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# Nietzsche's Political Skepticism



By Tamsin Shaw  
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Book review by  
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*Wir sind uns unbekannt, wir Erkennenden, wir selbst uns selbst:* We truth tellers are ourselves unknown to ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

At the risk of understatement, let me assert: the Delphic sentiment that we find in this opening line of *On the Genealogy of Morals* is not a central feature of Tamsin

Shaw's 2007 *Nietzsche's Political Skepticism*.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it is as if the "old, cold, boring frogs" among the British philosophers of "moral sentiment," whom Nietzsche warmly thanks at the outset of *The Genealogy*, have emerged from the bog slime a century or two later, still oblivious to their own historicity.

To be fair to Ms. Shaw, it should be acknowledged that she distinguishes herself *somewhat* from the analytic propensity to make a behaviorist out of Nietzsche. Yet we would be greatly mistaken to think the intellectual autonomy she identifies in Nietzschean skepticism is *Socratic*. The Nietzsche to whom she introduces us is a thinker still reeling from the death of God. The trauma that sets the stage of her narrative can be expressed in a couple of different

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral: Eine Streitschrift* Nietzsche Source Digital Critical Edition <http://www.nietzschesource.org/texts/eKGWB/GM>, Accessed 02/18/2012.

<sup>2</sup> Tamsin Shaw, *Nietzsche's Political Skepticism*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2007. Citations hereafter parenthetically in the text.

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ways, each of which no doubt appears slightly exotic to her fellow analytically-inclined bog-dwellers. Secularization is one way twentieth century thinkers have told the story; the dialectics of enlightenment another. Nietzsche obviously is organically connected to all of the various offspring who share these stories: Heidegger, Strauss, Gadamer, Arendt, Adorno, etc. The Nietzsche whom Shaw presents, however, has experienced modernity with rather unfortunate, cynicism-engendering results. As God is dead, traditional authority has proved itself powerless; and not only is the nation state without legitimate normative grounding, but all the previous modern attempts to locate non-coercive modes of human sociality have (allegedly) run ashore -- be they those attempted by the Renaissance humanists, those promulgated by the Enlightenment *philosophs*, or the Romantic poets. In such dire circumstances the Socratic approach appears to Shaw's Nietzsche as reminiscent of an ancient religiosity outmoded in the modern secular state. Plato, she explains (with Straussian inflection), rightly understood Socrates to have failed, and (allegedly) believed virtue was dependent upon "divine dispensation" (9). Socrates no doubt believed that people should follow the wisdom of Delphi -- *gnothi seautou* -- and Christianity has transmitted to posterity trust in "some inner revelation," or "conscience." But with the death of God, so Shaw's Nietzsche teaches, these subjectivist modes of philosophical investigation are no longer "reliable" guides to "truth and value"(10).

As *Nietzsche's Political Skepticism* is a work addressed to the Anglophone philosophical world, let us begin in the bog. Among the contemporary croakers is Brian Leiter, a Nietzsche scholar from the University of Chicago who figures prominently in several chapters of Shaw's book.<sup>3</sup> Tellingly, Shaw distinguishes her approach in comparison with Leiter's, as he himself

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<sup>3</sup> See Brian Leiter's review of *Nietzsche's Political Skepticism* in the *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* from 01/21/2009. <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/23891-nietzsche-s-political-skepticism/> Retrieved on 02/18/2012. Although Leiter remains unconvinced, he enthusiastically affirms: "I would not hesitate to say that it is the best book on Nietzsche's political theory I have ever read, even though I find it unpersuasive." Shaw for her part draws on Leiter's

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acknowledges in his very friendly review of *Nietzsche's Political Skepticism*. To put the matter too simply: while Leiter does not miss the certainty of Nietzsche's characteristically apodictic modes of expression, he downplays the boldness and innovation of "value-creation." He stresses that Nietzsche, like Hume before him, sees the vast majority of people unreflectively become themselves according to predetermined identities given by habit, biology, and "immutable physiological and psychological characteristics"(97). Moreover, even the few, in Leiter's account, who rise above "slave morality," do so as representative "higher types" expressing, "a set of determinate characteristics"(98). As the higher types themselves "submit to necessity," Leiter is clear that there is no need for the creation of new values *ex nihilo*. It is just as Hume and his fellow philosophers of "moral sentiment" taught long ago, "morality" is often a matter determined by accidents, illness, mistakes, etc. And it is in this sense that we are to make sense of Nietzsche's *amor fati*. *Can this last point be developed?*

Leiter's Humean Nietzsche is an empiricist who operates according to methodological naturalism and finds common-sense knowledge in perspectivalism. And, for much of *Nietzsche's Political Skepticism* Shaw is quite pleased to join her account of Nietzsche's political skepticism to Hume and his utilitarian friends. And yet, as she finds genuine autonomy in Nietzsche, she distinguishes herself: "pace Leiter," we are not "simply stuck with the basic determinants of our values being what they are;" "rational criticism can be a means to attaining an important form of freedom...our drives...can be brought under reflective control"(104). But let us be immediately clear, the brand of "rational criticism" that her Nietzsche utilizes only articulates itself within strict limits. First and foremost, it is not an (allegedly) naive repetition of Enlightenment ideals; "unlike a Kantian conception of autonomy," Nietzschean "rational autonomy," "is not something

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*Nietzsche on Morality* (London: Routledge, 2002); *Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), as well as several articles.

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that just anyone can attain"(124). As Shaw *repeatedly* informs us, the mass of humanity is too cognitively challenged to recognize the philosopher's moral insights; for this "requires expertise"(110). Although "philosophical criticism can delimit the realm of rationally justified beliefs, this activity is not available to everyone (as we do not all share the requisite leisure or intellectual ability), and most people will not possess the rational expertise necessary to assess the validity of arguments"(37-8). Such confidence in philosophical rationality (among the few) might strike us as un-Nietzschean, but it is the (Straussian) key to her argument. Again the comparison with Leiter is instructive. For as Leiter feels more at ease with submission to necessity than with the hubris and unpredictability of Romantic expression, so Shaw shies away from spontaneity and innovation, preferring, "the moorings of critical philosophy and its expertise in human nature and human reason"(48). The transcendental moment she shelters has nothing to do with hubristic value-positing *ex nihilo*. Philosophical reason is simply directed in one way, toward the perception of Truth in the grand philosophical sense, for this is how genuine normative authority (allegedly) appears in Nietzsche's modern secular world.

Still down here in the bog, consider one telling instance where the amphibious Leiter is particularly pleased with Shaw: her rejection of subjective moral speculation in individual identity formation -- what Kant calls "pure practical reason." Much to Leiter's delight, Shaw dismisses Nadeem Hussain's "fictionalist" reading of Nietzsche's transvaluation of values, his claim that our personally held values and beliefs *are and should be* works of our artistic creation, the "fictionalist simulacra," the self-generated "ideals" we love(94).<sup>4</sup> As Shaw explains, Hussain's account of Nietzsche's virtuoso treatment of nominalism doesn't make sense; "it is difficult to imagine...Nietzsche believes that all his own values are simply 'fictionalist simulacra'"(94). "Reason" has "a need," that can only be satisfied with values that are recognized

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<sup>4</sup> Nadeem Hussain, "Honest Illusion: Valuing for Nietzsche's Free Spirits," in *Nietzsche and Morality*.

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as "the product of a genuine form of intellectual authority," "not merely an appealing fantasy conjured up by the human imagination"(48).

Clearly uncomfortable with too radical a brand of "antirealism" ("nominalism" in the old school speak), Shaw asserts that value-creating need not predominate in the valuing process. She is confident that the subjective aspect of valuing values is typically trumped by *objective* claims about the world, values, "already presupposed"(93). But let us be clear: much is at stake philosophically in value-positing. That Nietzsche's notion of a revaluing of values, *Werte Alle Wertungen*, is a brilliant German translation of the Delphi-authorized maxim of Diogenes the Cynic -- *paracharein ton nomisma*, challenge conventions -- gives us just a hint of the illustrious historical pedigree of the skeptical philosophical vocation. But in her analytic bliss, freed from the burden of historical consciousness, Shaw finds little room for skepticism *as a philosophical vocation*.

The fact is, apart from her excellent introductory discussion of Nietzsche's critique of the nation-state, Shaw is not really concerned with skepticism. And it is not merely her neglect of Michael Oakshott and Isaiah Berlin, the "established positions" in the "Anglophone tradition"(2). Even more significant is the fact that she undertakes a discussion of Nietzsche's skepticism in light of modern secularization, but neglects to reference the razor-wielding William of Occam, the Franciscan medieval theologian who guided so many early modern men away from the metaphysical realism of the *via antiqua* toward the skepticism and nominalism of the *via moderna*.<sup>5</sup> In her story Nietzsche is a political skeptic concerned to preserve a very specific and limited form of "rational critique" from the ideological encroachment of the omnivorous Bismarckian nation-state. Accordingly, Shaw's Nietzsche (an advocate of "rationalism" like

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<sup>5</sup> "The Medieval Problem of Universals," entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, first published 09/10/2000; <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/universals-medieval/>. Accessed on 02/18/2012.

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Strauss) cannot primarily be engaged in the deconstruction of metaphysical Truth. While deconstructive, dismantling, skeptical practices are no doubt evident here and there for Shaw, we find zero emphasis on agonistic striving in her account, and no hint that Nietzsche was a polemicist. As hinted above, in her story Nietzsche the political skeptic *is a foundational thinker*, a "metaphysical realist," a "moral realist," a "normative realist," a philosophical "expert" first and foremost concerned with objective, universally valid Truth. *Pace* Nietzsche's own claims regarding the non-existence of moral facts, and of Truth itself, Shaw explains that, at his core, Nietzsche is a would-be priestly founder of political order, and although his foundational impulse has been foiled in the modern secular world, it tragically remains with him until the end.

Shaw's argument regarding Nietzsche's alleged priestly foundationalism is comprised in two lengthy chapters; the first comprises her treatment of "moral antirealism," that is, of Nietzsche's avowedly skeptical beliefs. In this discussion, as hinted above, she circumscribes his skeptical avowals, neuters his critical praxis, neutralizes his vocation as a force of deconstruction. Importantly, she neglects to situate him within the history of modern skeptical praxis, be it Occam, Erasmus, Luther, Descartes, Hume, Voltaire, Bacon, Rousseau, Kant. Rather, in ahistorical, analytic fashion Shaw explicates Nietzsche's skepticism in three somewhat reductionist points: 1. His empiricist "concern with facts," i.e. "moral facts"(rather than his denial of their existence); 2. His adherence to the correspondence theory of truth as (correctness); 3. The (alleged) competence of philosophers with "expertise" to cognize the truth (if not to convey it).

To put the same point another way: a more historicist view would read Nietzsche's political skepticism in light of the centuries long process of the deconstruction of the metaphysical tradition, from the Renaissance humanists, to the Reformation's attacks on the

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Church, the Scientific Revolution's dismantling of the given philosophy of nature, the Enlightenment's challenge to political and intellectual authority broadly. From his mischievous youthful attribution of evil to God at the outset of the *Genealogy*-- a clear echo of Luther's demonic negativity -- to his playful Erasmean mockery, and his turn from nihilism (extreme skepticism) to the Eternal Recurrence -- a move which has been likened to Descartes' jump from doubt to the ontological proof -- Nietzsche's biography matches the profound experiences of skepticism we find among the other giants of modern philosophy.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, one could continue nearly indefinitely meditating on Nietzsche and skepticism, certainly without neglecting either Kant or Hume, both of whom can be instructively compared to Nietzsche as modern adherents of the philanthropic brand of ancient skepticism known in Plato's Academy. In Hume's *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, we learn that this is "mitigated skepticism...both durable and useful."<sup>7</sup> And the Socratic skepticism of the Academy, I submit, we find in Nietzsche no less than in Hume. As Hume further explains, it is not the "Pyrrhonism or excessive skepticism" that childishly doubts the existence of anything and everything. This practical, worldly skepticism rather restrains itself from absolutist claims of divine authorization, remaining bound within the human sphere and "the proper subjects of science and inquiry." Again, this Socratic legacy is true to Nietzsche no less than to *the great destroyers* of the Enlightenment.

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<sup>6</sup> Shaw touches on Karl Loewith's discussion of Nietzsche's "self-surmounting of nihilism in eternal recurrence," though she is unable to make any sense of the existential import of the ontological experience. It simply seems to obfuscate "the rich array of arguments that he does deploy in support of his antirealist views." (87) To speak Heideggerean, Shaw is trapped in "the ontic," the realm of things, inured to the ontological difference, the possibility that the experience of the latter might be relation to the former. See Loewith's, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, trans. David E. Green (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964). As Shaw also notes, Leo Strauss, who famously engages Loewith, precedes her own insensitivity to the ontological cure for extreme skepticism. According to Strauss, "Nietzsche is *the* philosopher of relativism" (84n22). As I am arguing in this review, Shaw follows Strauss in reading Nietzsche as a thinker who finds hierarchy as the appropriate response to skepticism, relativism, etc. Certainly her Nietzsche is about as close to Strauss as one might imagine.

<sup>7</sup> David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* in *David Hume on Human Nature and the Understanding* ed. Anthony Flew (New York: Macmillan, 1962). The final chapter of the *Inquiry*, "Of the Academical or Skeptical Philosophy," is devoted to a discussion of all varieties of skepticism.

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Shaw's analytic account, by contrast with Academic skepticism, seems more a re-animation of Aristotelian foundational metaphysics than a critical practice. Shaw, we recall, thinks presents God-starved reason hungering for "the product of a genuine form of intellectual authority and not merely an appealing fantasy conjured up by the human imagination"(48). Nietzsche, she argues, is profoundly distressed by "our inability to arrive at a form of politics that is genuinely grounded in normative authority"(3). Before the "death of God" -- to speak cartoon for the historical process of secularization -- Shaw understands there to have been "mechanisms," e.g. priests and legitimated intellectual authorities, by whom "genuine normative truth" was made "popularly authoritative"(10). In the modern secular state, by contrast, there is no legitimate authority; philosophical experts are hardly recognized; and because the consensus underlying the political body is grounded only in reason, it is (alleged) to be inherently unstable, ideologically manipulated by the powers that be. In the face of the onslaught of the ideological manipulations of the nation-state, vigorous under Bismarck as never before, Nietzsche understandably insists on preserving "an independent source of normative authority." But again, as he longs for the old world of order, meaning and rationality -- the beautiful architectonic of essences and mediating normative authority -- "he cannot give up the demand that political life be governed by correct norms." "His political skepticism derives from the fact that he holds both to be necessary but cannot see how they can be compatible"(3).

If these moves seem "unNietzschean," Shaw's next one may appear even more so. In the chapter devoted to the positive side of his "skepticism," she presents Nietzsche's alleged foundationalism via his anti-egalitarian opining on the ideal rankings and hierarchical order of humanity. Her claim is that we cannot completely subsume Nietzsche into Hume's probabilistic scientific culture because he is a "moral realist" with a burning passion for Truth -- for the



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political Truth that provides him with "an independent source of normative authority." Shaw insists that Nietzsche's normative insights regarding rank and order be taken as something much more than preference, affinity, or subjective expression of "taste;" "his value criticism is universalist in scope and realist in its basic orientation"(108). Nietzsche is concerned, she argues, not with just "the advancement of some particular type of human being," but with humanity itself, "the type 'man' (*Mensch*)." His claims regarding the ideal order and ranking of humanity, while perhaps unappealing to us, are "universally valid, although not everyone will be able to see comprehend "the facts about what is good for humanity" (110).

At this point it is necessary to pause for a critical comment. Although matters are somewhat ambiguous in a book that offers *a reading*, rather than an direct argument, it seems that Shaw herself endorses Nietzsche's (and Strauss's) hierarchical vision. We read over and over again that Nietzsche was greatly "pessimistic" about "popular rational faculties"(75). Nietzsche was a universalist regarding moral truth, but not a universalist in his judgment of people's cognitive capacity. And more to the point, as we have just touched upon, Shaw presents Nietzsche's moral insights regarding the ideal rank and hierarchical ordering of humanity as universally valid, objective truth, precisely as that which stands above mere opinion, preference, and, above ideology. Assuming for a brief minute that we *should* read Nietzsche as a Straussian rationalist, the question that Shaw's presentation begs is whether Nietzsche can be said to escape ideology in her account. Although she rightly emphasizes Nietzsche's concern with the human species as a whole, she eschews, the prophetic Nietzsche who indicates that the future *Uebermensch* is as yet undetermined. She finds it more convenient to understand Nietzsche as asserting himself as the already actualized embodiment of the highest possible ideal type (although she insists that this is not his only concern). Instead of remaining open to the future,

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Shaw's Nietzsche, like Leiter's Nietzsche, makes the same moves that Hume already made when borrowing his fixed, ahistorical typology of "human nature" from Aristotelian ethics.<sup>8</sup> And while there may be a *claim* to philosophical anthropology in each of these philosopher's thought, drawing moral insight from a fixed Aristotelian typology is not the way a philosopher finds truth rather than ideology. Whenever a theory of "human nature" suits the "interests" of one particular group or class, ideology is inevitably at hand. As everyone knows, the argument that it is good *for some* to obey is not likely to fall on sympathetic modern ears, although we may certainly mark the lengths to which Shaw goes in order to justify Nietzsche's thinking as universally valid, even if not recognized as such by his fellow creatures (118). It is at this point that our analytic amphibians would do well to consult Kant's Third Critique.<sup>9</sup> For Shaw Nietzsche's insight regarding the ideal ranking and hierarchical ordering among humanity is his one and only, exclusive intellectual refuge; this insight is supposed to be the only normative Truth that can stand itself against the ideologically hegemonic nation-state. But when we take into account the ethical and the epistemological dimensions of Kant's Third Critique, as German philosophers have been wont to do for a couple/few centuries now, we find a much greater resource than Shaw's misguided dismissal of aesthetics as "apolitical, and ultimately, anti-political" allows (43). In Kant our analytically-inclined bog-dwellers will find that which has eluded them in their own presentations of Nietzsche, a coherent, non-ideological account of subjective expressions with claims to universal validity. Our own Nietzsche himself, we may surmise, can perhaps embrace his "impartiality" *and* take pride and pleasure in the universalizing expression of *his subjective taste*. Moreover, insofar as we permit ourselves to downplay Nietzsche's alleged foundationalism and the opposition between the many and the few possessing the "expertise"

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Chapter 8, "Of Liberty and Necessity."

<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987).

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necessary to recognize universally valid truths, the crisis of legitimacy Shaw finds in Nietzsche's political skepticism is significantly qualified. Here, in a world where the few and the many are not so rigidly divided, skepticism finds its limits *among multiple perspectives*. Here, as in the ancient Academy, probabilistic cultures are not merely "fact based," but rhetorically attuned and artistically enhanced. Here the average person *also* is potentially autonomous and enjoys self-generated, personally edifying beliefs and values, "conjured up by the human imagination"(48).

In conclusion, Shaw's account of Nietzsche's political skepticism rests on a claim that is insufficiently substantiated: supposedly Nietzsche, a great skeptic of the legitimacy of the modern state, was nonetheless committed to this sovereign entity as a necessary precondition of all possibility of grandeur and value, i.e. life worth living. As Leiter highlights in his review, Shaw's treatment of Nietzsche on the state is excellent and interesting, yet she fails to make the case that Nietzsche adopted Burkhardt's historical framework. More to the point, in my view, is the fact that Shaw's Nietzsche essentially embodies Leo Strauss' take on the problem of modern political authority. But, alternate to Shaw and Strauss, we need not accept that Nietzsche is *plagued* by the crisis of political legitimacy. Indeed, his entire oeuvre, the genealogical method itself, is evidence that *his aim is rather to wean us from our perceived dependence on legitimation*, on foundations. The prophetic Nietzsche, the Nietzsche who speaks in *Beyond Good and Evil* of "we Europeans of day after tomorrow," "the first born of the twentieth century," appears, *not* as one troubled by the illegitimacy of the nation-state, but rather as one having transcended provincial forms of identification.<sup>10</sup> And thus before we accept Shaw and Strauss' claim that the ideal of a hierarchical ranking of humanity is the exclusive resource of

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<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Boese* part VII, section 214. *Nietzsche* Source Digital Critical Edition <http://www.nietzschesource.org/texts/eKGWB/JGB>, Accessed 02/19/2012.

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intellectual resistance at Nietzsche's disposal, we should consider the broad plurality of perspectives from which Nietzsche the composer, the philologist, philosopher, prophet, etc., might nourish himself. We should think again before rejecting aesthetics and the entire tradition of *Bildung*. In fact, according to Hannah Arendt, it is possible to understand Nietzsche's analysis of the modern dilemmas of nationalism and the loss of normative political authority in a completely different, *European*, framework. As I hope is obvious, the following citation from Arendt is evidence, not only of Nietzsche's political sensibilities and acumen as a social critic, it offers just the sort of Socratic illumination that those unNietzschean Nietzsches who long for normative stability and a pre-modern feeling of legitimacy are sorely lacking:

Only Nietzsche, as far as I know, has ever pointed out...that the position and functions of the Jewish people in Europe predestined them to become the 'good Europeans' *par excellence*. The Jewish middle classes of Paris and London, Berlin and Vienna, Warsaw and Moscow, were in fact neither cosmopolitan nor international, though the intellectuals among them thought of themselves in these terms. They were European, something that could be said of no other group. And this was not a matter of conviction; it was an objective fact. In other words, while the self-deception of assimilated Jews usually consisted in the mistaken belief that they were just as German as the Germans, just as French as the French, the self-deception of the intellectual Jews consisted in thinking that they had no 'fatherland,' for their fatherland actually was Europe...<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Rosa Luxemburg," in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 42.