

Introduction

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Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and for No One* (*TSZ*) (1883–1885) is a text that was celebrated by creative artists and writers in the twentieth century and it continues to have a wide readership outside academia. This book has also been appreciated by some seminal thinkers in the history of continental philosophy – notably Martin Heidegger, Eugen Fink, Karl Löwith, and Gilles Deleuze. However, recent philosophical scholarship tends to marginalize *TSZ* and to downplay its significance in our engagement with Nietzsche's thought. This neglect is no doubt understandable. The text is perhaps the best example we have of his self-confessed philosophical heterodoxy, and he himself pointed out its unusual relation to the rest of his corpus: "Suppose I had published my *Zarathustra* under another name, for example, that of Richard Wagner—the acuteness of two thousand years would not have been sufficient for anyone to guess that the author of *Human, All-Too-Human* is the visionary of *Zarathustra*" (*EH* "Clever" 4; *EH* 1989).

The aim of this volume is to remedy this current neglect of *TSZ* by highlighting its importance for a fuller understanding of Nietzsche's contribution to philosophy. Our hope is that this new collection of essays by leading figures in the international community of Nietzsche scholars will help show why he was right to claim that *TSZ* needs to assume a central role in any informed appreciation of his style of philosophical practice as well as of the fundamental content of his core ideas. We also expect that this collection will help bring *TSZ* into better contact with the kinds of questions, problems, and debates that animate contemporary philosophy.

More specifically, the chapters in this Critical Guide separately endeavor to (a) help explain Nietzsche's claim that *TSZ* strives to resolve the important problems that are posed, but not resolved, in his other, more widely discussed texts (like *BGE* and *GM*) – for example, how to cure the human disposition to vengeful thinking and how to give meaning to human life; (b) help explain why Nietzsche's turn to art, poetry, and

fiction in *TSZ* is central to Nietzsche's project during the mature phase of his thinking, for example as a new kind of parodic and satirical critique, or as a narrative exemplification of circular time; (c) help show how *TSZ* addresses fundamental philosophical problems and questions that preoccupy contemporary philosophers today, such as the problem of persistence through change or the question of how human action is motivated; (d) help explain how *TSZ* contributes to the ongoing revitalization of the practice of philosophy as a way of life; and (e) help show how *TSZ* is pertinent to pressing contemporary concerns, such as the emergence of a widespread ecological conscience and the debate about transhumanism.

Because our guiding question is why philosophers today should care about *TSZ*, the chapters in this book do not offer purely exegetical treatments of this text and do not concentrate on scholarly questions about the place of this text in the history of philosophy or in Nietzsche's philosophical development. Also, since the Cambridge Critical Guides are intended for scholars and graduate students, these essays do not present introductory-level discussions, outlines, or commentaries on *TSZ*. Accordingly, this volume does not attempt to provide a comprehensive coverage of Nietzsche's text and its concepts, or of the various interpretive controversies concerning this text and its concepts. Instead, the focus is a philosophical discussion of topics that are the subject of interest today in the field of philosophy and within the community of philosophical Nietzsche scholars. However, we realize that philosophical readers who harbor misgivings about this text and its concepts may be disinclined to consider the philosophical relevance of *TSZ*. So we would like to address some common complaints before we provide an overview of the chapters in this Critical Guide. We hope that these brief framing remarks will facilitate a more open-minded approach to Nietzsche's book and to this collection of essays.

Some Common Complaints about *TSZ*

Thus Spoke Zarathustra is unique among Nietzsche's central philosophical works, and indeed in the history of philosophy, because it is not written in the author's own voice and is instead constructed in the form of a biblical narrative with a fictional teacher named "Zarathustra" taking the place of Jesus. In the course of this book, just as in the Gospels of the New Testament, this teacher offers an extended string of speeches, sermons, parables, and prophecies to the beloved disciples who have chosen to follow him. In addition, the narrative depicts events in the teacher's life

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that closely resemble the events in the Gospels. For example, the protagonist is tested by the devil (Z III.2); he rages against self-proclaimed good and just people who are identified as Pharisees (Z III.12:26); he is asked to heal those who are blind and crippled (Z II.20); he calls himself a fisher of men and struggles with the doubts and apostasies of his disciples (Z IV.1; Z III.8); like Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, he suffers excruciating self-doubt about his mission during a pivotal moment of solitude away from his disciples (Z II.22); and he gathers a select group of followers for a last supper (Z IV.12). Most importantly, at the end of the book that Nietzsche published without Part IV, Zarathustra experiences a self-sacrificing martyrdom and crucifixion that allows him to redeem humankind from all sin (Z III.13:2, Z III.14) – after which he is resurrected to live again for all of eternity (Z III.2:2, Z III.16).¹ At certain points in this book that Nietzsche called his “Testament” or “fifth Gospel” (KSB 6: 373, 375), there even appears a narrative voice that is historically distant from the events in the story, thus imitating the different kinds of narrative voices and sources in the New Testament compilation (Z IV.12, Z IV.19:1).²

Confronted with such a strange design, many philosophers, historians of philosophy, and even scholars of Nietzsche’s philosophy have been at a loss as to how to approach this book and have tended to marginalize it, dismiss it, or just ignore it altogether. The reasons for their resistance and negative valuation are not hard to understand. Since few of them are Christian, they see no reason to investigate the details of some imitation or parody of the Christian bible. Also, they are not trained as literary critics, much less as biblical exegetes, and they have little interest in doing the background work that would help them to understand and appreciate the unique style of this book. Perhaps there was a time when this book felt compelling to a majority of philosophers with a Christian background, but that time is long gone – maybe even due to the tremendous early influence of this very book.³ It is all well and good that readers of the Bible are persuaded by image-laden allegories, sermons, and parables, but this is anathema to philosophers who look for logic, reason, and argumentation. Most of what

¹ See Loeb (2010: 101–104, 114–117); and Loeb (2015b).

² This is not the only literary model for Nietzsche’s design, but it is certainly the dominant one. Other literary and artistic models include ancient Buddhist lore, ancient Greek and Persian mythology, the Homeric epics, the Old Testament, ancient Greek tragedies and satyr plays, Pindar’s odes, Plato’s philosophical dramas, Menippean satire, Lucretius’ philosophical poem, Goethe’s *Faust*, Emerson’s essays, Hölderlin’s poetic narratives, and Wagner’s operas. See also the helpful explanatory notes in Parkes (2005).

³ See Gadamer (1986).

Nietzsche's protagonist says is conveyed with an air of authority that is supposed to compel our assent, but this is just what Aristotle long ago called the logical fallacy of appealing to authority. Moreover, Nietzsche himself teaches that Christianity is a completely bankrupt system of thought, so why study a book that is based on the paradigm for all Christian thinking? Indeed, since we can simply read Nietzsche's later works – in which he communicates the same things, but this time in his own voice, and thankfully with a much clearer logic – why bother with this bizarre biblical palimpsest? This is especially the case since the philosophical books that Nietzsche wrote afterward, notably *BGE* and *GM*, presumably convey a more developed and sophisticated version of his earlier *Zarathustra* ideas – ideas such as the vengeful inspiration of moral judgment and the post-Christian nihilistic predicament. Perhaps Nietzsche wrote *Zarathustra* so as to better communicate with a much wider audience outside the world of academically trained philosophers (*KSB* 6: 375), in which case this is all the more reason for simply passing it over in favor of those later works that he wrote especially for philosophers. In any case, as one Nietzsche scholar has recently commented, there is something aesthetically unpleasant about the whole literary exercise:

In linguistic style, it has an affected, archaic air, with resonances of the Luther Bible. One of the key interpretive questions is whether it is a parody of a religious book, or meant to be taken 'straight,' as a kind of quasi-religious-mystical outpouring. My own view is that it is downright unbearable (some choice passages aside) unless one takes it as a rather arch sendup of a religious book, and even then it is tough going. (Huddleston 2019: 349)⁴

These are all serious worries about the book that is the subject of this Critical Guide. Nevertheless, we think there is an appropriate response to be found in the extended advice Nietzsche offered for understanding his book. For the most part, this advice can be found in *Ecce Homo*, where he presents a review of his life and philosophical career. Indeed, it is quite striking that Nietzsche spends most of his time in *Ecce Homo* introducing, quoting, explaining, praising, and celebrating *TSZ* as his most important book. He gives many reasons for this claim, including especially its extraordinary aesthetic qualities and the intensity of feeling that inspired its composition. But for our purposes here, what matters most is his assertion that this book is the only place where he presents the constructive

⁴ See also Gadamer (1986), Tanner (1994), and Huddleston (2020).

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and affirmative solutions to the questions and problems he poses in the critical, skeptical, and polemical books that came later (*EH*: *BGE*). His most precise statement of this point is his claim that only *TSZ* contains the counter-ideal to the ascetic ideal that he explains, diagnoses, and criticizes in the third essay of his *Genealogy of Morality* (*EH*: *GM*). This statement is supported by his claim at the end of the second essay of *GM* that only Zarathustra will be able to redeem reality and humankind from the curse placed upon them by this ascetic ideal – that is, from the great nausea, from the will to nothingness, from nihilism. Only Zarathustra will be able to liberate the will and once again give the earth its goal and hope to humankind. In fact, Nietzsche even concludes this second essay by deliberately silencing his own authorial voice for fear that he will interfere with the redemptive task that can only be accomplished by the superior teacher he envisions arriving in a stronger and healthier future (*GM* II:24–25).

It is true, then, that Nietzsche distances himself from his fictional protagonist – but not, as many critics assume, because he does not fully endorse his protagonist's philosophical views. Instead, it is because he thinks that these views are actually superior to his own views, that is, to the views he teaches in his own voice in the works he wrote after *TSZ*. Given what he says in *EH*, this means that he thinks of his own philosophical task as merely critical, not constructive. In terms of the distinction, he defends in *BGE* 211, this means that he thinks of himself as a philosophical laborer who is only able to prepare the ground for genuine philosophers who are able to create new values. He investigates historical origins, codifies past value-creations, offers methodological arguments, and criticizes the ideas of his contemporaries. He presents credible and arduous intellectual processes of inquiry, as well as skeptical and irreligious modes of thinking – including of course, and especially, his savage critique of the Gospels (*A* 28–47). But the genuine philosopher of the future, who is envisioned only in *TSZ*, is someone who will make use of all these preliminary labors in order to issue commands and laws that will determine the destiny and purpose of humankind (*BGE* 211; *KSA* 11:26[407], *KSA* 11:38[13]). This is why Nietzsche presents his fictional protagonist as an authoritative pedagogical orator rather than as a contemplative thinker-writer who offers logical analyses and arguments. Again, this is not because these logical analyses and arguments are absent. Instead, Nietzsche wants us to keep in mind everything he has taught us in his later books as the essential support and background – indeed, as the launching platform – for

Zarathustra's central teachings.⁵ For example, we should keep in mind everything he has taught us in his post-*Zarathustra* works about the inherent weakness and illness of humankind as the background for Zarathustra's inaugural command and law that the human species should sacrifice itself for the sake of a stronger and healthier superhuman species (*ZP*:3–5). According to Nietzsche, all the philosophical labor in his later books is presupposed by Zarathustra's creation of new values that are no longer centered, as has always been the case before (*JS* 1), around the survival and preservation of humankind.⁶ This new command introduces a new meaning and goal for humankind that redeems it from the Christian ascetic ideal and from the great nausea, nihilism, and will to nothingness that grew out of this ideal.

It is no coincidence, then, that Nietzsche begins his *Zarathustra* narrative with the hermit saint telling Zarathustra that God is already dead (*ZP*:2). For Nietzsche thinks that his own acceleration of the collapse of the 2000-year-old system of Christian belief is required before Zarathustra's future millennial project can begin. In *GM* II:24–25 Nietzsche baptizes his protagonist, whom he elsewhere calls his son and heir (*KSB* 6: 407), as “the Antichrist,” “the conqueror of God,” and “Zarathustra the Godless.” This is because Zarathustra's philosophical invention of new values that are centered around the self-overcoming of humankind is the whole key to dispelling all the remaining shadows of God. Thus, far from being a new kind of religious book, or a “quasi-religious-mystical outpouring,” *TSZ* is supposed to represent the ultimate triumph of philosophy over religion – of Dionysus over the Crucified (*EH* “Destiny” 9). When Nietzsche tells us that his *Zarathustra* book came to him as a kind of divinely revealed truth (*EH Z*:3, 6), this has nothing to do with the kind of religious revelation that is claimed as the source of the biblical texts he is imitating and parodying. What he has in mind instead is the philosophizing god Dionysus (*BGE* 294–295) who is the *circulus vitiosus deus* and the personification of cosmic eternal recurrence (*BGE* 56).⁷

This brings us back, then, to Nietzsche's reason for repurposing the Christian New Testament as a means of communicating his most important philosophical insights. In the first place, these are insights that he does not want to communicate in his own voice because he would then be

⁵ Hence Nietzsche's remark in *The Antichrist* that Zarathustra, like all great intellects, is a skeptic (*A* 54). For further discussion of this point, see Ansell-Pearson (2021).

⁶ For further discussion of this point, see Loeb and Tinsley (2019: 773–793) and Loeb (2019b).

⁷ See Loeb (2010: 2–4, 190).

usurping and undermining the task that demands a stronger and healthier philosopher in the future. In particular, Nietzsche confesses in *Ecce Homo* that he himself, having been corrupted by nineteenth-century German “idealist” culture, is not strong enough to command the self-overcoming of humankind or healthy enough to affirm the eternal recurrence of his own life. Still, he is able to extrapolate from his own weaknesses and pathologies in order to envision what kind of future philosopher is required to do these things.⁸ Indeed, he suggests, this very act of depicting the heir to his legacy might be sufficient to call forth this philosopher. Some exceptionally strong and healthy human beings in the future might be seduced into crowning themselves with the name “Zarathustra.” So Nietzsche asked himself what would be the best literary means of luring these figures to his side. And his answer was that he should appropriate the most widely-read and intensely-studied book ever written – indeed, the very book that occasioned the invention of the printing press. Not only would he be able to count on his readers already knowing this book almost by heart, he would also be able to bypass the vagaries of academic fashion, intellectual squabbling, and ivory-tower obscurity. In addition, as Benedetta Zavatta explains in the opening chapter of this collection (Chapter 1), Nietzsche saw that this choice would allow him to expel from the Gospels the religious meanings of its original writers and infuse them instead with his own new philosophical meanings. For example, he has Zarathustra teach that Jesus’ idea of turning the other cheek is actually inspired by vengeful motives and must be left behind if we are ever to overcome the spirit of revenge (Z I.19). What better way to seduce his readers away from the heart and soul of the Christian ascetic ideal and toward his new post-Christian goal of humankind’s self-overcoming? Indeed, in the notes he wrote while composing *TSZ*, Nietzsche explains that his appropriation of Luther’s linguistic style and of the poetic form of the Bible is what especially allows him to accomplish this seduction:

Lastly: we [Germans] are still very *young*. Our last major event is still *Luther*, our only book is still the *Bible*. [. . .] For continual repetition — — U — U etc. the rhythm of rhymed verse, *we* are musically too sophisticated (aside from misunderstood hexameter!) How beneficial the poetic form of Platen and Hölderlin has been to us already! But much too strict for us! Playing with the most diverse meters and occasionally unmetrical verse is the right thing: the freedom that we have achieved already in music through

⁸ For further discussion of this point, see Loeb (2021a).

R(ichard)W(agner)! we can certainly take this for our poetry! In the final analysis: it is the only kind of poetry that speaks strongly to our hearts! — Thanks to Luther! [. . .] The language of Luther and the poetic form of the Bible as the basis for a new German *poetry*: —this is *my* invention! Making things classical, the rhyme scheme—is all wrong and does not speak profoundly enough to us: not even Wagner's alliteration! (*KSA* 11:25 [162, 172–173]; *CWFN* 2021: 50)⁹

Returning now to the list of standard complaints about Nietzsche's book, we can see that they depend on various misunderstandings. Students of Nietzsche's philosophy will not find what he thinks are his most important insights anywhere outside of *TSZ*. These insights are not in any way superseded by what he wrote in his later works. In fact, he tells us, these later works are all merely critical and skeptical analyses that pose questions and problems that await their resolution in the ideas he had already presented in *TSZ*. Scholars often cite Nietzsche's remarks that his later works say the same things as *TSZ*, although very differently (*EH* "Destiny" 8; *KSB* 7: 754), but he does not mean by this that *TSZ* says the same things as these later works. And in fact it does not, because the two most important ideas in this book – the self-overcoming of humankind and the eternal recurrence of the same¹⁰ – are not revisited again in the texts written afterward (they are only mentioned or alluded to).¹¹ Again, this does not mean, as some scholars have supposed, that Nietzsche abandoned these ideas after completing *TSZ*.¹² Instead, he held them in reserve for readers to study once they had digested his devastating critique of their most cherished modern dogmas. These two central ideas can best be understood by philosophical readers who take the time and the

⁹ See also *BGE* 247: "The masterpiece of German prose is therefore, fairly enough, the masterpiece of its greatest preacher: the *Bible* has so far been the best German book. Compared with Luther's Bible almost everything else is mere 'literature'—something that did not grow in Germany and therefore also did not grow and does not grow into German hearts: as the Bible did" (*BGE* 1989).

¹⁰ Recently, it has become common practice for scholars to rest their whole interpretation of eternal recurrence on the mere preview of this doctrine that Nietzsche offered in a single paragraph of *The Joyful Science* (*JS* 341). See Loeb (2013, 2022) for a critique of this attempt to avoid discussing the book-long treatment of this doctrine in *TSZ*. See also Loeb (2010, 2015b) for a commentary on *TSZ* that shows how eternal recurrence informs not just Zarathustra's teachings about this doctrine but also the chronological narrative of the book as a whole.

¹¹ By contrast, Nietzsche's later texts do include a substantial, and in some respects more sophisticated, treatment of the other most important idea in *Zarathustra*, the will to power. See Loeb (2015a).

¹² For a critique of the interpretive suggestion that Nietzsche has Zarathustra abandon his ideal of the *Übermensch* as the narrative of *TSZ* progresses and that this ideal plays no role in the works he wrote after *TSZ*, see Loeb (2010, 169 n. 37, 203–206, and Chapter 8). See also Part IV of *TSZ* (*Z*.13: 2, 3, 5) and *EH* ("Books" *Z* 6, *Z* 8, and "Destiny" 5).

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trouble to study his use of the New Testament as a literary model, just as they take the time and the trouble to learn about his philosophical engagement with Schopenhauer and the neo-Kantians, or about his philological study of the history and culture of Ancient Greece. Biblical exegetes have offered persuasive interpretations of Jesus' life and teachings, and so Nietzsche encourages us to do the same with his presentation of Zarathustra's life and teachings. And just as these interpretations of the New Testament are supposed to uncover fundamental truths, so too Nietzsche expects us to find deep truths in his own fifth Gospel: "[W]hat is more important is that Zarathustra is more truthful than any other thinker. His teaching, and his alone, has truthfulness as the supreme virtue" (*EH* "Destiny" 3). There is no use in disgruntled scholars complaining about the perceived difficulty of *TSZ*, or about their lack of talent or expertise for dealing with the complex literary strategies employed in this book, or even about the aesthetic displeasure they feel when studying this book. If our goal is to achieve a complete and proper understanding of Nietzsche's contributions to philosophy, we have no choice but to accept his demand that we master his prized *Zarathustra* text.

Summary of The Essays

In keeping with the points just made, it is noteworthy that half of the essays collected in this volume are concerned with the two central ideas of *TSZ* that are not treated officially, or at length, anywhere else in Nietzsche's published corpus: eternal recurrence and the *Übermensch*. Paul Katsafanas, Matthew Meyer, and Paul S. Loeb concentrate on the former, Scott Jenkins on the latter, and Paul Franco and Gabriel Zamosc on both. Also, in keeping with the state of philosophical discussion today, it is noteworthy that half of the essays in this volume explore Nietzsche's metaphilosophical commitments in *TSZ*. Benedetta Zavatta outlines Nietzsche's design of *TSZ* as a new kind of philosophical critique, Matthew Meyer, Paul S. Loeb, and Kaitlyn Creasy reflect on Nietzsche's philosophical naturalism in *TSZ*, while Keith Ansell-Pearson and Marta Faustino jointly investigate Nietzsche's idea in *TSZ* that philosophy should be practiced as a way of life.¹³

Zavatta's chapter opens our collection with a discussion of the parodic and satirical aspects of Nietzsche's book. Scholars have heeded Nietzsche's

¹³ For a recent collection of essays on Nietzsche's metaphilosophy, see Loeb and Meyer (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

instruction that we should think of *TSZ* as a kind of parody (*GS P*), but there has been a great deal of uncertainty about what exactly he means by this. Zavatta helpfully clears up the debate by surveying the genres of literary and musical parody prior to Nietzsche's time and showing how he appropriated these genres in *TSZ* so as to invent a new form of philosophical critique. His central insight, she argues, is that the target of criticism – in this case, the principal text of the Christian tradition – can be imitated and modified in such a way that its original flawed meanings are expelled from within and replaced with new legitimate meanings. Those who have been corrupted by the original text will bring to the imitation all the same fervor they had invested in the original text and this will help them to process the criticism, move away from their commitment to the original flawed meanings, and more easily come to accept the new legitimate meanings. This new conception of philosophy as a kind of parodical re-coding is an affirmative critical weapon that can be usefully deployed against many other kinds of targets besides the Christian worldview. Or it can even be aimed from a different perspective entirely, as for example in Luce Irigaray's feminist re-coding of *TSZ* in her *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Irigaray 1991).

Ansell-Pearson and Faustino also emphasize the aesthetic design of Nietzsche's book. Building on Pierre Hadot's influential reminder that thinkers in the ancient world used to practice philosophy as a total way of life, they show that Nietzsche was inspired by these precursors to craft *TSZ* as a narrative exemplification and personification of this ideal. In their view, Nietzsche presents his performative book as a crucial intervention in an age when professionalized philosophy has become a merely theoretical and contemplative exercise that is textually propagated by university-dwelling scholarly specialists who have little interest in the kind of commitment to knowledge and wisdom that would transform them and their lives. Nietzsche knew that the philosophical texts he wrote in his own voice could be easily assimilated into this bloodless academic culture, so he deliberately designed a new kind of philosophical text that would resist any such assimilation. His fictional protagonist actually practices philosophy as a way of life and this is shown by the narrative of his transformative travels; his fully lived pedagogical relationships with his beloved disciples; his self-imposed solitude wherein he gains wisdom and experiences deep personal crises as a result; his fully embodied sensory communion with the natural world around him; and his joyful determination to live dangerously in order to shape the destiny of humankind. Instead of just arguing that philosophy should be practiced as a way of life, Nietzsche writes a new