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

Jeffrey Church

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Nietzsche's Culture of Humanity

Nietzsche scholars have long been divided over whether Nietzsche is an aristocratic or a democratic thinker. *Nietzsche's Culture of Humanity* overcomes this debate by proving both sides wrong. Jeffrey Church argues that in his early period writings, Nietzsche envisioned a cultural meritocracy that drew on the classical German tradition of Kant and Herder. The young Nietzsche's "culture of humanity" synthesized the high and the low, the genius and the people, the nation and humanity. Nietzsche's early ideal of culture can shed light on his mature period thought because, Church argues, Nietzsche does not abandon this fundamental commitment to a cultural meritocracy. *Nietzsche's Culture of Humanity* argues that Nietzsche's novel defense of culture can overcome persisting problems in contemporary liberal theories of culture. As such, this book should interest Nietzsche scholars, political theorists, and philosophers interested in modern thought, as well as contemporary thinkers concerned with the politics of culture.

JEFFREY CHURCH is a political theorist whose research area is the history of modern political thought, with particular interest in continental thought, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau through Friedrich Nietzsche. His work examines the reflections of past philosophers on freedom, individuality, education, and culture, and shows how these reflections can inform contemporary liberal and democratic theory. He is the author most recently of *Infinite Autonomy: The Divided Individual in the Political Thought of G. W. F. Hegel and Friedrich Nietzsche*, which won the Best First Book award given by the Foundations of Political Theory section of the American Political Science Association.

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*Beyond Aristocracy and Democracy in the
Early Period*

JEFFREY CHURCH

University of Houston



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To Mom and the memory of my Dad

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Preface

A newcomer to Nietzsche scholarship is likely puzzled by the vastly different political positions attributed to him. Is Nietzsche a “radical aristocrat,” defender of a natural rank ordering of political society, advocate of an educational project of discipline and breeding, a hero worship of Caesar and Napoleon? Or is Nietzsche an “agonistic democrat,” critic of inherited values and practices who envisioned politics as the site of contestation about cultural norms and identities? Or is he antipolitical? Or simply confused? The scholarly debate over Nietzsche’s politics has lasted for several decades and shows no sign of resolution. I wrote this book not to fuel the debate further, but to begin to move past it.

In what follows, I argue that each side of the debate captures a truth about Nietzsche’s politics, but only a part of the truth. We can overcome the debate by showing how a fuller picture of Nietzsche incorporates these partial truths into a whole. In my view, Nietzsche is neither an aristocrat nor a democrat, but a “meritocrat.” According to this meritocratic interpretation, Nietzsche sees human excellence as the goal of politics and culture like the aristocrat. However, he rejects the aristocratic view of a natural rank ordering of human beings and the view that politics is for the personal good of a few. Instead, he adheres to the democratic claims that all human beings are capable of achieving human excellence and that community is for the good of all. This meritocratic view is most clearly illustrated in Nietzsche’s early design of educational institutions. Like the democrat, Nietzsche advocates a universal public education for all students up to age fifteen, and, like the aristocrat, he then supports university study only for the highest achieving students.

This meritocratic reading explains why interpreters have been divided over Nietzsche’s politics – as each side correctly grasps and champions part of the truth – and also gives us a fuller picture of Nietzsche’s politics. What emerges from this book is a more sophisticated Nietzschean view of culture and politics

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than the “aristocratic” and “democratic” readings offer, because on this view Nietzsche seeks to incorporate both cultural and political tendencies in complex and dynamic ways. Furthermore, this book also sheds light on the debate over the foundation of Nietzsche’s ethics, because scholars have developed their interpretations of Nietzsche’s ethics based on assumptions about the democratic or aristocratic character of his thought. By gaining a fuller picture of Nietzsche’s view of culture, then, we also get a more complete picture of the basic philosophical claims Nietzsche makes.

Of course, I did not set out in this book to settle the debate over Nietzsche’s politics definitively because of my narrow focus on Nietzsche’s early period works. I do hope, however, that this book can help us find a similar *Aufhebung* of aristocracy and democracy in Nietzsche’s late period. For others to share this hope, however, this book has to show that Nietzsche’s early period is more than mere “juvenilia,” a common view among scholars. I was motivated to write about the early period because in it Nietzsche undertakes the most sustained examination of the concept of “culture” in his career. This notion of culture represents, I argue in this book, the basic motivation of Nietzsche’s early philosophy. However, he continued to display avid interest in the basis, nature, and preconditions of this community throughout his career. As such, by examining this basic element of Nietzsche’s thought in its origins, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of what unifies Nietzsche’s philosophical concerns throughout his life.

My motivation for writing this book, however, was not only to develop a deeper understanding of Nietzsche’s culture and politics. I also think that the Nietzschean view I develop here can contribute to contemporary philosophical discussions about culture. Culture, Raymond Williams (1985) has remarked, is one of the most complex words in the English language. What strikes me about culture, by contrast, is its strangeness. Culture encompasses not only the greatest and highest in humanity – our best art, literature, and philosophy – but also the emphatically average, local, particular – the customs and habits of a particular city or group.¹ How can culture both transcend particular divisions of class, tribe, and nation while also embracing these very same differences?

Unfortunately, most authors who write about the concept of culture do not address this puzzle. Rather, most advocate for one side or another. For some, culture is the best of what is thought and said. From this perspective, “low” or *Volk* culture is not really worthy of the name. For others, culture is the expression of the *Volk*’s authentic voice. As such, “high” culture is inauthentic and pretentious, and its defenders marginalize and silence alternative voices.² In

¹ Eagleton (2000) renders the difference between these two forms as “Culture and culture” (38).

² See Eagleton (2000): “For Culture, culture is benignly sectarian, whereas for culture Culture is fraudulently disinterested. Culture is too ethereal for culture, and culture too earth-bound for Culture. We seem torn between an empty universalism and a blind particularism. If Culture is too unhoused and disembodied, culture is far too eager for a local habitation” (44).

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the terms of Nietzschean interpretive camps, I think of the first group as the “aristocrats,” the second as the “democrats.”

This division is not only of academic concern but also has incited much of the *Kulturkampf* of the twentieth century. The wrangling over curricula in public education, art in public museums, and religion in public spaces is at bottom a dispute about what culture is and what its purpose is. In setting out to write this book, I thought that if we could solve the puzzle of culture and reconcile these divergent concepts, we could lay the foundation for overcoming these sorts of struggles.

Nietzsche's key theoretical contribution, I argue, is to conceive of culture as constituted by the lives and works of exemplary individuals rather than by particular identities. On the one hand, these individuals belong and give voice to particular peoples. Particular practices, beliefs, and values of a people change and fade with time, whereas exemplary individuals lend a coherence and permanence – indeed, even a promise of eternal life – to a people. Descartes and Voltaire, for instance, enduringly express the character of the French in a way croissants and fashion do not. On the other hand, these geniuses engage in a dialogue with other exemplary individuals about universal human questions. In so doing, these individuals belong not only to their people but also to humanity. Every culture has its heroes, and the gallery of these lives together comprises culture in the comprehensive sense. For Nietzsche, individuality provides the key to mediate low and high, democrat and aristocrat, nationalist and cosmopolitan.

Though Nietzsche asks us to place great individuals at the center of culture, he does not advocate hero worship. This is a recurring interpretive mistake readers make about Nietzsche's thought, and one that this book aims to expose. In a famous passage, Nietzsche asks, “how can your life, the individual life, receive the highest value, the deepest significance?” He answers, “only by your living for the good of the rarest and most valuable exemplars” (UM.3.6). Does this mean that, for instance, the French should worship Descartes and Voltaire? Give away their croissants to aspiring philosophers? Indeed not. To keep culture alive requires that we foster the preconditions for the emergence of genius. A culture of slavish bootlickers will not produce genius. Instead, a culture that balances reverence for the past, ambition for the future, and mistrust of all claims to power would in Nietzsche's view be the best soil for the cultivation of exemplars.

In writing this book, I have been interested in the questions liberalism has historically tried to dodge, to remain “neutral” on. Since Hobbes and Locke, the political-philosophical project of liberalism has come to focus on questions of how best to secure individual rights and well-being. Missing here are the more fundamental, existential issues about the purpose of these rights and well-being. The difficulty with maintaining a steadfast liberal neutrality about such issues is that it ignores the existential and political problems that have festered since the early developments of modern civilization. At the same time, my task

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has been to examine these issues while still maintaining a commitment to the principles of freedom and equality foundational to liberal democracy. In my view, Nietzsche and the German tradition as a whole develop an “alternative liberalism,” one that eschews the commitment to neutrality and embraces fundamental existential and moral questions, while not turning back to ancient or medieval forms of social order, but rather founding their view of community on the basis of modern principles.

This book has benefitted from the help of many perceptive and intelligent friends and colleagues: Ruth Abbey, Karl Ameriks, Rebecca Bamford, Kevin Cherry, Susan Collins, Mihaela Czobor-Lupp, Alex Duff, Christian Emden, Lawrence Hatab, Thomas Heilke, Paul Kirkland, Christoph Menke, Iain Morrisson, Dan Price, Denise Schaefer, C. Heike Schotten, Tracy Strong, Richard Velkley, Gregory Weiher, Catherine Zuckert, Michael Zuckert, and Rachel Zuckert. One of the best parts about writing a book is creating the opportunity to engage very smart and generous people in deep conversations. My heartfelt thanks to all.

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My wife Emily inspired many of the thoughts in this book through our many dinner conversations that extend well into the evening. She lives in the arts, and these thoughts come alive with her.

Finally, I have dedicated this book to my parents. Still lining my mother’s bookshelf is an old copy of *Great Books of the Western World*, which got me started on culture so long ago.

Abbreviations

FICHTE

- AGN *Addresses to the German Nation*, cited by page number in Fichte (2008)
- C *The Characteristics of the Present Age*, cited by page number in Fichte (1977)
- CHD “Concerning Human Dignity,” cited by page number in Fichte (1993)
- SE *System of Ethics*, cited by page number in Fichte (2005)
- SL “Concerning the Difference between the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy,” cited by page number in Fichte (1993)
- SV *Lectures on the Vocation of the Scholar*, cited by page number in Fichte (1993)
- W *Wissenschaftslehre*, cited by page number in Fichte (1982)

HERDER

- APH *Another Philosophy of History*, cited by page number in Herder (2004)
- CS *On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul*, cited by page number in Herder (2002)
- Ideas *Ideas for a Philosophy of History of Humanity*, cited by page number in Herder (1803)
- LAH *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, cited by page number in Herder (2002)
- MC *A Metacritique of the Critique of Pure Reason*, cited by page number in Herder (2001)
- OWH *On World History*, cited by page number in Herder (1996)

KANT

- CB “Conjectural Beginning of Human History,” cited by page number in Kant (1970)
- CJ *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, cited by Akademie page number in Kant (2000)
- CPR *Critique of Pure Reason*, cited by Akademie page number in Kant (1999a)
- GMM *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, cited by Akademie page number in Kant (1983)
- Idea “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” cited by page number in Kant (1970)
- LE *Lectures on Ethics*, cited by page number in Kant (2001)
- O “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” cited by Akademie page number in Kant (1999b)
- R *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*, cited by Akademie page number in Kant (1999b)
- RH “Reviews of Herder’s Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind,” cited by page number in Kant (1970)

NIETZSCHE

- BGE *Beyond Good and Evil*, cited by aphorism number in Nietzsche (2002)
- BT *The Birth of Tragedy*, cited by section number/page number in Nietzsche (1999)
- COSK “On the Concept of the Organic since Kant,” cited by page number in Nietzsche (1988)
- D *Daybreak*, cited by aphorism number in Nietzsche (1997a)
- DWV “The Dionysiac World View,” cited by page number in Nietzsche (1999)
- EH *Ecce Homo*, cited by section name and number in Nietzsche (2005)
- FEI *On the Future of our Educational Institutions*, cited by page number in Nietzsche (2004)
- FWF “Freedom of Will and Fate,” cited by page number in Nietzsche (2006)
- GM *On the Genealogy of Morals*, cited by essay and section number in Nietzsche (1994)
- GrS “The Greek State,” cited by page number in Nietzsche (1994)
- GS *The Gay Science*, cited by aphorism number in Nietzsche (2001b)
- HC “Homer’s Contest,” cited by page number in Nietzsche (1994)
- HGE “The History of Greek Eloquence,” cited by page number in Nietzsche (1989)

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HH	<i>Human, All Too Human</i> , cited by aphorism number in Nietzsche (1986)
KSA	<i>Kritische Studienausgabe</i> , cited by volume, notebook, and entry number in brackets, from Nietzsche (1980)
L	<i>Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche</i> , cited by page number in Nietzsche (1969)
LR	"Description of Ancient Rhetoric," cited by page number in Nietzsche (1989)
ML	"My Life," cited by page number in Nietzsche (2006)
OOL	"On the Origin of Language," cited by page number in Nietzsche (1989)
PPP	<i>The Pre-Platonic Philosophers</i> , cited by page number in Nietzsche (2001a)
PTAG	<i>Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks</i> , cited by page number in Nietzsche (1962)
SP	<i>Nietzsche: A Self-Portrait from His Letters</i> , cited by page number in Nietzsche (1971)
TI	<i>Twilight of the Idols</i> , cited by section name and aphorism number in Nietzsche (2005)
TL	"On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," cited by page number in Nietzsche (2009)
UM	<i>Untimely Meditations</i> , cited by meditation number and section number, from Nietzsche (1997b)
UUM	<i>Unpublished Writings from the Period of Unfashionable Observations</i> , cited by page number in Nietzsche (1995)
WC	"We Classicists," cited by page number in Nietzsche (1990)
WEN	<i>Writings from the Early Notebooks</i> , cited by page number in Nietzsche (2009)
WP	<i>The Will to Power</i> , cited by section number in Nietzsche (1967)
Z	<i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i> , cited by chapter name in Nietzsche (1966)