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Tamsin Shaw: Nietzsche's Political Skepticism

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Introduction

Without the assistance of priests, no power can become
“legitimate” even today.

—*Human, All Too Human*, I, 472

Nietzsche is a frustrating figure for political theorists. Those who take seriously his insights into morality, culture, and religion have often been struck by the fact that he abstains from developing these insights into a coherent theory of politics. There are two ways in which we might nevertheless try to derive a political theory from his work.

One way would be to uncover an implicit theory underlying his avowed political views. This route has not been widely held to hold much promise. He does, of course, indulge in some strident criticisms of naïve or decadent political ideals. But these have often been simply dismissed as being churlish rather than profound.¹ And detailed, scholarly studies of his attitudes to political phenomena have failed to discover a unifying basis in some implicit and coherent normative political theory.²

¹ Cf. e.g. Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 10. Williams tells us that, although Nietzsche’s views developed beyond his early aestheticism, “he did not move to any view that offered a coherent politics. He himself provides no way of relating his ethical and psychological insights to an intelligible account of modern society—a failing only thinly concealed by the impression he gives of having thoughts about modern politics that are determinate but terrible.”

Brian Leiter has recently concluded that Nietzsche “has no political philosophy, in the conventional sense of a theory of the state and its legitimacy.” He does, Leiter admits, occasionally express views about political matters, “but, read in context, they do not add up to a theoretical account of any of the questions of political philosophy.” *Nietzsche on Morality* (London: Routledge, 2002), 296.

And Keith Ansell-Pearson points out that, in his later works, Nietzsche makes normative suggestions about politics, but he never develops a notion of legitimacy to support them. Cf. *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 41.

² The two most detailed scholarly reconstructions of Nietzsche’s political views and their development in response to contemporary political events may be found in Peter Bergmann, *Nietzsche: “The Last Anti-Political German”* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); and Urs Marti, *“Der grosse Pöbel- und Sklavenaufstand”: Nietzsches Auseinandersetzung mit Revolution und Demokratie* (Stuttgart: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 1993). Marti writes (296): “Was in der Forschung als Nietzsches politische Philosophie bezeichnet wird, ist eine

The other way would be to spell out the political implications of his broader philosophical views. These might be seen to be compatible with his political opinions.³ Or they might be seen as implications that he himself failed to discern and which are therefore at odds with his own political remarks.⁴ But attempts to extract a political theory from his work in this way have yielded such diverse conclusions that it is hard to resist drawing the inference that his ethical and epistemological views do not themselves have any very determinate political consequences.⁵

In this book, I would like to defend the view that Nietzsche indeed fails to articulate any positive, normative political theory. It is tempting to assume that there are only uninteresting reasons (lack of understanding, lack of interest, unreflective parochialism) for this failing. But I want to make a case for the claim that there is an interesting reason. I shall argue that, in his early and middle works in particular, Nietzsche articulates a deep political skepticism that can best be described as a skepticism about legitimacy.⁶

In using the term *political skepticism*, I am not alluding to the established positions that generally go by that name in the Anglophone tradition, such as those associated with Michael Oakeshott and Isaiah Berlin. The former involves a claim about the limitations of technical expertise in politics;⁷ the latter an insistence that we cannot assume there will be

Ansammlung von Stimmungen, tiefen Ängsten, vorsichtigen Hoffnungen und realitätsfernen Zukunftsvisionen.”

³ Some commentators have seen the hierarchical and aristocratic tendencies in his later writings as being deeply rooted in his philosophical insights. Cf. esp. Bruce Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and Frederick Appel, *Nietzsche contra Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁴ This discrepancy is stressed especially by Mark Warren in *Nietzsche and Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).

⁵ Steven Aschheim has recorded the tremendous diversity of political positions that Nietzsche's work has been employed to defend in Germany. Cf. *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany: 1890–1990* (University of California Press, 1994). Tomasz Grzegorz Pszczółkowski has provided a detailed typology of interpretations of Nietzsche's politics in his *Zur Methodologie der Interpretation des Politischen bei Friedrich Nietzsche* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996). Cf. also Tracy Strong's essay, "Nietzsche's Political Misappropriation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Bernd Magnus and Kathleen Higgins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 119–47.

⁶ I will use the term *early works* to refer to *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871) and contemporaneous writings. The term *middle works* will refer to the *Untimely Meditations* (1873–76), and all further writings up to and including the first four books of *The Gay Science*. All of the writings including and following the fifth book of *The Gay Science* (1886) will be called the "mature works" or "later works."

⁷ Cf. Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics," in *Rationalism in Politics* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991).

any natural harmony between the plurality of political values that we pursue.⁸ Nietzsche, I shall argue, is less concerned with the conflicts that arise when we try to realize our values in political life than with our inability to arrive at a form of politics that is genuinely grounded in normative authority.

His guiding political vision, I shall claim, is oriented around the rise of modern state, which requires normative consensus in order to rule, and a simultaneous process of secularization that seems to make uncoerced consensus impossible. The state has the ideological capacity to manufacture this consensus but no necessary concern that it should involve convergence around the right (as opposed to merely politically expedient) norms.

Nietzsche doubts that secular societies can otherwise generate sufficient consensus. They therefore lack any reliable mechanism for placing real normative constraints on state power. But, I shall argue, he does not want to give up either on the possibility of having stable political authority or on his commitment to an independent source of normative authority. So his political skepticism derives from the fact that he holds both to be necessary but cannot see how they can be compatible.

To many of Nietzsche's readers, no doubt, it will sound as though this kind of political skepticism presupposes precisely the kind of normative realism that he has been widely taken to reject. Any interpreter of Nietzsche must face a tricky problem concerning the status of his evaluative claims, particularly in the later works. The anti-objectivist meta-ethics that is suggested there seems to be in conflict with the objectivist-sounding evaluative judgments that he defends.⁹ Some interpreters claim that there are readings that can render these aspects of his work compatible, in particular by refusing to take the value judgments at face value. Nietzsche does not mean them, they claim, to express objective normative truths. I shall defend the view that the evidence is mixed, but that the incompatibility thesis provides us with a more plausible and coherent account, as well as one that can help us to make sense of this interesting political dilemma.

If we read Nietzsche, at least in his later period, as a consistent antirealist, we will still encounter a version of the political problem that I have

⁸ Cf. "Two Concepts of Liberty," *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), and "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁹ As John Richardson puts it, "The main interpretive puzzle about Nietzsche's metaethics" is "how to reconcile his emphatic 'perspectivizing' of all values, including his own, with his equally vehement 'ranking' of values—a ranking that so clearly purports to some privileged status." *Nietzsche's New Darwinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 68. Richardson himself defends an interesting compatibility thesis, which will be discussed in chapter 5. Cf. also Richard Schacht, *Nietzsche* (London and New York: Routledge, 1983), 419.

described, concerning an inability to formulate a coherent conception of political legitimacy. On an antirealist view of the status of his own values, Nietzsche must not only lack a normative political theory that can be justified to others, but will also (as we shall see in chapter 4) lack a coherent conception of how his own values might ground political authority.

But even if we take Nietzsche's value-criticism to be objectivist in orientation, that is, if we read him as a moral realist, we will arrive (perhaps more surprisingly) at an antitheoretical view of politics. And on this reading we can make sense of the distinctive form of political skepticism that he discovers.

As I have already indicated, there are many different ways in which we might try to assess Nietzsche's contribution to political thinking. I do not myself believe that the political skepticism that I am attributing to him will provide an interpretive framework that renders coherent every aspect of his thought, or one that is compatible with all the diverse philosophical and political claims that he makes. But I hope to show that it is at least a sufficiently distinctive and interesting strand in his work to merit examination in its own right.

NIETZSCHE'S VIEW OF THE STATE

The political skepticism that I attribute to Nietzsche derives from two important descriptive premises. One concerns the nature of modern states and in particular the fact that their ability to rule a society requires convergence, in that society, on some shared normative beliefs. The other concerns the inability of secular societies to generate the required convergence through noncoercive means. I shall take these descriptive premises, which originate in Nietzsche's early and middle-period writings, to be held fairly stably across his career.

Nietzsche sees that modern states cannot rule through direct coercion alone. They must be perceived to be legitimate.¹⁰ This means that they must have a perceived entitlement to rule. Their subjects will accept those political obligations that they believe conform to the correct norms for political legitimacy. For example, if they believe that religion has supplied them with the correct set of norms, they will measure their political obligations against this independent standard for moral appraisal.¹¹

States functionally require that the political obligations they seek to impose on their subjects be accepted by them. The aspiration to legitimacy in this sense is a "transactional" feature of states, as John Simmons

¹⁰ *HTH*, I, 472.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

has pointed out.¹² It concerns the obligations of particular people to particular states, and not just the justification of the state per se. Although Nietzsche speculates, in passing, about what a world without states would be like, he accepts that political agency in the modern world is concentrated in them.¹³ The most interesting questions that he raises about states concern not their basic justification, but rather what we shall refer to as their ideological need. People will only accept the authority of a particular state if that state seems, in its form and its behavior, to conform to independently valid moral norms. The ideological need of the state consists in this need for perceived legitimacy.

Many states are accepted to be legitimate in this sense. Their rule is supported by normative consensus. But as we shall see, Nietzsche claims that insofar as this normative consensus exists in secular societies, it is the product of political coercion. The state, he tells us “lies in all the tongues of good and evil.”¹⁴ States are quite capable not only of compelling obedience but also of manufacturing a misguided moral commitment to the obligations that they impose on us.¹⁵

Although people will not consciously espouse views that they know to be mere prescriptions of state ideology, states, through their control of apparently independent institutions—for instance, educational and religious institutions—have powerful means of implicitly asserting control over belief. States can thereby manufacture the very normative beliefs to which they then appeal in their claims to legitimacy. We will refer to this phenomenon as political self-justification. It is made possible by the ideological capacity of modern states.¹⁶

¹² A. John Simmons, “Justification and Legitimacy,” *Ethics* 109, no. 4 (July 1999): 739–71.

¹³ In *HTH*, I, 472, he speculates that in the absence of religion the state as a form of political organization might die out. He warns against any rash political experiments that would hasten this process.

¹⁴ *TSZ*, part I, “On the New Idol”: “Every people speaks its tongue of good and evil, which the neighbour does not understand. It has invented its own language of customs and rights. But the state tells lies in all the tongues of good and evil; and whatever it says it lies.”

¹⁵ States have, for example, co-opted religious authority to this end. “As a rule,” Nietzsche tells us, “the state will know how to win the priests over to itself because it needs their concealed and intimate education of souls and knows how to value servants who appear outwardly to represent a quite different interest.” *HTH*, I, 472.

¹⁶ Mark Warren has argued that this problem of covert self-justification is the primary political problem that Nietzsche sees as resulting from secularization. He writes: “Because the loss of Christian-moral culture occurs without the formation of a sovereign self, the opportunity exists for the state to provide its own legitimations by manipulating self-identities. In this way, the state assumes a role vacated by the church. Only in the modern period, then, does it become possible for the state to exploit reflexive needs directly by providing a vicarious identity for the self in relation to the community” (*Nietzsche and Political Thought*, 220). I shall explore this same loss of extrapolitical authority, but instead of focusing on the

I shall argue that Nietzsche sees this political self-justification as an inevitable feature of secular polities, for he holds that in the absence of myth or religion we have no other means of generating the required normative agreement. There can be no uncoerced consensus sufficient to support political authority. Nietzsche's reasons for holding this view are complex and will be set out in chapters 3, 4, and 5.

The strength of the claim will depend on how strong an impossibility Nietzsche takes uncoerced normative agreement to be. He might mean that uncoerced agreement is impossible only "for us," that is, for human beings given a particular stage of their intellectual development. Or he might mean that it is in principle impossible for us to achieve. In fact, we shall see, his view is grounded in diverse observations and speculations concerning our intellectual capabilities, as well as philosophical claims about the nature and difficulty of moral criticism. I do not attribute to him any confident view about the extent to which the situation is remediable, should human capacities develop beyond their current state. But I will claim that he seems inclined toward pessimism.

Given Nietzsche's reflections on the state and on the general unreliability of normative belief, he must assume that it is extremely unlikely that any independent source of normative authority will be able to compete with the state's ideological control. This view of the modern political predicament forms the basis of Nietzsche's political skepticism. In itself this is merely a descriptive view, and does not yet amount to a form of skepticism. But I shall argue that insofar as Nietzsche believes that we can neither be satisfied with this state of affairs, nor see a way to overcome it, he must be viewed as a political skeptic.

NIETZSCHE AS A SKEPTIC ABOUT LEGITIMACY

Nietzsche's concern with the state, I shall argue, is normatively driven. He is an opponent of its ideological incursions into the realm of culture. His antipathy is most evident in the middle-period writings, where he has very specific complaints about the German state. But his opposition does not simply derive from a contingent clash between his own values and those promoted by this state. It derives from a principled objection to political ideology. The very fact of having normative convictions entails a rejection of the untrammelled ideological authority of the state.

It would simply be incoherent for anyone to have strong normative commitments and at the same time to concede to the state the power to

manipulability of identity as the basis of our vulnerability to state ideology, I shall try to bring out the salience of Nietzsche's claims concerning normative authority.

override all normative authority. If someone acknowledges a distinction between correct and incorrect values, they are acknowledging some determinant of that correctness. The fundamental determinant will be some property such that, in virtue of possessing it, this will be the correct value to have. They might hold that this property consists in its being sanctioned by God, or corresponding to normative facts, or even just being endorsed by their own pro-attitudes. Very few people hold the view that this property consists in being sanctioned by the state. Even political realists, who ultimately value state power above all else, tend to do so because it tracks some property such as, in Leopold von Ranke's case, what God wills.¹⁷ To the extent that the state is assigned a role in determining people's values, this authorization will be derivative. It will derive from recognition of some independent source of normative authority.

If we accept some independent source of normative authority, we cannot concede total ideological power to the state. We must preserve the conditions of possibility of valuing. We might call this a "transcendental" argument for limiting the state's ideological capacity. Nietzsche cannot, then, coherently accept or endorse the ideologically predatory state. I shall argue in chapter 1 that he is a vociferous opponent of it. He aims to preserve evaluative independence.

It does not, *prima facie*, look very difficult to come up with a theory of legitimacy that meets this "transcendental" demand. There are certainly contemporary political theorists who would hold that that is just what is taken care of by the weak, or deflationary, notion of legitimacy that they defend. This weak notion does not require that political institutions conform to objectively *correct* norms. It involves, along with the view that states must justify themselves to their subjects, only what Bernard Williams refers to as the "critical theory principle," or the claim that "the acceptance of a justification does not count if the acceptance itself is produced by the coercive power which is supposedly being justified."¹⁸ So legitimacy in this sense requires that political institutions conform to the

¹⁷ There may be a few exceptions among secular reason-of-state theorists. In his *Idee der Staatsräson in der neueren Geschichte* (entitled *Machiavellism*, in the English edition), Friedrich Meinecke tells us that the state "is an organic structure whose full power can only be maintained by allowing it in some way to continue growing; and *raison d'état* indicates the path and goal for such a growth." An understanding of the characteristic way of life of an individual state, Meinecke claims, yields normative insight: "From the realm of what is and what will be, there constantly emerges, through the medium of understanding, a notion of what ought to be and what must be." Friedrich Meinecke, *Machiavellism: The Doctrine of Raison d'État and Its Place in Modern History*, trans. Douglas Scott, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction, 1998), 1.

¹⁸ Bernard Williams, "Realism and Moralism in Political Theory," in *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6.

accepted norms of those over whom they rule, and that acceptance of these norms be uncoerced, at least by the political institutions that they purport to legitimate.

But although this weak notion seems helpfully unambitious in demanding conformity to the professed normative beliefs of a population, rather than to the right norms, it presupposes precisely the kind of uncoerced convergence that Nietzsche thinks secularism is making increasingly unlikely. In the absence of any account of how uncoerced convergence might be possible, it must fall short of being a feasible theory of legitimacy.¹⁹

Nietzsche claims that popular values, in the absence of myth or religion, will not manifest the kind of convergence that is necessary to support a shared form of political authority. As I shall argue in chapter 2, in ancient Greece as well as in the modern world, secularization involves, for Nietzsche, acceptance of the view that reason is the only legitimate guide to belief and value. Reasoning does not, however, appear to lead to normative consensus. And there does not seem to Nietzsche to be any secular institution that can compete with the state in shaping popular belief through some nonrational means. His own initial hopes that art might supply such a galvanizing force turn out, as we shall see in chapter 2, to be flawed.

A moral antirealist would have special grounds for being concerned about this problem. The antirealist holds that moral reasoning cannot generate convergence on the truth, since there are no objective normative truths to converge on. We cannot, then, reliably expect rational consensus to be the outcome of moral reasoning. But at the same time, people in secular cultures will not consciously defer to any nonrational authority, in the way that, for instance, religious people might defer to revelation. So the combination of secularism and antirealism, or the refusal to accept nonrational forms of authority combined with skepticism about moral reason, makes the problem seem especially intractable.

But what about the moral realism or objectivism? It looks as though this might supply a way out of the problem, by offering the hope of rational convergence. A stronger notion of legitimacy, one that aimed for convergence on the correct norms might then appear to offer a more feasible solution. And, as I suggested earlier, there seems to be quite a powerful residual element of moral realism even in Nietzsche's later work (I defend this view in chapter 5). Nietzsche presents his own evaluative

¹⁹I am assuming here that practical impossibility is a knock-down argument for any theory of political legitimacy. If a theory of legitimacy is intended to supply us with standards for the evaluation of political institutions, then an ideal that could never be realized institutionally must fail in a vital respect.

convictions as if they were normative truths that he has discovered. These concern what is good for individuals, for societies and cultures, and for humanity as a whole. So, if there are discoverable moral truths, can we not hope for convergence around them? And would this not constitute a robustly independent form of normative authority that could compete with the state's ideological capacity?

Nietzsche's most distinctive argument for political skepticism, I shall argue, rests on the claim that even if we can assume that there are knowable normative truths, secular societies will still have a tremendous problem in making those truths effective in political life. Even objective normative truth would not be able to provide a basis for genuine political legitimacy because the majority of people would have no means of recognizing it as such. If we read implicitly realist assumptions into Nietzsche's later value-criticism, I shall argue, we will find in his work an even deeper form of political skepticism.

There are two ways in which, we might imagine, we could acquire normative knowledge. First of all, we could try to discover the truth ourselves, through the use of our own reason. I shall argue that Nietzsche thinks most people simply lack the intellectual capabilities to do this. If we take his later evaluation of values to involve a quest for truth, his value-criticism has to be seen to reveal how widespread, deep, and intransigent error inevitably is. Normative truths, we have to infer, are difficult to discover.

The second way in which people might acquire normative knowledge is through deference to experts whose authority they recognize. But even if there were indeed people (such as philosophers) who had the relevant intellectual capabilities and were able to ascertain the truth, most people would still be incapable of recognizing their authority. They would have no reason to defer to any particular individual who claims expertise in this area, for they would not be equipped to assess whose view really should be rationally binding for them.

This problem concerning normative expertise has been explored by Alexander Nehamas, for whom it constitutes the central puzzle of Socrates' ethical teaching. Socrates, he tells us, raises the question of how *aretê* can be taught, given that those who want to learn it face the problem of identifying a teacher with the right expertise. In order to do so, they would already have to be experts themselves "regarding what benefits and harms the soul."²⁰ Otherwise they risk being harmed by an incompetent teacher.

Socrates' insight, Nehamas tells us, is that "in the case of shoemakers or doctors, we can tell whether the shoe fits or the fever has gone: we

²⁰ Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 80.

have relatively clear ways of recognizing them. But in the case of ethical experts, it is not clear that we can recognize the experts independently of the fact that we find their views and their reasons for them—their reasons for living as they do—convincing. But to find such reasons is already to follow them.”²¹ We are then presented with a profound problem concerning how knowledge of *aretê* can ever be communicated to others. The Platonic solution, Nehamas tells us, is to claim that people have *aretê* only by divine dispensation.²²

Nietzsche, I shall argue in this book, is concerned with the distinctively secular problem that arises when theism no longer seems to provide a credible means of resolving the issue. The problem of moral knowledge resurfaces for Nietzsche as a post-Christian problem. And it seems to be a peculiarly destabilizing problem in a world in which social and political ideas and institutions have taken for granted the possibility of popular access to moral truth.

This problem was not apparent so long as people believed that religion was the correct guide to normative truth. Religions have suggested two different solutions. On one model, they have insisted, people might rely on some inner revelation, or their own conscience, as a reliable guide to truth and value. On another, people might defer to the authority of appropriate experts, or a priesthood. But on Nietzsche’s view, there are no comparable secular mechanisms for making genuine normative truth popularly authoritative. Our intellectual capacities are generally inadequate. And secular societies conspicuously lack any recognized normative expertise.

So his political skepticism, I shall argue, is motivated by the perception of an important disanalogy between religious and secular worldviews. Organized religions can develop structures through which their normative and nonnormative truth-claims might come to wield authority over popular belief. The exploitation of various nonrational forms of persuasion (involving acceptance of the authority of revelation, scripture, a clerisy) has permitted religions to promote acceptance of the beliefs and values that they take to be correct. Religious authority dictates that our justifications for belief and value must end in some specific place, that is, the faith that comprises that particular religious worldview. A religious priesthood might therefore devise various means of establishing these limits. But secular, rational justifications do not in principle have to end at any particular point. Even if philosophers can identify valid norms, they cannot set themselves up as a secular priesthood and establish similar mechanisms of normative control.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

²² *Ibid.*, 89.

Nietzsche's political skepticism, then, consists in the view that we simply cannot reconcile our need for normative authority with our need for political authority. Given his own historical situation, as we shall see, he was vividly aware of the fragility of any apparent compromise between these demands. He does, in the later writings, occasionally seem inclined to give up on one or the other. But the real challenge that his skepticism presents to modern politics is somehow to find a way of not giving up on either.