

# Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 5 No. 2, June 2004

---

## Book Review

---

*The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two*, Alenka Zupancic, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003. Series Forward, 181pp., notes. ISBN 0-262-74026-5. \$16.95, paper.

---

It is appropriate that the MIT Press begins its Short Circuits Series with a book on Nietzsche. (The other inaugural book is Slavoj Žižek's *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*.) As series editor Slavoj Žižek explains, to short circuit is to "cross wires that do not usually touch." It is not deconstruction in that it does not (necessarily) seek to connect the text to any historical movement or cultural process. Manipulating a text from within, as it were, is the surest way for it to reveal its true nature. This is the method employed, Žižek claims, by Marx, in his studies of capitalism, and Nietzsche, in his critique of morality.

The book, consistent with its subtitle, is comprised primarily of two halves. The lengthy Introduction begins by noting the discrepancy between Nietzsche's style of writing and the style used by those who write on him. Scholars all too frequently disregard Nietzsche's bombastic *ad hominem* attacks or treat them as mere opinions, Zupancic claims; and, in the process, most scholars miss the truly radical implications of his philosophy, and misunderstand the "event Nietzsche" (4). Zupancic seems unaware or unconcerned that Nietzsche is responsible for inspiring the very trend she argues against. Nietzsche, we recall, (re)defined philosophy as the love of one's own particular truths, and his "philosophers of the future" are characterized by their ability to create values. Treating philosophic truths as opinions is a testament to Nietzsche's success, not to the failing of the academy to come to terms with Nietzsche's philosophy.

Nietzsche is an event, writes Zupancic, insofar as philosophy is the "process of truth" in which the Real is revealed through declaration and the duality, or redoubling, that distinguishes the event from its pronouncement (9). In other words, philosophy is not the love of truth as an end unto itself; it is a willful act that exists independently from what it creates. How, we might ask, would this work with an emotion such as love? "The Real here is the very ground on which we stand when we are declaring it," she contends, "and this is what redoubles the declaration of love at its core" (12).

It is not his rejection of ontology or embrace of "multiplicity"—what some have called perspectivism—that distinguishes Nietzsche from other philosophers; rather, it is his invention of the "figure of the Two." This element introduces a temporality or "time loop" into Nietzsche's notion of truth. That truth is temporal means that truth "becomes what it is" (13). As Nietzsche wrote (in *The Gay Science* and elsewhere), there are no facts, only interpretations; and some interpretations serve us better than others do. The image of "Dionysus and the Crucified," a central theme in many of Nietzsche's writings, also

epitomizes duality, temporality, and becoming; and Nietzsche himself is the point where these two events coincide.

Zupancic nevertheless misses Nietzsche's repeated statements where he equates himself with Dionysus. In the penultimate aphorism of *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche claims to be "the last disciple and initiate" of the philosopher-god Dionysus; and in his other writings, Nietzsche refers to himself as "The Antichrist" and depicts Christianity as a religion hostile to philosophy and truth. This is a glimpse into what we might call Nietzsche's religion of the future: a polytheistic religion that serves culture by promoting and even nurturing what is highest in mankind. In this, Nietzsche takes his bearings from the Greeks. Yet by emphasizing the concept of "the Two," Zupancic does great harm to the positive elements of Nietzsche's philosophy, including his embrace of Dionysus and Greek high culture.

Moreover, Zupancic glosses over the radicalism of Nietzsche's epistemology. Focusing on the duality of event and declaration—or even a "double declaration" (19)—might reveal a hitherto underappreciated aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy, but it does so by ignoring the goal Nietzsche set for his philosophy. Zupancic is correct that, through the act of declaration, truth is inherently connected to the will; but she is too inattentive to the nature and purpose of the declaration. Much of Nietzsche's writings, especially his later works, take the matter of rank and order seriously. Nietzsche is no teleologist; there is no decisive goal or single aim in his writings. But a process that lacks any goals is one that he would reject.

Zupancic's analysis of Nietzsche turns then to the doctrine of eternal return. For Zupancic, eternity is not an endless circle, but "those rare moments when this circularity appears, becomes tangible for us in the encounter of two temporalities—the encounter that distinguishes the event as such" (21). While this is a perfectly defensible interpretation of Nietzsche, it does not seem to be consistent with Zupancic's emphasis on becoming. If circularity is not constant, then becoming cannot be either. Here, Zupancic introduces, albeit inadvertently, an element of being and temporality into her otherwise atemporal account of Nietzsche.

This is also evident in her emphasis on "Noon," the subject of the second half of the book. It is divided into four roughly equal sections: "Troubles with Truth," "From Nothingness Incorporated...," "... via double affirmation...," and "... to Nothingness as Minimal Difference." The book takes its title from the Nietzsche's depiction of midday, where the sun casts no shadow and things cast shadows only upon themselves. "The 'great midday' is conceived by Nietzsche as a kind of ultimate perspective," Zupancic writes. "Its singularity resides in the fact that it is not a point of view, but the point of the gaze" (23). Yet Nietzsche preferred the image of midday to emphasize the illusive and temporal nature of truth. The section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* called "At Noon," for example, depicts the title character napping, hardly at the height of his philosophic or creative prowess. What for Nietzsche is only a moment, Zupancic makes into an eternity.

The first half of the book is entitled "Nietzsche the metapsychologist," and also contains four parts: "'God is Dead,'" "The Ascetic Ideal," "Nihilism," and "... as a 'Crisis of Sublimation.'" Its purpose is to illustrate the extent to which Nietzsche identified the discontent at the heart of Western culture. Zupancic focuses on asceticism and the rise of slave morality, and how each is connected with Nietzsche's challenge to liberalism. Asceticism, Zupancic contends, is Christianity after the death of god. By the death of god, Nietzsche means a symbolic death, Zupancic explains; the actual death of god was the event that made Christianity possible.

The author goes to great lengths to illustrate the two-fold nature of Nietzsche's pronouncement on the death of god: god is dead, yes; but "Christianity survived the death of god." A further clarification of this thesis would add "so far." Christianity may have survived the death of god, but its time is up. As she does with her notion of duality and declaration, Zupancic misses the greater implications of Nietzsche's philosophy.

Zupancic makes the same mistake in her, rather material, understanding of asceticism. She presents a Nietzsche overly concerned with enjoyment and comfort. Zupancic exaggerates the likely egoism of the ascetic—going so far as to liken it to Freud's superego—and overlooks the fact that Nietzsche saw the ascetic primarily as a barrier to instinct and a proper appreciation of human nature. For Nietzsche, asceticism had little to do with "the pleasure principle," and everything to do with the harm that it did to the philosophic process. (It is for this reason that Nietzsche suggests solitude to replace asceticism as a means to philosophy.) The author is right to distinguish this element in Nietzsche's philosophy, but she should call it what Nietzsche calls it: the will to power. Zupancic stumbles onto this realization during her treatment of Nietzsche's typology of nihilism, but she fails to appreciate how it affects her study. We might also wonder whether Zupancic's Nietzsche too closely resembles the "Last Man" that Nietzsche found so nauseating.

One of the more original pronouncements in *The Shortest Shadow* is Zupancic's contention that master morality remains, for the most part, uncorrupted by the change in morality. The victory of slave morality does not "in the least subvert or abolish the topography of mastery," she writes (45). While Zupancic is correct—nowhere does Nietzsche indicate a change in the nature of mastery—she once again misses the larger implications of Nietzsche's project: an appeal to masters and would-be masters. Slave morality may be perfect in the modern world, but Nietzsche's aim is to restore master morality as a just form of rule.

Nietzsche's intention would be clearer to Zupancic had she not followed Alain Badiou in seeing jenseits—the "beyond" in *Beyond Good and Evil*—as neither a synthesis nor a transcendence. Instead, they both view it as a sort of midpoint. Although this would explain why noon is a recurring image and theme throughout Nietzsche's work, it misconstrues Nietzsche's critique of Christianity and what it has meant for life. Nietzschean morality, properly understood, is not a midpoint between good and evil, but a radical revaluation, where good becomes bad and evil becomes good.

Zupancic's repeated neglect of the positive elements in Nietzsche's writings leads to absurd conclusions concerning life. As she writes, "Life is creative neutrality, taking place in the middle, between disjunctive synthesis and conjunctive analysis" (87). To confound her error, the author introduces a sort of egalitarianism into this creativity. "To be powerful is integrally to affirm the equality of Being," she writes. "To be weak is to mutilate its neutrality" (88). Life is creativity, but Nietzschean creativity is a divine act that can neither be neutral in its aim nor equal in its value. Nietzsche's "new philosophers" may be legislators and creators of value, but with regard to high culture, not all values are created equal.

The book concludes with an odd addendum, entitled "On Love as Comedy," in which, save for the explanatory introduction, Nietzsche does not appear. Instead, Zupancic discusses these themes, by way of Kant, Hitler, and the Marx Brothers. The pages, the author admits, were written originally for a project wholly unrelated to her book on Nietzsche. It is included, Zupancic contends, because it illustrates the primary thesis of her book: truth is multi-faceted.

While initially promising, Zupancic's methodology is unnecessarily distracting in its omission. At no point does she explain the particulars of her short circuit. What two elements of Nietzsche has she crossed? What truth has been revealed by this process? The actual methodology of the book is inspired by Jacques Lacan's appropriation of Freud, and it seems quite fitting that someone would turn a psychoanalytical lens against the very man Freud found so inspirational.

Yet we have to wonder whether Nietzsche himself would have rejected Lacanian psychoanalysis. Nietzsche's view of life, as the will to power, inspired Freud's notion of the ego, which Lacan rejected as illusory and false. For Lacan, the Freudian project of bringing forth the unconscious is a fanciful goal; instead, it is the unconscious that should be primary. Nietzsche himself would have agreed with the thesis of this book, but would have disagreed with the tacit assumption that the self and the consciousness conclude in a product so aimless and, therefore, lifeless.

*The Shortest Shadow* is a curious book in that it professes a methodology it does not utilize and concludes with an essay where the subject fails to appear. It is, however, genuinely insightful in that it treats Nietzsche as the psychologist he professed to be. Although the text can be cumbersome at times, particularly for those unschooled in psychoanalytic philosophy, it is quite remarkable in its style and, for the most part, worth the effort.

Steven Michels  
Sacred Heart University

---

Copyright © 2004, Humboldt State University