, they have found little success. One of the main obstacles to culture is that many critics understand it to be opposed to the central values of liberal democracy, equality and liberty. For instance, some critics see “high culture” as an elitist project disdainful of the equality of humanity, or even more cynically an ideology to preserve the power of an elite, white, male clique. “High culture,” on this view, is an essentially conservative program, whose “canon” of “Great Books” excludes rival voices to the establishment, voices who have suffered in the name of creating and promoting this

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Lipovetsky and Mario Vargas Llosa, “Proust Is Important for Everyone,” Eurozine, [www.eurozine.com/articles/2012-11-16-vargasllosa-en.html](http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2012-11-16-vargasllosa-en.html), accessed 12/29/12.

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organization of power.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, liberal critics regard “high culture” as a threat to liberty. Culture is a form of paternalism, since it tells individuals how we ought to live our lives. It tells us that our lives will be enriched and our social and political relations improved by embracing a high culture that we have no interest in.

The central problem with high culture, then, is that its defenders have not been able to reconcile it with the modern goods of freedom and equality. This book aims to overcome this problem. It does so by arguing that, properly understood, culture is not an enemy but a friend of liberal democracy; that is, it is not only compatible with but also productive of equality and liberty. Culture does not consist in a static identity, but a dynamic community encompassing the local, national, and global. I make this case by returning to the origin of the concept of culture in eighteenth-century German thought and its full development in the early work of Friedrich Nietzsche (1868–1876).

Influenced by the “founders” of the concept, Immanuel Kant and J. G. Herder, Nietzsche criticized modern civilization as materialistic and dehumanizing. In response, Nietzsche devised a new form of community distinct from politics – culture – whose aim is to restore humanity by fostering and honoring human excellence. In its function to perfect what is distinctive of humanity, culture resembles the ideal community envisioned by ancient political philosophers. Against the ancients, however, Nietzsche argued that nature does not supply human beings with a single end or *telos* toward which nature guides us. Rather, because human beings possess two contradictory ends – perfection and wholeness – nature drives us toward frustration and anxiety. Fortunately, however, all is not lost: According to Nietzsche, this discontent gives rise to human freedom and the longing to create a community – culture – dedicated to the fulfillment of humanity. Culture supplements nature and redeems our contradictory natural existence.

For Nietzsche, then, human excellence consists not in the perfection of our natures, but in the realization of our freedom. “Geniuses” or “exemplary individuals” lead the best human life, since they represent a free or self-determined life. The lives and works of these individuals, who include Socrates, Goethe, and Schopenhauer, serve as exemplary models for others, models who form together the very substance of culture. Culture’s aim, then, is to transmit the lives and works of these individuals and to foster ever new models of human excellence.

As such, I argue in this book, Nietzsche’s “culture of humanity” provides us with a novel justification for culture. On his account, culture promotes human excellence not at the expense of equality and liberty, but rather as their highest realization. Human excellence is not determined by unequal natural

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Williams (1983, 242–3) on Eliot; Bourdieu (1984) on aesthetic taste and class distinctions.

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endowments or talents. Rather, every human being is “a unique miracle” (UM.3.1), equally capable of excellence, since excellence is a matter of freedom and effort. Unfortunately, many human beings fail to live up to the call to be free, but by maintaining and transmitting culture, all individuals can share in the freedom achieved by the exemplars of humanity.

## THE “MERITOCRATIC” NIETZSCHE

The early Nietzsche may seem a strange source for a defense of this “culture of humanity” for two reasons. First, Nietzsche’s early work is often regarded as unsophisticated juvenilia, written when Nietzsche was under the spell of the Romantic metaphysics of Wagner and Schopenhauer. This work is, according to many scholars, decisively repudiated by Nietzsche himself as he enters his middle period phase with *Human, All Too Human*.<sup>3</sup> As a result, Nietzsche’s early period work is discussed selectively at best, but most frequently ignored.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, there has not been a single book on the early period in nearly twenty years, a telling fact given the many books published on Nietzsche each year.<sup>5</sup>

This book argues that we ought to reconsider our assumptions about Nietzsche’s early period. In this period, Nietzsche develops a much more sophisticated philosophical view of culture and of politics than most scholars give him credit for.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Nietzsche offers his lengthiest reflections on the notion of culture – which animates Nietzsche’s lifelong philosophical concerns – in his early period work. In addition, I argue in Chapter 9, Nietzsche revises his fundamental views much less than most scholars assume.<sup>7</sup> The basic structure

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Clark (1990): “Far from a precocious statement of Nietzsche’s lifelong views, [‘Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense’] belongs . . . to Nietzsche’s juvenilia” (65) and Parkes (1994): Nietzsche’s “juvenilia are like the charcoal marks a painter initially sketches on the canvas. The major figures are there from the beginning . . . even though they remain vague and lack definition” (23). See also Taylor (1997), p. 102, for several other examples.

<sup>4</sup> See Large’s (2012) judgment that the *Untimely Meditations* are among “Nietzsche’s most neglected works” (86).

<sup>5</sup> See Taylor (1997), Yack (1986), and Heilke (1998) for excellent treatments of Nietzsche’s early period. Taylor’s book provides an excellent overview of Nietzsche’s early views of the state, culture, and education. Heilke’s book also offers a good account of Nietzsche’s early period notions of culture and education, but he reads the early Nietzsche in Schopenhauerian metaphysical terms. In its philosophical substance, my book is indebted most to Yack’s analysis. In his chapter on Nietzsche’s early period, Yack demonstrates Nietzsche’s fundamental philosophical debt to the Kantian philosophical tradition. Following in this tradition, Nietzsche argued that modern life is dehumanizing us and we require a new form of community that would elevate us out of an animalistic state and restore our humanity. Yack’s analysis of the early period Nietzsche, however, covers only thirty pages of text.

<sup>6</sup> See Breazeale (1998, 3), who argues that the early work, and in particular the UM, “undeniably are . . . transitional works.” Breazeale also characterizes them in biographical or psychological terms as Nietzsche’s “declaration of independence” from his scholarly career (5).

<sup>7</sup> This point has been made frequently in the literature. Allen Megill: “Important aspects of his ‘mature’ position are already in place in the early writings. And the historical roots of that

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and motivations of Nietzsche's practical philosophy remain the same throughout his life. Finally, Nietzsche's early work offers much clearer statements of his views than his later works, which are shot through with ambiguity.<sup>8</sup> Examining the early work, then, can afford us clearer and more decisive evidence for resolving contemporary scholarly debates about Nietzsche.

The second reason Nietzsche may seem an odd choice is that the view of culture I am defending does not square well with the prevailing scholarly interpretations of Nietzsche. Scholars have been long divided about whether to conceive of Nietzsche as a "radical aristocrat" or an "agonistic democrat." According to the "radical aristocrat" interpretation, Nietzsche conceives of the best community as one in which the many sacrifice themselves for the few in accordance with a natural order of rank.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, for the "agonistic democrat," Nietzsche calls for the ongoing contestation of all received forms of order and a struggle over the community's identity and aims.<sup>10</sup>

This book challenges these readings and develops a new interpretation "beyond aristocracy and democracy." Nietzsche adheres to what I call a "meritocratic" concept of culture. Like the "aristocratic" Nietzsche, the "meritocratic" Nietzsche envisions the good community as founded to foster excellence. Unlike the "aristocratic" view, however, the "meritocratic" view judges excellence not in terms of natural inequalities but rather in terms of human effort possible for all human beings. Like the "democratic" Nietzsche, my view recognizes Nietzsche's fundamental commitment to human equality and freedom. However, the "meritocratic" Nietzsche is less egalitarian than the "democratic" view in terms of outcomes. Not everyone can become a "genius," Nietzsche recognizes, yet we can all share in the freedom of the genius by becoming "cultured."

Whereas the "aristocratic" and "democratic" readings fuse culture and politics, I argue by contrast that Nietzsche separates them. For Nietzsche, the distinction between culture and politics is crucial in order to ensure the

position are much more clearly visible in the early than in the later writings" (quoted in Yack (1986), 313–14). See also Tracy Strong (2000): "Already at the beginning of Nietzsche's career are the elements that continue to occupy his endeavors" (236). Yack (1986): "there is a greater continuity between Nietzsche's concerns at the beginning and end of his career than is usually recognized and because Nietzsche is more willing to acknowledge his intellectual debts in his first essays" (314). See Heilke (1998) on the continuities between early and late Nietzsche on "political pedagogy" (8). Gemes and Sykes (2014) hence conclude that "it is no longer controversial to argue ... that the early [work] ... is thematically continuous with the later" (80). See, finally, Nietzsche himself, who presented Lou Salome with a copy of UM.3 in 1882, writing, "this book contains my deepest sentiments" (quoted in Breazeale (1998, 4).

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Breazeale (1998) on Nietzsche's early view of the self, which, he claims, possesses "a clarity that the [later period texts] sometimes lack" (13). Bernard Williams (1994) has influentially described the ambiguity of Nietzsche's later period work: Nietzsche's texts are "booby-trapped, not only against recovering theory from it, but, in many cases, against any systematic exegesis that assimilates it to theory" (238).

<sup>9</sup> See especially Detwiler (1990), Appel (1999), and Ansell-Pearson (1994).

<sup>10</sup> See especially Owen (2002) and Hatab (1995).

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meritocratic character of culture. For individuals to merit their excellence, they must freely achieve it through a fair competition for human excellence, rather than “rigging” the contest through political force. Hence, I argue, Nietzsche conceives of the function of the political community in much more mundane terms than the democratic or aristocratic readers do. Politics is not the sphere of aristocratic enslavement or “breeding” experiments, nor is it the sphere of democratic contests over identity. Rather, the modern state’s proper function is to support a stable rule of law and ensure basic material necessities for citizens, all for the purpose of providing the material preconditions for the autonomy of culture. In sum, this new Nietzsche is neither aristocrat nor democrat, but a classical liberal thinker who seeks to lodge high culture prominently in public esteem.

One of the main reasons for the persistence of the aristocratic-democratic debate is that scholars have not situated Nietzsche in the right philosophical context. Nietzsche’s views can be illuminated by situating them alongside German thinkers such as Kant, Herder, and Schiller. By revealing Nietzsche’s debt to these thinkers, this book contributes to growing scholarship on Nietzsche’s debt to the classical German philosophical tradition. Much of the work done thus far has concerned the influence of Kant, Schiller, and Hegel on Nietzsche’s nonpolitical concerns, from his epistemology to aesthetics.<sup>11</sup> I argue that the early Nietzsche was influenced by the fundamental practical concerns about modern civilization and culture raised by Kant and Herder and sought to synthesize their competing views. In this book, then, I hope to add to our understanding of the development of the notion of culture and of nineteenth-century philosophy in general.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

Culture, for Nietzsche, is a partnership in pursuit of the good life. In this first part of the book – comprising Chapters 1–3 – I examine the basis and substance of Nietzsche’s view of the good life. I argue that the good for Nietzsche is a self-determined or autonomous life, which finds its highest expression in the “genius” or “exemplary individual.”

Chapter 1 examines the two main influences on Nietzsche’s view of culture, Kant and Herder. These philosophers were motivated by the dehumanization caused by modern civilization and sought to create a new form of community that would restore our humanity. This restoration of humanity would not involve a return to premodern values, but on the contrary would deepen the modern value of freedom. Nevertheless, Kant and Herder disagreed about the character of culture. Whereas Kant upheld a cosmopolitan culture of

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Doyle (2009) and Hill (2003) on Kant and Nietzsche, Martin (1996) on Schiller and Nietzsche, and Williams (2012) and Dudley (2004) on Hegel and Nietzsche.

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autonomous individuals, Herder defended a nationalist culture of self-determining communities. This disagreement about culture continued into the nineteenth century and framed, I argue, Nietzsche's early period thought.

In Chapter 2, I begin with Nietzsche's motivation for culture, namely, the nihilism resulting from modern civilization. I argue that Nietzsche does not understand nihilism in Schopenhauerian metaphysical terms (as is commonly argued), but rather in Kantian terms, resulting from our contradictory human nature. For Nietzsche, human beings are torn between two contradictory purposes – harmony and perfection. Nature does not guide us toward a single end, but rather drives us apart in two contradictory directions, which grounds Nietzsche's judgment that natural human existence is not worth living. In the second half of the chapter, I argue that for Nietzsche this contradiction is temporarily overcome through communal "horizons" and "myths" that animate human beings toward a particular view of the good life and provide them with wholeness through communal belonging. However, I conclude that Nietzsche does not call for a restoration of "myth" and willful ignorance as many scholars argue, but rather he enjoins us to overcome myth and forge a new modern community – culture – on the basis of human freedom.

The core of my reconstruction of Nietzsche's ethical argument appears in Chapter 3. In this chapter, I build on recent scholarship that connects Nietzsche to the Kantian autonomy tradition. I argue that Nietzsche defends a social conception of autonomy; that is, freedom is not a metaphysical capacity for "choice" given to individuals. Rather, our identities and behavior are shaped by our histories and by the communities to which we belong. As such, freedom is an achievement of those communities that foster individuals to give direction to their own lives. These individuals achieve autonomy by transcending their time and by synthesizing a novel human "type," the "law" that they give to themselves. For Nietzsche, this freedom is rarely achieved, because it requires the development of a self-sufficient character, an "exemplary individual" whose entire life is devoted to the perfection of a self-given "type." Though these individuals are shaped by the historical community from which they arose, they transcend their community or age and are expressions of humanity as a whole.

Whereas Part I articulates the end of culture, freedom, Part II discusses the character of this community. In this part, I challenge existing scholarship by showing that the early Nietzsche has not one but two concepts of culture, a nationalist and a cosmopolitan concept. By developing these two concepts of culture, he can harbor democratic and aristocratic sympathies at the same time.

Culture aims to foster the good life, the life of the exemplary individual. In Chapter 4, I examine more closely the identity of these individuals, the substance around which culture turns. The first part of the chapter explains why for Nietzsche only philosophers, artists, and saints can be exemplary individuals. In my view, only these callings can be free in Nietzsche's robust sense. The second part of the chapter discusses the character and significance of

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the early Nietzsche's six main exemplary individuals: Socrates, Schopenhauer, Goethe, Wagner, Rousseau, and Bismarck. I argue that these six represent three occupations – philosopher, artist, and statesman – and fall into two different types – an Apollinian and Dionysian.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I challenge directly the democratic and aristocratic readings of Nietzsche's ideal of culture. The crux of the disagreement between the democratic and aristocratic readings concerns Nietzsche's view of the relationship between the few and the many. Is it an agonistic yet egalitarian relationship, as the democrats claim, or an exploitative relationship, as the aristocrats claim? In my view, neither is true, though each is partially right. The reason for the disagreement is that Nietzsche himself develops two concepts of culture in which he displays two quite different accounts of the relationship between the few and the many. On the one hand, for Nietzsche, culture can consist in a common effort undertaken by the few and the many to foster the good life. On the other hand, culture can involve the conflict between a mob and the exemplary few. The first concept of culture – examined in Chapter 5 – reveals Nietzsche at his most democratic and Herderian, in that he thinks that a people, a cultural “nation,” can give expression to its own genius.

In Chapter 6, however, I argue that that Nietzsche has a second, more elitist concept of culture that exists alongside the first. This concept of culture is not aristocratic, however, in being based on natural differences among human beings, nor is it exploitative as scholars claim. Rather, this elitist culture seeks to combat the several practices of modern civilization – the state, mass society, and the market – that corrupt a “people” into a “mob” and pit them against culture. For Nietzsche, only a cosmopolitan “republic of geniuses” can successfully shame the many for indulging in their temptations and motivate them to lead a distinctively human life. Though Nietzsche's two concepts of culture are in apparent tension with one another, what unifies them is the notion of merit. Both cultures are dedicated to human excellence, one in the form of a people's “genius” and the other in humanity's exemplars. This “meritocracy” thereby transcends aristocracy and democracy. In order to merit human excellence, the few cannot exploit the many – as the aristocratic reading holds – nor can we efface the distinction among ranks of human beings – as the democratic reading implies.

In the third part of the book, I complete the reconstruction of Nietzsche's ideal of culture by detailing how he thinks this ideal can be made a reality. I argue that Nietzsche heavily relies on education to foster culture. His view of the state in the early period is mainly negative – the best way the state can help foster culture is by rolling back the power it has gained in the modern age and restricting itself to the liberal ends of protecting the rule of law and material well-being.

In line with his predecessors such as Schiller, Fichte, and Hegel, the early Nietzsche saw education as critical to cultural renewal. In Chapter 7, I offer one



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of the few readings of Nietzsche's unpublished lecture series, *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*. I do so because in this lecture series Nietzsche himself challenges the democratic and aristocratic approaches to education that contemporary scholars attribute to him. Instead, he develops a meritocratic model of education that has democratic elements, such as public education for all individuals through age fifteen. For Nietzsche, the only path to cultural renewal is to restore liberal education, which consists in the engagement with the works and lives of the exemplary individuals of humanity's history. However, this education was squelched by nineteenth-century utilitarian and socialist approaches to education that upheld utility and the egalitarian society as the most important ends. To combat these tendencies, Nietzsche draws on national pride as the route to liberal education. In order to merit the claim to be a great nation, for Nietzsche, a nation must educate its citizens in the great works of the human spirit.

Chapter 8 critiques the assumption held by aristocratic and democratic readers alike, namely, that Nietzsche himself held an odious, uninteresting, and confused aristocratic political theory. I do so through a new reading of Nietzsche's unpublished essay "The Greek State." In that essay, most scholars claim, Nietzsche celebrates the Greek institution of slavery, its penchant for war, and the hierarchical constitution of Plato's *Republic*. I argue, by contrast, that Nietzsche's critique of liberalism in "The Greek State" is a critique of its fundamental ethical ideals – such as the abstract "dignity of man" – rather than of its political institutions. Indeed, I proceed in the second half of the essay to show that Nietzsche put forward a developmental account of political institutions. On this view, the political institutions relevant for the ancient world – slavery, war, and so forth – are no longer appropriate in the modern world, since we have discovered functional alternatives to the institution of slavery in the ancient world. What is most needful in the modern world, according to Nietzsche, is a reduction in state power and recognition that the proper purpose of community is culture.

The final part of the book discusses the significance of these reflections on culture for Nietzsche scholarship and for contemporary political theory. Nietzsche scholars focus primarily on his late period, his more familiar writings, especially *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Many scholars hold that the late Nietzsche abandons the views of his youth, thereby rendering them of biographical interest only. In Chapter 9, I argue on the contrary that Nietzsche's early ethical views persist into the late period. The main changes to Nietzsche's philosophy are in his negative, critical, or genealogical project – where he expends most of his energies in the 1880s – while his positive views remain largely intact. The early period is significant, then, because it contains Nietzsche's most sustained reflections on ethics and culture that can help explain Nietzsche's notoriously cryptic later doctrines of the revaluation of values, the overman, the sovereign individual, and the like.



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Chapter 10 offers some concluding thoughts about the relevance of Nietzsche's view of culture to contemporary political theory. Most contemporary theorists conceive of culture in terms of its identity or essence, some set of beliefs, values, and practices that constitute what a culture is. This conception of culture-as-identity, I argue, leads to political problems when tied to a multiculturalism project. Identity is arbitrary and changeable, and hence the subject of heated political disagreement without a clear normative standard to adjudicate the dispute. Identity also divides rather than unites different cultures. Instead of conceiving of culture-as-identity, I argue we should consider conceiving of culture in terms of its exemplary individuals as Nietzsche does. Exemplary individuals are not selected arbitrarily nor do they enter and exit the Pantheon of culture, and so they create less division over what distinguishes a culture. At the same time, these individuals unite cultures in virtue of their common excellence as human beings.

## TEXTUAL METHODOLOGY

Since Nietzsche is a notoriously difficult writer and his texts are open to many interpretations, I should say something at the outset about my method of interpreting Nietzsche. My guiding principle of interpretation has been this: Out of the multiple possible interpretations of Nietzsche's text, the best reading is the one that not only makes the most sense of the textual evidence and contributes to a coherent reading of Nietzsche's thought, but also is philosophically the best or most interesting. The second condition is important, I think, because the major competing interpretations of Nietzsche's thought have considerable textual evidence to back them up. As such, to adjudicate among equally plausible interpretations, I am suggesting, we should pick the position that is the more sophisticated one philosophically. The principle of charity demands this condition, as does the hope that Nietzsche can continue to speak to contemporary political and philosophical problems.<sup>12</sup>

On the first condition, there has been some question as to what constitutes evidence of Nietzsche's views, that is, only the published work or the published work and the *Nachlass*. I follow what has become current mainstream practice in the scholarship, that is, to privilege the published work in supporting an interpretation, but to consult Nietzsche's *Nachlass* and letters to fill in the gaps where the published work is underdetermined. In my study, the unpublished material is particularly important because it brings out the degree to which Nietzsche was influenced by the German philosophical tradition. By contrast, in his published work, Nietzsche either willfully tries to establish himself as a

<sup>12</sup> My aim, to use Leiter's phrase, is not to "paraphrase" what Nietzsche says, but to reconstruct it in the most philosophically defensible form I can (see Leiter 2002, xiii).

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self-made philosopher, or (more commonly in the early period work) seemingly presents himself as an acolyte of Schopenhauer and Wagner.

Furthermore, in reconstructing Nietzsche's early period views, I have attempted to move past the metaphysical language of his *Birth of Tragedy*.<sup>13</sup> In the *Birth of Tragedy* – and notes of that period – Nietzsche employs a good deal of metaphysical language, often with reference to Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation*. This language has led many readers to assume that Nietzsche adopts Schopenhauerian metaphysics wholesale in his early period. However, before and after *Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche leveled searching criticisms against metaphysics as such, while also arguing that metaphysical language and imagery can serve a practical, edifying function.<sup>14</sup> As such, several recent interpreters have questioned the “metaphysical” early Nietzsche and instead read him as a neo-Kantian.<sup>15</sup> In this book, I follow the recent “neo-Kantian” reading and so read the *Birth of Tragedy* alongside his other major early writings, especially the *Untimely Meditations*. These other texts offer us, in my view, a sophisticated and nonmetaphysical account of Nietzsche's early ethics. They in turn shed light on the *Birth of Tragedy* and help us to read past the metaphysical language to get to the core of his cultural concerns.

<sup>13</sup> For thorough analyses of BT, see, for instance, Silk and Stern (1981), von Reibnitz (1992), Gerhardt (1988).

<sup>14</sup> See especially Nietzsche's 1868 notebook entry “On Schopenhauer” and Janaway's (1999) and Hill's (2003) discussions. See also Han-Pile (2006) and Gemes and Sykes (2014) for challenges to the received Schopenhauerian metaphysical account.

<sup>15</sup> For accounts of Nietzsche's early Kantianism, see Gardner (2013) and Emden (2014).