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Peter Berkowitz, *Nietzsche: The Ethics of An Immoralist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). 336 pages, \$35.00 (cloth), \$15.96 (paper).

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Peter Berkowitz characterizes Nietzsche's philosophy as a *contest of extremes*. For Berkowitz, Nietzsche's thought is unified by a fundamental tension between repudiating and embracing metaphysical views about truth, reason, and the good [p. 276, endnote 9, *passim*]. The philosophical value of Nietzsche's attempts to "overcome metaphysics" lies precisely in his failure to realize this goal. Against Heidegger, Berkowitz claims that Nietzsche thus serves as an example to all who dare attack reason that such projects are futile: "Nietzsche's failure to move beyond metaphysics attests to its inescapableness" (p. 8).

Berkowitz reads what he calls Nietzsche's "histories" (especially *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and *The Antichrist*) as attempts to articulate an ethics of creativity, which is allegedly opposed to and radically distinct from an ethics of reason. According to Berkowitz, Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil* exemplify attempts to demonstrate how one, the "superman" in the first case and the free spirit in the second, might live according to this new ethic. The histories, he argues, elaborate an ordering of rank, based on the pursuit of truth and in accordance with a natural order for which Nietzsche gives no philosophical justification. Yet Berkowitz claims, contrary to the "Nietzschean Left," that Nietzsche fails as a critic of the Western moral and metaphysical tradition. He does not represent a fundamental break with the past, since his philosophy is not radically different from the philosophical tradition following Socrates.

Berkowitz catalogues no fewer than ten paradoxical tendencies in Nietzsche's thought. Each represents "a contest between a peculiar combination of convictions" (p. 19), and it is this on-going contest that gives unity to Nietzsche's work. Although Berkowitz does not draw any distinctions between them, the paradoxes he cites generally take one of two forms. One kind marks a failure in the application of a metaphilosophical commitment. Berkowitz highlights inconsistencies between Nietzsche's claims about what it means to do philosophy and his practice in specific cases. For example, he argues that although Nietzsche seems to advocate an ethics of creativity – in which moral truth is invented, not discovered – his critique of slave morality in *The Genealogy of Morals* suggests that right making is subject to another kind of morality that distinguishes the deficient invention exemplified in the morality of good and evil from the alternative that Nietzsche advocated (pp. 6, 67–99). In these cases, Berkowitz claims, Nietzsche fails to sustain the

critique he wishes to mount; he is unable to put into practice the theory he had earlier formulated. As Berkowitz indicates, his critical strategy seems to be sanctioned by Nietzsche himself in *Schopenhauer As Educator*, where he wrote: “The only possible criticism of a philosophy, the only criticism that proves anything at all, is trying to see if one can live by it.”<sup>1</sup> Other paradoxes disclose how Nietzsche makes contradictory statements. Berkowitz claims that the conflict central to *Beyond Good and Evil* lies between the opposing views that what is noble is a product of self-creation and that nobility is discovered by one who has grasped certain metaphysical truths (pp. 252–253; cf. 123). In these cases, Nietzsche is charged with contradicting himself by making diametrically opposed claims. Berkowitz argues that such paradoxes are interwoven throughout Nietzsche’s writings and that they serve as the basis for the “contest of extremes” that characterizes all of Nietzsche’s work.

The contest is decided, whether Nietzsche realized it or not, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Zarathustra, the supreme advocate of creative ethics and the teacher of the eternal return, is portrayed as a failure in every way. His character is marred by desperate appeals for followers and disciples, and his greatest thought is motivated by a vicious spirit of revenge. Zarathustra, according to Berkowitz, is weak, his thought is reactive, he sanctions cold-blooded murder as an innocent impulse and admirable deed (p. 164), and “his attempt to overcome his humanity by mastering necessity discloses that contrary to the hopes for self-deification inscribed in the ethics of creativity, some forms of necessity are invulnerable to even the strongest wills” (p. 209). This display of Nietzsche’s valiant struggle against reason vindicates reason itself and serves to prove that reason is for us, as the gods were for the ancient Greeks, one idol we cannot challenge without bringing about our own destruction.

There are other contests on display in Berkowitz’s book – some explicitly recognized, others not. He contests much of contemporary Nietzsche scholarship. Although he confronts a number of Nietzsche interpreters directly – Blondel, Foucault, and Heidegger, to name a few – Berkowitz dismissively characterizes much recent work on Nietzsche as holding “that Nietzsche’s books are potpourris of stimulating insights mixed in with clunkers, embarrassments, unfortunate fulminations, and irrelevant notions” (p. 11). Alexander Nehamas is held responsible for this interpretive trend, and Berkowitz cites him as the paragon of those engaged in “making arguments about what Nietzsche intended or thought based on picking and choosing, mixing and matching, and cutting and pasting words, phrases, and ideas drawn from wherever they can be found” (p. 10). He struggles with Nehamas in every chapter except those dedicated to the interpretation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and Nehamas is second only to Plato and Aristotle as the most frequently men-

tioned person in the book (excluding Nietzsche, of course). Yet Berkowitz almost never addresses the arguments of Nehamas's work. This is particularly problematic for Berkowitz's challenge to perspectivism. Since Berkowitz has chosen to take Nehamas to task for placing perspectivism at the center of Nietzsche's work, it is reasonable to expect that he should explain exactly how Nehamas fails to respond to charges that perspectivism is self-refuting, i.e., how one can consistently hold a perspectivist position without having to admit that that position is itself *only* an interpretation.

Nehamas not only confronts this challenge directly in his *Nietzsche: Life As Literature*, he further clarifies what it means to take seriously the prospect of perspectivism. Nehamas argues that it is wrong to think that Nietzsche held a theory of truth according to which all knowing is *merely* interpretation – implying that all so-called knowledge is therefore false – or that Nietzsche believed that we lack good reasons to prefer one interpretation over another (Nehamas, pp. 65–67). A discussion that treats these particular issues is missing in Berkowitz's book, and by reading Berkowitz alone, one might get the erroneous impression that Nehamas is somehow naive about the potential problems of this view.

It is easy to see why perspectivism is problematic for Berkowitz's thesis. One kind of paradox to which he points is derived from opposing claims that acquire their contradictory character only when read as absolute and fundamental convictions. We must attribute absolute, unwavering assertion to each of these claims in order for them to stand in direct opposition. I do not contradict myself if I answer the question "What if the world were such?" in one way and then give a different, even opposite answer when responding to the question "What if the world were *not* such?" Nietzsche regularly employed a philosophical strategy of looking backward and forward – from standpoints he called healthy and decadent – when investigating the problems he found most serious. Is there any wonder these multiple perspectives differ, that they might even result in contrary accounts? Recognizing Berkowitz's other kind of paradox demands that we treat all claims alike without drawing any distinctions between metaphilosophical claims and Nietzsche's own applications. I would not be guilty of contradiction if I suggested that all claims to knowledge reflect a particular perspective and that the view from here suggests X to be the case. If I do not hold X with conviction, then these two claims are not at odds, at least not in a logically rigorous way.

What is unasked by Berkowitz is whether Nietzsche in fact holds convictions in the manner of those he criticizes. Does he regard his beliefs as the dogmatists do theirs? Or does Nietzsche offer his "convictions" in a hypothetical spirit? If I seriously entertain the possibility of perspectivism, does this mean that I may no longer hold *any* beliefs? What is Nietzsche's philosophical

attitude toward his “wisdom”? Can we distinguish convictions from beliefs, opinions, arguments, declarations, and assertions? Berkowitz’s argument suggests we cannot. In several places he couches these paradoxical oppositions as ones occurring between Nietzsche’s opinions and convictions (p. 42), his philosophical commitments and his declarations (p. 48), his doctrines and his practices (p. 73), and passages in which Nietzsche makes transitions from suggestions to dogmatic statements of fact (p. 233). Perspectivism is problematic for Berkowitz because it demands that we make distinctions between claims to truth and moments in which Nietzsche is speaking from a certain perspective. Nietzsche prided himself on being able to see things from different, even *opposing* perspectives.<sup>2</sup> Might we not at least allow that he also attempted to write from those different perspectives? This is not to say that Nietzsche is correct, regardless of what he writes, or that we should not hold him to the same standards to which we hold other philosophers; but on the issue of internal consistency, we should certainly give consideration to the whole of any writer’s work and should not forget in Nietzsche’s case, simply because he did not remind us at every sentence, that perspectivism was a possibility he maintained throughout his career. Admit perspectivism and the “contest of extremes” becomes significantly less radical. Subtract dogmatic conviction from Nietzsche’s so-called metaphysical views and his “paradoxes” do not reduce to simple contradictions, the case against Nietzsche weakens, and Platonism is not vindicated as Berkowitz claims.

Berkowitz claims that perspectivism is just a “contemporary form of dogmatism” (p. 275 n5) and that “Nietzsche asserts that perspective is the condition of all life from a vantage point that allows for a correct perspective on the relation between perspective and life” (p. 233). In fact, he believes Nietzsche’s invocation of perspectivism is linked less with a theory about the character of truth than with a claim about who has access to truth. He calls attention to distinctions Nietzsche draws between the esoteric and exoteric, which “do not essentially refer to a kind of layered writing . . . but rather reflect two basic perspectives for seeing, estimating, measuring, and judging” (p. 240). According to this view, Nietzsche’s perspectivism boils down this: there are true perspectives about the world and false ones, and Nietzsche claims to have the former. The exoteric seems true from a certain perspective that comes from below, from a lower order. The esoteric perspective is available only from a higher position, from above, and it alone provides genuine access to the truth. Hence, claims Berkowitz, when Nietzsche wrote about different perspectives, he was not advocating a perspectival understanding of human knowledge, he was making claims about *which* kind of perspective is the right one. Because this view is at odds with other passages in which Nietzsche seems to have made the former claim, Berkowitz argues that there

is an irreconcilable tension between appealing to perspectivism and making truth claims in Nietzsche's work. Berkowitz claims that Leo Strauss recognized and preserved this tension in his article on *Beyond Good and Evil*,<sup>3</sup> which is why Strauss's article is superior to Nehamas's<sup>4</sup> on the same work (pp. 301–302, endnote 1).

In his attempt to clarify the significance of contest for Nietzsche (cf. 92, 163ff, pp. 252, 253), Berkowitz ignores the distinction Nietzsche draws between creative and destructive contests. This might, in part, explain why he reads Nietzsche's Zarathustra as an *advocate* of cruelty. He claims that Zarathustra "urges his 'brother' to become a battleground on which conflicting desires are deliberately polarized and emboldened to seek supremacy to the point where they come into lethal combat with one another" (p. 164). But Zarathustra does not encourage *becoming* a battleground – he thinks this conflict is unavoidable: "are war and battle evil? But this evil is necessary; necessary are the envy and mistrust and calumny among your virtues."<sup>5</sup> Zarathustra believes that such battles are inevitable, and so it is wrong to assert that "he adapts Hobbes' dismal depiction of the war of all against all as an ennobling regulative ideal . . ." (p. 164). On the basis of this interpretation, Berkowitz concludes that Nietzsche's earlier idea of contest, elaborated in "Homer's Contest," is "transformed by Zarathustra into a ruthless war . . ." (p. 164).

In "Homer's Contest," Nietzsche points to a creative reevaluation in ancient Greece of what he believes is a natural human drive – the desire to surpass opposition – that provides the conditions for human flourishing. Envy [*Neid*] and grudge [*Groll*], he claims, were two powerful motivations that fanned the flames of strife among people. In Greek myth, Eris (Strife) was the sister of Ares, god of war, and the daughter of Night, and she was almost always associated with evil. But in *Works and Days*, Hesiod calls attention to a second Eris-goddess who brought good to humankind. The good Eris sparks a kind of envy that "provokes human beings to action – not to the action of fights of annihilation but rather to the action of contests."<sup>6</sup> Rather than suppressing the impulse to strive against others, Nietzsche claims, the Greeks reinterpreted this urge and redirected it to serve as a means to a better life. Hesiod's proverb about the potter's grudge – drawn from the lines "this Strife is good for mortal men/Potter hates potter, carpenters compete/And beggar strives with beggar, bard with bard,"<sup>7</sup> – had a lasting influence on Greek ethics, and even Aristotle did not condemn this form of envy when he criticized other kinds.

Nietzsche believed that envy expressed in contests drove people to better their rivals in literature, drama, and art. Whereas the evil Eris manifested desires to bring about complete destruction of what opposes [*Vernichtungslust*] the good goddess incited people to rise above their opponents in

contests [*Wettkämpfe*]. Nietzsche later distinguishes two modes of pursuing victory in competition: in one the victor achieves success by pushing the challenger below the common standard, in the other, victory is won by rising above the opponent.<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche argues that the achievements of Greek culture were made possible by the proliferation of outlets organized on this latter, agonistic model. Creative action thrived in these institutions.

In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche describes himself as “warlike by nature,” but he qualifies this claim with a description of how strength can be developed in opposition and how he chooses his battles: “The strength of those who attack can be measured in a way by the opposition they require: every growth is indicated by the search for a mighty opponent – or problem; for a warlike philosopher challenges problems, too, to single combat. The task is *not* simply to master whatever happens to resist, but what requires us to stake all our strength, suppleness, and fighting skill – opponents that are our equals.”<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche had an interest in “an *honest* duel”: “Where one feels contempt, one *cannot* wage war; where one commands, where one sees something beneath oneself, one has no business waging war.”<sup>10</sup> We might challenge Nietzsche and claim that his work offers evidence that he did not always act on these principles, but we can still read these remarks, especially in the light of his earlier work, as clarifying his views about power, cruelty, and human suffering. In his discussion of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Berkowitz claims that Zarathustra is an advocate of “theft and murder for sport” (p. 166). Does he mean to suggest that Nietzsche no longer distinguishes contest from war and destruction from creative action as he had done earlier? Why this regressive step toward barbarism? One might argue that this is one lesson that Zarathustra learns in the course of the book, but Berkowitz would have him learn nothing but resignation.<sup>11</sup>

I am not suggesting that Nietzsche’s views about cruelty are unproblematic, but they are significantly more refined than Berkowitz acknowledges. Two recent essays confront this issue explicitly: Ivan Soll’s “Nietzsche on Cruelty, Asceticism, and the Failure of Hedonism” and Martha Nussbaum’s “Pity and Mercy: Nietzsche’s Stoicism.”<sup>12</sup> Neither seeks to excuse Nietzsche’s remarks on war and cruelty as “clunkers, embarrassments, unfortunate fulminations,” (p. 11) but both strive to reconcile these passages with Nietzsche’s other interests and ideas. These articles go a long way toward correcting the portrait of Nietzsche as jack-booted thug.

Berkowitz is right to strive to try to preserve the oppositional nature of Nietzsche’s thought. We would be irresponsible philosophers if we simply overlooked passages in which Nietzsche appears to make contradictory statements, and we would be unfair to Nietzsche if we did not expect him to meet the same challenges he poses to Socrates, Plato, and the tradition that follows

them. But we must also strive to be clear about what it was that Nietzsche was trying to accomplish. He believed he could make a contribution toward creating a tension that might stimulate the type of activity he called self-overcoming. Before we convict him for failing to topple Platonic ideals, we must first be clear about the goals of Nietzsche's striving and then evaluate his project in that light.

## Notes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer As Educator*, translated by William Arrowsmith in *Unmodern Observations* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), part 8, p. 220.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* in *On the Genealogy of Morals* and *Ecce Homo*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1967), "Why I am So Wise," part 1, p. 223.
3. Leo Strauss, "Note On The Plan Of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*," *Interpretation* 3: 2–3, pp. 97–113.
4. Alexander Nehamas, "Who Are 'The Philosophers of the Future'?": A Reading of *Beyond Good and Evil*," in *Reading Nietzsche*, edited by Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 46–67.
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1985 (reprint), part 1, "On Enjoying and Suffering the Passions," p. 37.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Homer's Wettkampf," in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Werke*, edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1967ff), volume III, part 2, p. 281. The translation is my own.
7. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, translated by Dorothea Wender in *Hesiod and Theognis* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), lines 23–26, p. 59.
8. See "Homer's Wettkampf," *passim* and *Human All Too Human*, volume 2, part 2, section 29.
9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, "Why I Am So Wise," part 7, p. 232.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 232.
11. Richard Schacht presents a persuasive case for the claim that Zarathustra is not only about Zarathustra's attempts to educate others but about Zarathustra's own education as well. See Richard Schacht, "Zarathustra/Zarathustra as Educator," in *Nietzsche: A Critical Reader*, edited by Peter R. Sedgwick (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1995) pp. 222–249.
12. Both in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals*, edited by Richard Schacht (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

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