

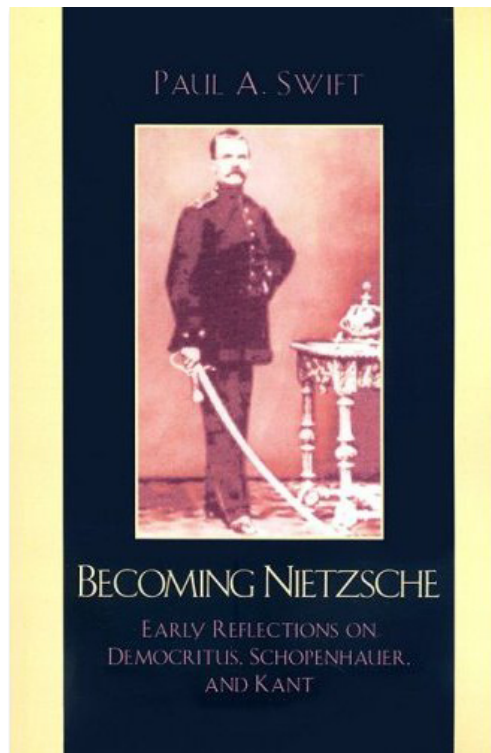
Book Review of **Becoming Nietzsche: Early Reflections on Democritus, Schopenhauer and Kant**

by Paul A. Swift (Lexington Books, 2008)

reviewed by John Montfort Gist (Western New Mexico University)

To his credit, Nietzsche's philosophy remains enigmatic, an essential characteristic of any enduring work of art. Paul A. Swift, in his study *Becoming Nietzsche*, recognizes that "There probably have been more diverse and conflicting interpretations of Nietzsche than any other thinker in the history of the world, as is evidenced by the very different senses of what Nietzsche's primary significance is" (120). Taken as a whole, Nietzsche's writing is not something that "is," as in fixed in form, but something that "becomes," as each generation of interpreters struggle to unravel the intricacies of his philosophical system. Swift looks to Nietzsche's early writings, in the form of notes and unfinished essays (1866-68), which focus on Democritus, Schopenhauer, and Kant, in order to provide a foundation for understanding the ambiguity that remains at the heart of Nietzschean discourse. He also emphasizes the role of Friedrich Lange in this stage of Nietzsche's development, though he is not the first to do this, as writers such as Claudia Crawford and others have pointed out Lange's influence, as well.

Although Swift applauds Nietzsche's view that "There are no facts, only interpretations" (*WLN*), he does not believe that all interpretations of Nietzsche have equal merit. It should be noted that the above quote is all-too-often employed to distort Nietzsche's philosophy. Nietzsche does not suggest that facts do not exist and the world is an illusion but rather that "there are no eternal facts, just as there are no absolute truths" (*HH* §2). Swift's interpretation of Nietzsche, then, is not designed to be exhaustive but informative, a clearing of the way, a light from which others may glimpse into Nietzsche's early influences. His role is not to define but to illuminate. As such, Swift attempts "to show that the view of Nietzsche as a philosopher of becoming (in the



Heraclitean sense) is justified, in spite of the fact that Nietzsche is only occasionally thought of in that sense” (120). Swift, in my opinion, makes his case insofar as Nietzsche would reject **Par-menidean** absolutes, although the work does little to clarify exactly what value a “philosopher of becoming” possesses in the body of philosophical discourse, wrought as it is with metaphysical constructs designed to corral that which may be beyond capture by human means. Certainly the philosopher of becoming undermines traditional teleological explanations concerning the meaning (value) of life, but does it, as Nietzsche would have demanded, erect something in the place of that which it has destroyed? Swift could have gone much further on this point. It is understood by most scholars that Kant, Schopenhauer, and even Democritus (through the works of Diogenes Laertis) influenced Nietzsche. The question becomes: is becoming a innovative metaphysical system or something entirely different, a new perspective that is philosophical, spiritual, and artistic at the same time? This question, which is key in interpreting Nietzsche, goes beyond the scope of Swift’s limited study.

Critics of Nietzsche are fond of (wrongly) pointing out that, in the end, Nietzsche’s radical perspectivism leads to nightmarish worldview in which subjectivism reigns supreme, a world in which the individual’s interpretation of the aesthetic called “life” leads, necessarily, to nihilism. If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, then all things are potentially beautiful and horrific at once. Any chance at meaning is lost, as myriad competing interpretations cancel one another out until there is no meaning at all. If all is equal, then existence is meaningless. The philosophy of becoming, then, develops into a doctrine of nihilism, an irony not lost to critics of Heraclitus and Nietzsche alike. Pierre Klossowski pointed out decades ago that Nietzsche is not a nihilistic thinker but is in opposition to it and sees it only as a stage that humanity must pass through.¹ In pointing out Nietzsche’s early philosophical influences, Swift manages, whether intentionally or not, to highlight the challenge that is often misunderstood in Nietzsche’s “philosophy of life.”

As Swift correctly points out, by the early 1870’s Nietzsche was referring to his own philosophy as “inverted Platonism” (78). This tendency may be what first attracted Nietzsche to the philosophy of Democritus. It is crucial to understand that with “inverted Platonism” Nietzsche does not jettison Plato’s theory of transcendent ideals but instead, after inversion, appropriates it for his own use by bringing ideals out of the abstract heavens and into concrete living. In this way, teleology, too, is not abandoned but re-contextualized into Nietzsche’s philosophy. An inverted teleology, in which the end is contained, and thus annulled within the becoming, is an original contribution of Nietzsche, though it could be attached to the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, as well. In other words, life is the ideal, not the afterlife, and living in itself is the only arena in which meaning (value) can be found. This is not nihilism in any traditional sense, rather it is an affirmation that serves as the foundation of Nietzsche’s entire philosophy: the value of life is contained within life, not outside of it. So the struggle to express potential in

¹ Pierre Klossowski, *Such a Deathly Desire*, Russel ford, trans., State University of New York Press, 2007

order to create meaning begins.

Swift suggests that Democritus helped shape Nietzsche's ideas as well as fueled his rejection of Platonic ideals:

Democritus's interpretation of teleological causes had an impact on Nietzsche's entrance into philosophy, since Democritus appears to have rejected the idea of order bestowed upon nature by an external intelligent designer [...] Democritus was a sober physicist who was not drunk from the hope of *Nous* to serve as the basis of an anthropomorphic, natural teleology (15).

In Democritus, Nietzsche finds a kindred spirit, and it follows that Nietzsche gave some credence to the apocryphal story that Plato wanted to have the works of Democritus destroyed. For Nietzsche, Democritus proved to be an important alternative to Platonism. Diogenes Laertis was the one to offer up this kindred spirit to Nietzsche:

The end (*telos*) of action [according to Democritus] is tranquility, which is not identical with pleasure, as some by false interpretation have understood, but a state in which the soul continues calm and strong, undisturbed by any fear or superstition, or any other emotion (15).

This resembles Schopenhauer, and, interestingly, Buddhism, which, like traditional teleology, rejects life. Nietzsche would later reject Schopenhauer on the grounds of pessimism and a suspicion of his claim of access to the absolute. He also rejects the idea of tranquility in his later writings, associating it with seeking peace, peacefulness of the mind. For Nietzsche, there were no absolutes accessible to the realm of the living, only probabilities based on the movement of life. In Nietzsche's scheme, there can be no probability of the absolute, as life as probability (or better yet potentiality) precludes an endgame and, therefore, an absorbing absolute which swallows up becoming. In line with Heraclitus, who credited a mysterious *Logos* as that which lends cohesion to an eternal becoming, Nietzsche inverts teleology so that the endgame conceived by traditional theologians and philosophers becomes the game itself, life without end, an eternal creative act.

Swift suggests that, for Nietzsche, God (the unchanging absolute) was already dying in ancient Greece:

The conflict between Platonism and Democritus may be expressed in terms of a conflict between "this worldly" and "other worldly" philosophies. Like Feuerbach and Marx, Nietzsche suspects that fixation on other worlds ultimately serves to deny and neglect the reality of this world, or even worse, slander this world [...] The Democritean ethics are heralded by Nietzsche precisely because they do not jump into the supernatural, favoring a sober scientific inquiry aimed at securing a strong, undisturbed

reviewed by:

John
Montfort
Gist

Agonist 3

disposition, free from bodily pain, anxiety and disturbance (33).

This is not nihilism. On the contrary, life is meaningful in and of itself without desire or need for validation from somewhere over the rainbow, outside of life, a transcendent, ghostly reality which, for Nietzsche, was the true essence of a counterproductive nihilism. As with most things Nietzschean, however, this early endorsement of scientific rationalism would later come under attack:

There are no scientific methods which alone lead to knowledge! We have to tackle things experimentally, now angry with them and now kind, and be successively just, passionate and cold with them. One person addresses things as a policeman, a second as a father confessor, a third as an inquisitive wanderer. Something can be wrung from them now with sympathy, now with force; reverence for their secrets will take one person forward; indiscretion and roguishness in revealing their secrets will do the same for another. We investigators are, like all conquerors, seafarers, adventurers, of an audacious morality and must reconcile ourselves to being considered on the whole evil (D §432).

For Nietzsche, like Heraclitus, change is the essence of becoming and one should therefore expect Nietzsche's philosophy to evolve over time. A pure, cold rationality as presented by Diogenes could not do justice to the vicissitudes of life. Emotion, irrationality, love, passion, and desire also play key roles. As evolutionary biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky aptly observed,

Seen in retrospect, evolution as a whole doubtless had a general direction, from simple to complex, from dependence on to relative independence of the environment, to greater and greater autonomy of individuals, greater and greater development of sense organs and nervous systems conveying and processing information about the state of the organism's surroundings, and finally greater and greater consciousness. You can call this direction progress or by some other name.²

When viewed from an evolutionary perspective, and Nietzsche was, as we know, certainly aware of the evolutionary theories of his time, Nietzsche's philosophy of life gains coherence. The early Nietzsche is attracted to Democritus, through the writings of Diogenes Laertis, because he satisfies Nietzsche's instinct that life, in and of itself, is sacred without interference from the supernatural. He takes Democritus at his word that sober scientific inquiry leads to greater knowledge than superstition, appeal to the gods, heavens, and mythology. Democritus had taken up arms against the gods, allowing Nietzsche to do the same. As with Schopenhauer, however, Nietzsche's initial exuberance concerning sober scientific inquiry would evolve as he developed

² Theodosius Dobzhansky, *Studies in the Philosophy of Biology: Reduction and Related Problems*, Francisco J. Ayala and Theodosius Dobzhansky, eds. University of California Press, 1974. p 311.

a deeper sense of the nature of knowledge and relative independence from the philosophical traditions of the past.

If Nietzsche found a kindred spirit in Democritus, in Schopenhauer he found a brother-in arms. Although Nietzsche ultimately rejects Schopenhauer because of perceived pessimism (though, as with nihilism, Nietzsche locates varying degrees of pessimism, some of which are positive!) in the latter's work, both writers held similar views on the philosopher's role in the world.

Swift observes that, "Nietzsche found a hybrid philosopher-poet in Schopenhauer, a mentor who took seriously the limits of representation and stood fast in rejecting popular metaphysics" (63). This rare occurrence, the philosopher-poet, served to fuel Nietzsche's growing verve concerning philosophy. However, as Swift concludes, Nietzsche's is a philosophy of life (reiterating the fact that this is a problematic philosophical category) and, therefore, it is necessarily life affirming or nothing at all. One could go further and claim that Nietzsche, because he returns continuously to the theme of a concern for life, considers life as sacred and, as such, the philosopher's role is to serve life, just as it is the priest's role to serve God. The religious tone of *Zarathustra*, for example, underscores Nietzsche's conception of life as sacred, one he sought to promote much in the same way Socrates promoted reason and Jesus promoted salvation. Because Schopenhauer, who, "with powerful masculine seriousness" (63), was not afraid to promote unpopular ideas, Nietzsche at first embraced him as a fellow rebel struggling against the establishment. As his philosophy ripened, Nietzsche rejected Schopenhauer because he dwells too long on suffering and misery thus obscuring the philosopher's true mission: the affirmation of life in all of its guises.

Swift's treatment of Schopenhauer's influence on Nietzsche is to the point and well written. It may belong to another study to trace Nietzsche's growing devotion, in which life becomes a type of self-sustaining deity, an entity worthy of worship and, yes, an *amor fati*, much in the same way as the believer loves God. As will be seen with Swift's treatment of Kant's influence on Nietzsche, like Dobzhansky's description of evolution in general, Nietzsche's own groping in a different direction at this early stage, along with his embryonic conception of an inverted Platonism, can be called progress or something else. Whatever the case, Swift's study goes a long way in dispelling the myth that Nietzsche was a nihilist in any traditional sense of the term. However, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not Swift believes he is breaking new ground here. He is not. Deleuze, Kolossowski, Reginster, and others have observed this point, as well.

Schopenhauer maintains the view that there is a chasm between the life-force and representation. Nietzsche agrees with this claim, although he rejects Schopenhauer's theory of will. Swift maintains that Kant endeavored to map out the limits of pure reason as related to the natural sciences in the *Critique of Pure Reason* but found that accounting for organic life possesses its own problems in assessing the design of living organisms, "a problem around which Schopenhauer constructs his entire philosophy" (88). In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant attempts to lay out

the epistemological limit in the processes that power the living organism. Kant concludes that it is an “artwork of God” (88). Nietzsche asserts that both men are wrong and have merely lapsed into fictitious aesthetic representation. For Nietzsche it is impossible to ever fully comprehend the life-force. Then again, can any true work of art ever be fully comprehended? Apparently Kant and Nietzsche are not so far apart on this matter, though they are commonly portrayed at opposite ends of the spectrum. Moreover, Nietzsche claims that in actuality there really are no individual living organisms, implying life (for Kant, God) is irreducible to a single form, a rejection of being in favor of becoming. Swift provides fascinating insight into this stage of Nietzsche’s development by including Nietzsche’s notes on *Teleology Since Kant* (1868). Nietzsche here delivers some core observations which are very useful in understanding his later work:

In truth, it stands firmly that we only cognize the mechanistic [...] However, the concept of the whole is our work. This is where the source of our representation of purposes lies. The concept of the whole does not lie in the thing, but in us. But once again, these unities which we call organisms are still multiplicities. There are in reality no individuals. Moreover, individuals and organisms are nothing but abstractions. They are unities manufactured by us into which we transfer the idea of purpose (99).

Swift stresses, once again, that some may object to the notion of “life” being a unifying theme in Nietzsche’s work, as the term is so vague it teeters on the brink of incoherency. But, Swift argues, this is entirely consistent with Nietzsche’s “deep concern with the inability of conceptual thought to render the workings of ‘life’ translucent, in spite of any dialectical attempts at illumination” (90). Swift goes on to propose that, “Moreover, ‘life’ appears as that which both philosophy and history are to be in the service of in Nietzsche’s thinking” (90).

Kant, unlike Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, believed that an understanding of the cooperation between the part and the whole was possible through his concept of natural purpose, though he concedes that there is still something that cannot be explained. Nietzsche, as shown above, argues that there is no individual while Schopenhauer argued that the blind, dark forces of life were simply beyond the understanding of conscious thought. All three men, though reaching different conclusions, were struggling with the same concepts.

Swift does a good job at pinpointing the crucial difference between Kant’s traditional view concerning the nature and scope of aesthetic judgment and Nietzsche’s radical view:

The matter is exacerbated by Nietzsche’s seemingly cryptic comments that aesthetic forces are more fundamental than the knowing subject. Such a view suggests that the aesthetic dimension has made possible the knowing subject, rather than the usual conventional view that maintains the knowing subject makes possible the aesthetic dimension (78).

Swift explains that Nietzsche's view need not be considered incoherent if we look at Nietzsche's assertion that his philosophy is inverted Platonism, which, by definition, would render art the most real rather than the Platonic notion that art is the least real. This distinction is crucial in understanding the corpus of Nietzsche's work, and Swift, once again, has done us service by bringing it to our attention.

From the study of Nietzsche's early influences in the realm of philosophy, we find that he thinks of life as an artistic becoming, self-contained, mysterious, and, to put it bluntly, sacred, in that living things, including the intellectual endeavors of philosophy and history, must be in service to life. To look beyond life for justification of the living, for Nietzsche, is blasphemy. Democritus provides Nietzsche with the framework for denying the traditional teleological framework. In Schopenhauer, Nietzsche finds the philosopher-poet, a mentor upon which to shape his service to life. Because of Kant, Nietzsche is able to offer a "philosophic re-interpretation of the Kantian project, envisioning the constellation between the first and third critiques as an aesthetic formation" (78).

Swift does not go far enough, in my opinion, in elucidating the ramifications of Nietzsche's early ponderings, although this was not the stated scope of his work and could easily be taken up in another study. For example, in *Teleology Since Kant*, Nietzsche's notes are quite revealing in uncovering his evolving attitude of inverted religious conviction concerning the phenomenon of life: Existence is perforated with miracles (97). Here it is demonstrated that what we call purposive is only that which proves itself to be capable of living. The secret is only "life" (99).

Some Nietzsche analysts (supporters and detractors alike) are loathe to call Nietzsche a religious thinker, the creator of an inverted theology, in part due to his relentless attack on Christianity, which he thought to be the logical outcome to Platonism. Remember, however, that Nietzsche does not abandon Platonism but inverts it, and the same can be said of Neo-Platonic religious thinking which heavily influenced early Christianity. For Nietzsche, the divine was not somewhere out there, but in the phenomenon of life itself, a creative force of becoming that may have left Heraclitus weeping not out of sorrow but out of joy. Zarathustra, as the best example, is the Nietzschean prophet of an inverted religion in which the creative force is played out through courageous creative acts of the living. In creating the creator is served. For Nietzsche this is the highest task, the poet-philosopher-prophet who expends potential fully and to the limit in a creative affirmation of life. This is Nietzsche's free spirit, the new philosopher which he prophesized.

In his conclusion, Swift brings out that both Nietzsche and Kant held laughter in high esteem and that Kant criticized Voltaire for not mentioning laughter as an important counterbalance to the hardships found in living (122). Zarathustra, too, praised the power of laughter, "Not by wrath, but by laughter do we slay. Come, let us slay the spirit of gravity" (Z: "On Reading and Writing"). The two monumental thinkers are not so far apart as one might think from first appearances, and Swift does a good job at pointing this out, though he is far from the first to do this.

reviewed by:

John
Montfort
Gist

Agonist 7

In Swift's study we find the seeds from which Nietzsche's later work would evolve. *Becoming Nietzsche* is an significant contribution to Nietzsche scholarship, though it might have delved further into the process of the germination and subsequent evolution of the seeds into the flowering of Nietzsche's work. The book does much to dispel the supposed correlation between Nietzsche and nihilism, which has plagued his reputation among laymen.

For Nietzsche, nihilism was a necessary evolutionary step in achieving the status of free spirit, but nothing more, not an end in itself. Nietzsche sees himself as having gone beyond nihilism, as "the first perfect nihilist of Europe who, however, has even now lived through the whole of nihilism, to the end, leaving it behind, outside himself" (WP: P 3). What Nietzsche actually means by nihilism, of course, is not belief in nothing, but a purging of the old philosophies and religions in order to clear the way for the new, the inverted, the poet-philosopher-prophet he calls the "free spirit." Life is creative, and, in order to be in tune with life, we must be creative as well. *Becoming Nietzsche* provides a welcome insight into Nietzsche's early philosophical/creative process.

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