Who Was the Author of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra?*

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The title of this paper sounds like an unfunny children’s joke (“Who is buried in Grant’s Tomb?”), but I am going to try to answer the question anyway. I agree with Alexander Nehamas that it is often a productive avenue of approach to Nietzsche’s texts to ask who their “postulated author” is,1 in something like the way that it is a productive approach to John Koethe’s The Late Wisconsin Spring to ask who the narrator of the poems is, and I think that pressing this question may help to make Thus Spoke Zarathustra philosophically readable, which thus far it has not been. Although it is perhaps Nietzsche’s best-known and most admired work among the general public, and although Nietzsche seems to insist that this is a piece of writing that we should take very seriously, philosophers for the most part do not

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1Nehamas, 1981; Nehamas, 1987; Nehamas, 1988; Nehamas, 1985. I will take up my disagreements with Nehamas in due course.
know what to make of it, and with occasional exceptions find it frankly embarrassing.\textsuperscript{2}

That is unfortunate, because the book advances, develops and critically explores ideas that, despite speaking directly and very interestingly to concerns and positions at the center of current ethics and metaethics, have yet to be assimilated by moral philosophy. Let’s borrow from Joseph Raz a rough and ready characterization of what philosophers have in mind when we discuss one such concern: we “will generally agree that whatever else people having value in themselves, or being ends in themselves, means it means that, other things being equal, their interests should count.” And he continues: “Many will say that an essential element of the idea that people have value in themselves is that they must be respected” (1999, pp. 274f). Nietzsche notoriously had what is among philosophers today an unusual view of the value of humanity, namely, that it has scarcely any at all, and is likely soon to have none; there is no presumption that the interests of people as we have them count, or that people generally are to be respected.\textsuperscript{3} He understood this to be a catastrophe-in-progress, and his label for it was—sometimes—\textit{nihilism}.\textsuperscript{4} So he devoted the most productive

\textsuperscript{2}‘Seems to,’ because we should not assume that we can always take what we are told for granted. EH Z.6/6:343, for instance, has the look and feel of booby-trapping: Nietzsche’s announcements that Goethe, Shakespeare and Dante aren’t up to writing like \textit{Zarathustra}, that “there is is no wisdom, no investigation of the soul, no art of speech before \textit{Zarathustra},” and that, “measured against [the concept of the ‘Dionysian’ presented there], all the rest of human activity [!] seems poor and relative”—these are the sort of the bragging we expect from rappers and television tag-team wrestlers, and, if we are going to get anything from reading Nietzsche, must be treated as themselves a puzzle.

I will refer to Nietzsche’s writings by volume:page in the \textit{Kritische Studienausgabe} (1988); where possible, I first give book and section, following the North American Nietzsche Society conventions. (Thus the citation earlier in the footnote is to \textit{Ecce Homo}, in vol. 6, at p. 343 of the KSA.) That means that citations to \textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra} are by part, section number and, as appropriate, subsection, where \textit{P} indicates “\textit{Zarathustra’s Prologue}”. While Nietzsche himself did not assign numbers to the sections, Kaufmann’s table of contents, at Nietzsche, 1954, pp. 112–114, is widely available and will spare you counting them off. Unless otherwise noted, I will be using Walter Kaufmann’s translations, because he is better than anyone else in the Nietzsche business at matching certain aspects of English to German style. Kaufmann’s renderings reproduce the literary failings of Nietzsche’s German remarkably well, and that will turn out to matter a great deal.

\textsuperscript{3}The cluster of claims that fall under this heading often includes a further commitment, to the bottom-line equality of human beings. Nietzsche does not share this view, either: “men are not equal: thus speaks justice” (Z II.16/4:162, and there is a very similar remark at II.7/4:130); or elsewhere, compare AC 43/6:217 on “the poison of the doctrine of ‘equal rights for all’” (restoring Nietzsche’s emphasis). Here I will leave to one side Nietzsche’s view that the value of humanity, when it has any, is unevenly distributed.

\textsuperscript{4}Nietzsche worked very hard at exhibiting what he called “perspectivism” in his own
phase of his working life to laying out his remedy: a program having as its linchpin the invention of novel values.

As we will shortly see, this program faces what is prima facie an insuperable obstacle. (If I am understanding Nietzsche’s response to it correctly, it set much of the agenda for his mature writings.) In *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche dramatizes rather than discusses the roadblock, with the aim of showing how standard techniques for managing evaluative innovations will not get us through it. Thus, although with rare exceptions philosophers in our tradition read past what they think of as the merely literary aspects of Nietzsche’s writings, if we do not treat them as our entry point into *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, we will miss its point entirely—or so I hope to convince you. Since it will be necessary to interleave two very different treatments—that is, an explanation of that dramatization and a direct discussion of the philosophical issues—I will have to ask the reader for more than the usual quota of patience.

Nietzsche’s program for transforming a worthless humanity into something of value is a surprising attempt to abort and replace a familiar philosophical enterprise, that of spelling out and accounting for the value that humanity is assumed to have, already and across the board. Since it is the task of philosophers not to take familiar enterprises for granted, Nietzsche’s alternative deserves careful consideration. And whether or not we share Nietzsche’s views about the need to redeem humanity as a whole, his exploration of the idea that values are to be invented, rather than discovered, and that this is the proper business of philosophy, is in my own view of great interest.

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Why do philosophers so frequently treat Nietzsche’s most famous book as though it were a shameful family secret? The doctrines advanced in the book are—with an important qualification that we will get to in due course—shared with Nietzsche’s other mature writings; even the most analytic of Nietzsche scholars are comfortable reconstructing and discussing a great many of them. However, Kathleen Higgins memorably reports a young friend’s description of *Zarathustra* as “kind of like a perverted Kahlil Gibran,” and...
that characterization is spot on.\textsuperscript{5} It’s easy to assemble a long list of ways in which \textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra} reads badly: it is often pompous, and excessively flowery in ways that make straightforward points unnecessarily obscure; it is the sort of patchwork of pastiches that made postmodernism so very annoying; it is sentimental; it is preachy; it is writing that, by being at once naively blasphemous and naively idealistic, appeals primarily to adolescents; it contains one of the most excruciatingly mixed metaphors—a vine with swelling udders (Z III.14/4:279)—that one is likely ever to run into; very often it’s just plain kitsch. The philosophers’ collective cringe is largely prompted by the book’s stylistic excesses.\textsuperscript{6}

There is, however, an important difference between Nietzsche and Gibran. The author of \textit{The Prophet} was probably unaware of how awful his writing was, but Nietzsche was very self-aware indeed, and an acknowledged master of style; it is hard to believe that he did not know exactly how it sounded. In \textit{The Gay Science}, which acts as a runup to \textit{Zarathustra}, we have confirmation that he did: evidently because he did not trust his audience to realize what he was doing, he went out of his way to tell us that we should not take the text of \textit{Zarathustra} at face value, belatedly adding the following bit of instruction for his readers:

\begin{quote}
“Incipit tragoedia” we read at the end of this awesomely aweless book.\textsuperscript{7} Beware! Something downright wicked and malicious is announced here: \textit{incipit parodia}, no doubt. (GS P.1/3:346)
\end{quote}

If the book is stylistically hard for professional philosophers to swallow, that may well have to do with its being a parody; so we should approach \textit{Zarathustra} by asking ourselves what it is parodying, and why.

The plan of action is as follows. I will begin by identifying the genre being parodied. Then I will supply a bit of historical context that today generally gets overlooked: the so-called Higher Criticism, and one of Nietzsche’s several appropriations of it. That will allow me to identify the postulated author of \textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra}—that is, the character implicitly presented to us as the author of the text we are reading. Knowing what sort of author we are encountering will tell us how to read the doctrines we

\textsuperscript{5}Higgins, 1988, p. 132; the friend almost certainly had in mind Gibran, 2004.

\textsuperscript{6}To be sure, not everyone has this reaction by any means; for instance, Hayman, 1984, p. 273, tells us that “it would be pointless to deny that \textit{Also sprach Zarathustra} is one of the finest pieces of prose in the German language.” But then, Hayman has not been a professional academic philosopher.

\textsuperscript{7}GS 342/3:571, which duplicates and functions as a segue to the beginning of \textit{Zarathustra}.
find there. That in turn will allow us to broach the question of why Nietzsche took the trouble to present us with this particular authorial perspective.

At that point, I will move to the forefront a complaint that contemporary readings of Nietzsche’s doctrines of the Eternal Return and of the Overman have had to face, and put on the table a famous and distinctive Nietzschean proposal which I mentioned a moment back: that we are to invent values, and that these values should be not only novel but idiosyncratic. To anticipate, the difficulty of firming up the content of a newly-introduced value, never a trivial exercise in any case, is exacerbated when the values are of the sort that Nietzsche is inviting us to fashion. The authorial perspective taken on in *Zarathustra* is, I will suggest, Nietzsche’s attempt to bring us to appreciate just how difficult a problem it is.

Once Nietzsche’s literary framing has been explained, I can turn to the question of what to make of the Overman and the Eternal Return. I will consider how effective these ideals are going to be in imbuing humanity with value; as it turns out, they are much less important than Nietzsche’s presentation makes them seem initially. Pretty much all the heavy lifting is done by his lower-key proposal, namely, that our lives are to be improved, and made capable of compelling respect, through the particular and idiosyncratic values that we invent.

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The title of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a heavy-handed allusion to an Old Testament marker of prophetic discourse (“thus saieth the Lord”), and it is reiterated frequently in the book as a closing signature to one or another speech. Like the later prophets of the Hebrew Bible, Zarathustra delivers impassioned speeches to uninterested crowds, demanding of them that they change their ways. Like the prophets, he often speaks in parables, and, like the prophets, he sometimes shifts into verse. Although there are of course differences—for instance, and this is a point to which we’ll return, prophets are assigned their missions by God, but *Zarathustra*’s stage-setting tells us that God is dead (Z P.2/4:14)—*Zarathustra* presents itself as prophesy, and part of the holy scripture of a nonexistent religion.

A book parodying holy scripture is so far of a piece with Nietzsche’s other later works; his mature writings typically reappropriate one or another literary genre, and the first question to ask when reading them normally is:

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8For biblical usage, see, e.g., Jer. 2:1, 6:9, 16, 21, 22, 7:3. For Nietzsche’s, see Z I.7/4:50, I.8/54, I.9/57, I.10/60, etc.
which genre is it in (or riffing on)? The prose form is appropriated in order to make one or more points, and typically Nietzsche’s most immediate point turns on the sort of person who might write such a book. If that framing hypothesis is correct, then making sense of *Zarathustra* will involve first of all figuring out what Nietzsche wants to convey about the sort of person who writes books in its genre. *Zarathustra* is holy scripture. But what sort of person authors a bible, or part of one?

The mid-nineteenth century saw secular second thoughts about the origins of the Bible crystallize into a scholarly movement whose enormous intellectual impact we have almost forgotten. The Higher Criticism proposed to treat the Bible like any other historical document: thus, as a product of human rather than divine authorship. Higher Critics attempted to reconstruct the histories, processes and agendas that had shaped the texts we now have. Although secular biblical scholarship is still with us, readers should be aware that today’s version of it differs a great deal from that of the mid-nineteenth century. Lacking much in the way of archeological background, the Higher Critics focused almost exclusively on internal textual evidence. And, as with many Enlightenment intellectual enterprises, the Higher Critics are likely to strike us now as overly invested in debunking the religion in which they were raised, and as having about them a good deal of the village atheist.

As a classics scholar, Nietzsche was bound to be familiar with the figures and ideas in this iconoclastic field, and in fact he owned a copy of Julius Wellhausen’s influential *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*. Wellhausen was not by any means the sole or most original member of his movement, but he synthesized the Higher Critics’ ideas about the Old Testament into a scholarly narrative that captured the imaginations of his contemporaries, and I am going to lean heavily on this work in particular.

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*For instance, On the Genealogy of Morals presents itself as a Streitschrift—popular writing, typically by an intellectual, taking sides on one or another public controversy—and frequently alludes to academic prose forms. The conventions of the genre being appropriated are both followed in an exaggerated and self-conscious manner, and violated in various ways, as when the quasi-scholarly prose of the *Genealogy* is broken up into “Essays” and supplemented with “Notes”, and when it is interrupted by outbursts that would not be tolerated in academic or even semi-academic publications. For discussion, see Millgram, 2007.*

*Wellhausen, 1883; for the convenience of readers of the English translation, I will generally refer to Wellhausen’s *Prolegomena* by chapter, section and subsection; however, when discussing Nietzsche’s own marginal annotations, references will be to the page numbers of the 1883 edition. (I was first alerted to Nietzsche’s having read Wellhausen by Yovel, 1998, p. 160.) Coppens, 1952, is a useful overview of the Higher Criticism.*
Now, the date of the edition is the year in which Nietzsche began Zarathustra, so using this volume as our foil involves tradeoffs. On the one hand, we still have Nietzsche’s own marked up copy, and while it is naturally hard to date Nietzsche’s marginal markings, they are an extremely helpful (even if retrospective) guide to the aspects or elements of Wellhausen’s book that Nietzsche found most salient. And the doctrines of Wellhausen’s school are captured quite dramatically in what became their canonical rendering. On the other hand, we have to remain agnostic as to how directly the volume influenced Nietzsche’s composition. What matters here is that the ideas circulated widely at the time. A relevant example of this sort of reading of the New Testament is David Strauss’s Das Leben Jesu (1892), with which

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Let me lay out some back and forth about that. Nietzsche started writing Zarathustra at the outset of 1883, and the Prolegomena presumably would not have been available for its early stretches; however, the writing wrapped up only some two years later, which gives him time to have taken a look (for the chronology, see Hayman, 1984).

Ahlsdorf, 1997, p. 56, dates Nietzsche’s ‘intensive’ reading of Wellhausen to 1888; he is going by the allusions to Wellhausen in later works (which we will get to momentarily), and the fact that explicit mentions of Wellhausen in Nietzsche’s journals almost all postdate Nietzsche’s composition of the initial segments of Zarathustra. Ahlsdorf’s primary concern is Wellhausen’s portrayal of Judaism and the ancient Hebrews, apparently prompted by the entanglement of nineteenth-century Orientalism and Bible Studies with the political antisemitism of the period.

I am not sure the Nachlass shows that the Prolegomena cannot be figuring into the design of Nietzsche’s book. Not to compare myself to Nietzsche, but I keep a journal, and the books I read often enough come in for discussion only months or even years later; you generally can’t tell when I’ve read something by looking at my notebooks. So should we assume that we can tie a timeline of Nietzsche’s reading to his handwritten notes? That would make sense only if he were a particular type of reader, and one he discusses in Ecce Homo:

Scholars who at bottom do little nowadays but thumb books—philologists, at a moderate estimate, about 200 a day—ultimately lose entirely their capacity to think for themselves. When they don’t thumb, they don’t think. They respond to a stimulus (a thought they have read) whenever they think—in the end, they do nothing but react. Scholars spend all their energies on saying Yes and No, on criticism of what others have thought—they themselves no longer think. . . . I have seen this with my own eyes: gifted natures with a generous and free disposition, “read to ruin” in their thirties—merely matches that one has to strike to make them emit sparks—“thoughts”. (EH 2.8/6:292f)

Given how dismissive Nietzsche is of this sort of reactive intellectual, it would be a mistake to rely on exegetical inferences that presuppose a stimulus-response workflow. I would not be surprised to have it turn out that Nietzsche had been reading the Prolegomena during the later stages of writing Zarathustra—though for present purposes, namely, putting in place a crisp picture of how the Higher Critics approached Biblical texts, we don’t need to have a view about that.
Nietzsche was also quite familiar, and Wellhausen’s *Geschichte Israels*, a trial run for the *Prolegomena*, had been published in 1878.\(^{12}\)

Against traditional views which imputed divine or inspired authorship to the Bible, or which took its historical books to constitute an authentic record contemporaneous with the ancient early Israelites, Wellhausen argued that a great deal of the Hebrew Bible was one or another much later forgery, manufactured by priestly elites in order to confer legitimacy on their institutional privileges and prerogatives. *Deuteronomy* and related texts were presented as dating to the period of religious centralization in the later Judean monarchy; what Wellhausen dubbed the “Priestly Code” was a product of the post-Exilic period. In each case, practices and evaluative perspectives of the later period were backdated, and anachronistically imposed on earlier stages of Israelite history. Such later forgeries often helped themselves to earlier documents, which they clumsily wove together into the texts we now have; the distinct sources, as well as later editorial alterations, were alleged to be distinguishable and datable on the basis of stylometric evidence.

Now, in his *Antichrist*, Nietzsche wrote:

> The concept of God falsified, the concept of morality falsified: the Jewish priesthood did not stop there. The whole of the history of Israel could not be used: away with it! These priests accomplished a miracle of falsification, and a good part of the Bible now lies before us as documentary proof. With matchless scorn for every tradition, for every historical reality, they translated the past of their own people into religious terms, that is, they turned it into a stupid salvation mechanism of guilt before Yahweh, and punishment; of piety before Yahweh, and reward.

> the priest...measures peoples, ages, individuals, according to whether they profited or resisted the overlordship of the priests... in

\(^{12}\)On his encounter with Strauss, see Janz, 1981, vol. i, p. 146. The suggestion that *Zarathustra* is a parody is not unprecedented, and Meier, 2017, pp. 12f, understands it to be a takeoff on the life and teachings of Jesus. But note that Nietzsche does not seem to be taking any particular religion as his reference point. I will be emphasizing Old Testament allusions because we still have a book, from Nietzsche’s personal library, that tells us how to read them. As I have just remarked, we know that he owned and read a very similar book, which we no longer have, directed to the New Testament; Ben-Menahem, n.d., observes that a large number of *Zarathustra*’s chapter headings are lifted from the Koran; the title and protagonist are obviously a gesture at Zoroastrianism; finally for now, Janz, 1981, vol. ii, pp. 221f, mentions reasons for taking one of Nietzsche’s models to be Buddhist writings.
the hands of the Jewish priests the great age in the history of Israel became an age of decay; the Exile, the long misfortune, was transformed into an eternal punishment for the great age—an age in which the priest was still a nobody. (AC 26/6:194–195)

This passage is visibly derived from Wellhausen, and could serve as a precis or abstract of his treatise; together with similar passages nearby in *The Antichrist*, it confirms what we know from his frequent and emphatic underlining, that Nietzsche perhaps treated Wellhausen as an authority, but in any case paid close and careful attention to his work.\(^{13}\)

The common denominator of the Higher Critics’ rereading of both the Old and New Testaments was that a religious canon is normally the product not of the time at which the religion originated, but is assembled at a much later date by functionaries of that religion. An institutionalized religion inevitably has a very different perspective, and in particular, a very different system of values from that of its founders—whether they were charismatic leaders of lower-class protest movements or the primitive nomadic predecessors of a subjugated state. Thus the writings those institutions canonize will systematically misrepresent the early historical stages of the religion’s development.\(^{14}\)

\(^{13}\)For instance, early on in Wellhausen, 1883, ch. 5, it is argued that authors of *Deuteronomy* and the “Priestly Code” progressively altered earlier rules to specify that priests were to receive, as their dues from a sacrifice, first the shoulder, cheeks and maw of the animal, and subsequently the right leg and breast. When Nietzsche writes that “the priest formulated once and for all, down to the large and small taxes he was to be paid (not to forget the tastiest pieces of meat, for the priest is a steak eater), what he wants to have, ‘what the will of God is’” (AC 26/6:196), we know to which page his copy of Wellhausen is open. (Note the extensive underlining at vol. 1, p. 159, of that copy, for instance of “eine unverschämte Forderung”, the demand being for “roher Fleischstücke”; for this and further illustrations, see Ahlsdorf, 1997, pp. 156f.)

Over and above his penchant for iconoclasm, there are textual reasons for wondering whether Nietzsche flat out believed Wellhausen’s narrative; at BGE 45/5:66, for instance, Nietzsche complains about the quality of work in religious studies, and concludes that “in the end one has to do everything oneself.” And discussing Strauss, 1892, Nietzsche suggests that only the immature can take this sort of scholarship at face value (AC 28/6:199). (He means: A youth who was raised in a religious environment might take the question of whether Jesus performed the miracles that were attributed to him to be addressed by a close reading of some text; once you’re all grown up, stories involving miracles are obviously confabulations, and you don’t need involved and complicated textual arguments to decide that.)

\(^{14}\)Nietzsche seems to have paid close attention to this motif in Wellhausen’s exposition. See, for instance, the marginal emphasis at vol. 1, p. 168; Wellhausen is remarking that the Exile had left the Hebrews’ collective memory the sort of tabula rasa that made such misrepresentations feasible. Or again, at p. 233, Nietzsche underlines Wellhausen’s
Looking ahead, if *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is modeled on holy scripture as Nietzsche understood it, we should expect its implicit author to be something on the order of a priest of a religion that claims Zarathustra as its founder, writing at a time much later than the events it depicts, from a perspective that cannot avoid systematically misrepresenting them. Thus we should further expect the book’s ideas about humanity and its value, their familiarity from his other works notwithstanding, to turn out to be a perversion of Nietzsche’s own view and proposals. So let’s consider whether the Higher Criticism’s reading of the Bible is in fact guiding Nietzsche’s composition of *Zarathustra*.

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Indeed, Nietzsche seems to have quite self-consciously gone out of his way to mark *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* with the telltale features that the Higher Critics had so famously claimed were to be found in the Old Testament.

Taking after Ibn Ezra, the Higher Critics made a great deal of the presence in the Bible of turns of phrase such as, “And the Canaanite was then in the land” (Gen. 7:6), or “There arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses” (Deut. 34:10), or “Joshua made the Gibeonites at that day hewers of wood and drawers of water... even unto this day” (Josh. 9:27). Because such locutions inform you of the temporal displacement of the writer from the events he is recounting, they are incompatible with traditional views about the Bible’s authorship, and motivate the project of determining who the real authors of the Bible were. Now, very early on in *Zarathustra*, we

\[\text{characterization, “die Judaïsierung der Vergangenheit” (the Judaization of the past); see also his emphases on pp. 243 and 245: “Kurz, was man so eigentlich für das Theokratische in der Geschichte Israels ausgiebt, das ist durch die Bearbeitung hineingebracht.” Again, at p. 257, he underlines Wellhausen’s dictum, “je näher die Geschichtsschreibung ihrem Ursprung ist, desto profaner ist sie.” There are many further emphasized passages of this sort.}\]

15 In sec. 13 I will take up the question of whether we are in a position call any view properly Nietzsche’s own. In the meantime, however, you might be worried that, since the protagonist of the book is its title character rather than Nietzsche himself, we should not assume the views being turned upside down to be Nietzsche’s. As we proceed, please notice the points at which ‘Zarathustra’s’ various dicta are compared to pronouncements drawn from Nietzsche’s other writings.

16 The first two are adduced by Wellhausen in his introduction, the last in VIII.I.3; compare also Wellhausen’s discussion of 1Sam. 12, in VIII.I.1. In Nietzsche’s copy of the *Prolegomena* we find him giving unusually heavy emphasis (both underlining and marginal markings) to “Abenezra’s und später Spinoza’s Aufmerksamkeit”—followed by a list of such Biblical passages that they had noticed (p. 10).
read:

And here ended Zarathustra’s first speech, which is also called “the Prologue” (Z.P.5/4:20)

—implying a long (presumably religious) tradition in which the speech has been given a name. Or again, at the end of sec. 1 of “On Virtue that Makes Small,” we get: “On that same day, however, he made his speech on virtue that makes small”; as before, the implication is that the speech about to be presented is already in circulation, and known by that name (Z.III.5.1/4:212). Or again, in “At Noon,” a remark is identified as “Zarathustra’s proverb” (Z IV.10/4:342); the ‘proverb’ is repeated at Z IV:12/4:353, and a further proverb is attributed to Zarathustra at Z IV:19.1/4:396; evidently a number of sayings are already known as ‘Zarathustra’s proverbs’. Or again, an event is identified as “that long-drawn-out meal which the chronicles [better: the history books] call ‘the last supper’” (Z IV:12/4:355). Briefly, Zarathustra presents itself as having been composed much later than the events it reports.

The Higher Critics had argued that when post-Exilic priests wrote historical works, they clumsily inserted features of the social organization of that much later date into the historical narrative. Zarathustra adopts the conceit that its author is doing the same. The setting is some sort of pastoral society long ago: Zarathustra walks; he doesn’t take trains or even carriages, and no one else seems to, either. The forests have saints in them, and the villages have tightrope shows. Perhaps it’s supposed to be the middle ages, perhaps not; in any case, it is a great deal earlier than the nineteenth century. But we find this older time peppered with all manner of anachronisms: newspapers, chairs (i.e., professorial chairs in a university),17 the Kantian thing-in-itself (Z I.3/4:38), egalitarian ideologies (Z II.7/4:128–131), Kantian aesthetics (Z II.15/4:156–159), military uniforms (Z I.10/4:58), complaints about the State (Z II.18/4:170; Z I.11/4:61f), about the overspecialized academics and scholars whom Nietzsche describes as “inverse cripples” (Z II.20/4:178), about housing developments (Z III.5.1/4:211f), and about the emerging bourgeoisie (Z III.12.21/4:262f). At one point Zarathustra returns from the future, “to you, O men of today, and into the land of education” (Z II.14/4:153); his complaints identify the land of education as late-nineteenth-century Europe.

Wellhausen and others had argued that internal textual evidence showed the Bible to have been assembled from many disparate sources. Zarathustra

17Kaufmann’s translation of the section title at I.2/4:33 as “On the Teachers of Virtue” is unfortunate.
mimics this also. There are collections of speeches; we have already noticed two named speeches, and the title “Zarathustra’s Speeches” (4:29) further marks them as a compilation of already available material. There is also some rhymed verse (Z III.15.3/4:285f), as well as “songs” of Zarathustra, meant to imitate psalms—notice the repeated “Selah” and “Amen”—all integrated somehow into the book.\textsuperscript{18}

Nietzsche is not just parodying the Bible: he is parodying the Bible as the Higher Criticism understood it. If he is, then the putative author of \textit{Zarathustra} is someone cobbling together and rewriting older texts, and in the course of doing so imposing his own ideology on his materials. And if that is right, \textit{Zarathustra} differs strikingly in one respect from Nietzsche’s other mature writings.

In his other late works, the postulated authors are (directly or indirectly) named, and, throughout, their name is “Nietzsche”. At the outset, I registered my agreement with Nehamas’s suggestion that Nietzsche’s books are best read by asking who their authors are. We have now reached the point at which we will have to part ways with Nehamas’s reading. Nehamas assumes that Nietzsche’s books all share a single author. My own view, for which I mean to argue elsewhere, is that each of the later books presents us with a distinct author, and that these authors are, and not by accident, quite different from one another. However, because most of them are named “Nietzsche”, my disagreement with Nehamas is a relatively complicated one to resolve. The instance we have in front of us, however, is uncomplicated: the postulated author of \textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra} is something like a priest of some not-yet-founded religion, writing at some time in the distant future.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18}At Z IV.16.2/4:381–385; compare the shift from “thus spoke Zarathustra” to “thus sang Zarathustra” at e.g. Z III.6/4:221.

\textsuperscript{19}Is it plausible that a nineteenth-century author was writing science-fiction \textit{avant la lettre}? I don’t think we should be incredulous on this score: just for instance, William Whewell, the early nineteenth-century philosopher of science, penned an account of a visit from an inhabitant of the moon (Todhunter, 1876, pp. 380–405).

I have frequently encountered puzzlement on this point: if the claim is correct that, in \textit{Zarathustra}, Nietzsche is appropriating the doctrines of the secular Bible scholarship of his day as a stylistic model, how is it not already widely known? I suppose a fast version of the answer would be another question: how could it have taken well up of a thousand years for the likes of Ibn Ezra, Spinoza, and Wellhausen to have noticed those markers of the composition of the Old Testament?

A slower version of that answer might go as follows. The Bible is hard for us to read in good part because we have lost the literature and forgotten the literary conventions of the time in which it was written. In rather a similar manner, \textit{Zarathustra} is hard for us to read because by the time it started to receive serious attention from philosophers, the Higher Criticism had receded into our cultural past; I scarcely ever find that a member of
One point is quite clear. The use which Nietzsche makes of the Higher Criticism tells us that Nietzsche means *Zarathustra* to represent, not his own ideas and—to use the relevant part of his vocabulary—values, but rather, his ideas and values as they will be perverted and corrupted by being institutionalized. If that is correct, we have on hand an important consequence for how the book is to be read. It is irresponsible simply to pull passages from *Zarathustra*, and treat them as assertions of Nietzsche’s views—which is, almost without exception, what scholars who have helped themselves to *Zarathustra* have done.\(^{20}\)

Why would Nietzsche (the once-living, breathing writer) have taken the trouble to present us with a literary construction of this form? Philosophers delivering injunctions not to misinterpret them in one or another way are common enough. But why would Nietzsche have written an entire book in which he presents possible misreadings? And moreover, why would he have regarded such a book as a philosophically central work, and been positively exuberant at his own achievement? If we are on the right track, it must be because the institutionalization of values amounts, in one or more ways, to a central problem in Nietzsche’s philosophical enterprise, and because he thought that with *Zarathustra* he was addressing it. So it is time to turn to Nietzsche’s philosophical agenda; I will begin with some criticism of the way in which two famous doctrines are familiarly ascribed to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

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Twenty-five or so years back, a New Age self-help book which disguised itself as a thriller made it to the bestseller lists. *The Celestine Prophecy* told the story of its protagonist’s pursuit of an ancient document containing the very secrets of existence. In the course of a typical chapter, in which he might, say, narrowly escape death at the hands of soldiers intent on suppressing the document, a capital-letters Insight is revealed to him, such as: people

our tribe has any familiarity with it at all.

To be sure, ‘Zarathustra’s’ pronouncements can be brought to bear on a reconstruction of what Nietzsche himself thought, but only when they are read as inflected, so to speak, by the genre exercise in which Nietzsche has embedded them. We can be fairly confident that this approach to his texts is licensed, since his models—Wellhausen, Strauss *et al.*—took themselves to be able to reconstruct the true history of ancient Israel or of Jesus from the later misrepresentations. Here the attitude of the village atheist on which I earlier remarked is in play; the Higher Critics adopted a breathtakingly condescending attitude toward the authors of the texts they were reading, treating them as incompetent writers and editors who would be simply unable to cover their tracks.
try to win conversations, which is a bad thing; or, if you have a bad feeling about something, don’t do it; or, don’t cut down those beautiful old-growth forests. That is, the chase after the ancient document reveals ‘secrets’ that are in fact no more than truisms, platitudes of which the book’s readers are no doubt already convinced.  

Nietzsche can present us with a very similar problem. Heidegger correctly observes that Zarathustra is given the role of the teacher of the Eternal Return and then of the prophet of the Overman. These doctrines have received a great deal of exegetical attention, and the results share in what we can call the Celestine Prophecy Problem. Take the Eternal Return: on the most mainstream family of interpretations, its point is, more or less, that you should ask yourself whether you are happy enough with the way your life is going to want to do it over again.  

21 Redfield, 1993. That characterization is in a way misleading, because some of the ‘secrets’ the protagonist discovers will strike most academic readers as flat-out goofy; the Jungian notion that coincidences are significant is probably the most innocuous of them. But the characterization is nonetheless on-target for my purposes, because the audience of the book is the New Age community, and they already take the more-or-less magical pronouncements for common knowledge: that people have auras is, for them, a truism.

22 Heidegger, 1984, ch. 5.

23 There are many variations. Danto, 1965/1980, p. 212, presents it as Nietzsche’s Categorical Imperative: “So act (or so be) that you would be willing to act exactly the same way (or be exactly the same thing) an infinite number of times over.” Clark, 1991, ch. 8, “compare[s] Nietzsche’s question—would you be willing to live this same life eternally?—with a question people do in fact ask each other: if you had it to do all over again, would you marry me again? The way in which members of a couple respond to the latter question is usually taken to reflect their true feelings about their marriage” (p. 269). Nehamas, 1985, ch. 5, ties the test of whether your life is regret-free to Nietzsche’s anti-essentialist metaphysics, and to the ideal of a maximally coherent character and life. Anderson, 2009, very interestingly argues that the key to affirming one’s past is changing its aesthetic properties by reframing it. Reginster, 2006, ch. 5, however, takes the Eternal Return to be Nietzsche “exhorting us to recognize a certain substantive value, namely the value of ‘becoming’”, and “that there are perfections to which impermanence might actually be essential” (pp. 225f). When discussing previous interpretations, Reginster notices a version of the problem we are raising: “Who would find novel or controversial the exhortation to live life so as to have no regrets about it?” (p. 221) But his own proposal makes Nietzsche’s views out to be merely the recycled platitudes of German Romanticism (and when the time comes to illustrate the view, Reginster turns to Goethe’s Faust).

An older group of interpretations made Nietzsche out to be attempting bad a priori cosmology; see, e.g., Zuboff, 1980, and Soll, 1980. These have largely dropped out of view in the current literature, and I will not discuss them here. However, the cosmological notion was familiar enough at the time. Just for instance, John Stuart Mill points out that on his view, “if any particular state of the entire universe could ever recur a second time, all subsequent states would return too, and history would, like a circulating decimal of many figures, periodically repeat itself”; he then goes on to quote Virgil, before reassuring
think of the recommendation, it is familiar and even trite; we do not need a prophet to descend from the mountains to tell us that we should live so as not to have regrets, and that a satisfactory life is one that we would be willing to relive.

Or again, the Overman, as he is sketched in *Zarathustra*, comes off as a personality type that will synthesize the hypertrophied traits and capabilities of today’s ‘higher men’, the academic specialists, ascetics, clergy, Dostoyevskian nihilists, and so on cataloged in Part IV; these traits systematically deform people’s characters and lives into what would be, other things equal, occasion for regret. However, once we understand the ‘higher men’ as the historical preconditions of the Overman, we will no longer find their existence regrettable. (They will have been ‘redeemed’.) This bit of Nietzschean doctrine is not trite and overfamiliar in the way that the Eternal Return is, but it nonetheless does not deserve its very own prophet. Even if it is heartening to think that all those human bonsais have not gone to waste, we no more need a Zarathustra to preach it to us than we need a Celestine Prophecy to tell us not to try to win conversations or lie to children.

Oversimplifying somewhat, as this family of interpretations of the Eternal Return has it, we are being advised to live so that we do not regret the past: neither our own decisions—nor, and this tends to get overlooked in the treatments at which we have just gestured—the variously sorry state of humanity until this point. The way to do this is to come to understand apparently regrettable aspects of ourselves and our world as necessary preconditions

24 Remembering that its being truistic does not make it true, or particularly good advice. Kundera, 1984, pp. 3–6, entertains perceptive second thoughts.

25 You can find a version of that second worry in Danto, who remarks of what he takes to be “an ancient, vaguely pagan ideal, the passions disciplined but not denied,” that, “divorced from the extravagant language and the rushing cadences of Zarathustra’s singing, [it] turns out to be a bland and all-too-familiar recommendation” (1965/1980, p. 199).

Danto does find a side of the Eternal Return that would perhaps be worth prophecy, if we could attribute it to Nietzsche: that because the world has no final state, it has no meaning, and so it is up to us to supply its meaning (pp. 211f). Even if the conclusion is Nietzsche’s, however, it would be uncharitable to attribute this train of thought to him. Presumably the transition from “no final state” to “no meaning” is to be managed by trading on the ambiguity of “end”: the meaning, i.e., the attained purpose, comes last. But Nietzsche, whom Nehamas correctly takes to be preoccupied with literary models of understanding, is unlikely to be crude enough to endorse that transition: the meaning of a novel is not its climax, and the meaning of an essay is not its last line.
for, or part and parcel of, something that we wholeheartedly choose and affirm. Once one sees one’s trials and tribulations as the *sine qua non* of one’s success, one is in retrospect happy that one underwent them; likewise, once one sees our depressing history as the precondition for our glorious future, one will no longer be thinking: *if only* . . . The Eternal Return is meant as a test that this condition has been attained; if you would be willing to have history as a whole, and your history as a part of it, repeat itself unaltered infinitely many times, then you must have managed to get past your regrets in pretty much this way.

The problem, now, is that there is a great deal indeed to be redeemed: in Nietzsche’s own case, the marginalized life of a near-invalid, someone who would be a street person if he did not have a disability pension, living out a lonely and ignored existence in a succession of cheap Italian and Swiss hotels. Even more pressingly, affirming the Eternal Return is a matter of reaffirming not just one’s own past, but *all* of the past—and the future, as well. That includes the entire history of Christianity, just for starters, and what is hardest to stomach, a world full of defective, deformed and—he repeatedly tells us—nauseating humanity. Here is Nietzsche’s character playing up that response:

> “Naked I had once seen both, the greatest man and the smallest man: all-too-similar to each other, even the greatest all-too-human. All-too-small, the greatest!—that was my disgust with man. And the eternal recurrence even of the smallest—that was my disgust with existence.” (Z III.13.2/4:274f)

Elsewhere he recounts a vision, deploying a related image that, we recall, has earlier been glossed for the readers:

> “A young shepherd I saw, writhing, gagging, in spasms, his face distorted, and a heavy black snake hung out of his mouth. Had I ever seen so much nausea and pale dread on one face?” (Z III.2.2/4:201f)

> “The bite on which I gagged the most...was...my question: What? does life *require* even the rabble?...my nausea gnawed hungrily at my life.” (Z II.6/4:125, restoring Nietzsche’s emphasis of “nöthig”)

And in the book’s Preface, in his attempt to shock an audience out of its complacency, Zarathustra indicts them:
“The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small... ‘We have invented happiness,’ say the last men, and they blink.”

The description does not indeed move his listeners, but it is meant to be deeply disturbing.

Let’s start to use Nietzsche’s word, “values,” to cover, among other things, the standards by which one assesses the relative worth of one thing and another. What could be so valuable as to redeem that past? And what could be so valuable as to redeem our worthless humanity? By the lights of the values we deploy in real life, nothing fits the bill. At first glance, Zarathustra is naturally read as proposing that the Overman will be so supremely valuable as to retrospectively justify his hard-to-swallow past. But not only does this sort of reading fail to explain why the Overman is that valuable, it loses track of Nietzsche’s problem. That was, we saw a moment back, precisely that life requires the dishearteningly valueless version of humanity that we see around us. (“What? does life require even the rabble?”) So insisting that humanity as it is and has been is required by the Overman should not count as a solution to it. Once we remind ourselves that there is more to the Eternal Return than the trite injunction to be alright with your life, the doctrine, as Nietzsche’s interpreters have been construing it, seems simply unbelievable.

But there are two very different ways to come to have something that is valuable; one is to take available standards as a fixed frame of reference, and to acquire something that is sufficiently valuable by their lights; the other is to alter the standards so that what one has, or perhaps could come to have, will count as more valuable. If we need to redeem the past and our fellow man, and if, given our current values, nothing could count as valuable enough to do so, then we must replace our current values with values that permit the past, and even those fellow men, to be redeemed. This train of

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26 Z P.5/4:19; compare Nietzsche’s characterization of the proper object of pity in BGE 225/5:160f: “we see how man makes himself smaller...Well-being as you understand it...soon makes man ridiculous and contemptible...”

27 Anything as valuable as that would be something you wouldn’t trade in for any amount of anything else, and as undergraduates in classes on Mill’s higher pleasures are easily brought to observe, there is nothing in the real world of which this is true; evidently, our standards are balanced enough so that no one sort of thing can have the requisite priority over all the others.

Of course, the Christian system of evaluations purports to provide salvation, which is announced to be valuable in just this way. But Nietzsche insists both that the Christian world-behind-the-world, i.e., heaven and hell, is a fiction, and that the values it supports are themselves a large part of the problem that Nietzsche is trying to solve.
thought appears as one of several motivations for a distinctively Nietzschean innovation in moral theory, the invention of new values.

In *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche repeatedly presses this agenda on his reader. For instance, “On the Three Metamorphoses” charts the path followed by promising personalities: they start out by taking on challenging obligations, precisely because they’re challenging; then they challenge the values they inherited, which underwrote those challenging obligations; finally, they make up new values (Z I.1/4:29–31). In “On the Flies of the Market Place,” we’re told that what’s really important is something that doesn’t get a lot of attention, namely, the invention of new values: “Around the inventors of new values the world revolves: invisibly it revolves.” Would-be inventors are warned that if they want to be in that line of work, they do well to stay away from distracting and unappreciative hypemeisters, who are dismissively compared to irritating insects (Z I.12/4:65–68). Similarly, “On Great Events” tells the reader not to pay attention to large political events; what really matters is the invention of values, which is the sort of quiet (and apolitical) business that scarcely gets noticed (Z II.18/4:166–171). And in a section on “Gift-Giving Virtue,” we’re reminded that we’ve inherited a great deal in the way of randomly and badly chosen values, and these have in some Lamarckian manner really become part of us; that we can still experiment with and create new values, and get it right; and finally, that if one just follows someone’s instructions about creating values—even Nietzsche’s, or Zarathustra’s—one is doing it wrong (Z I.22/4:97–102).

If our account of the literary frame is correct, we need to be suspicious about whether these pronouncements convey Nietzsche’s own views accurately as they are; in due course I will get around to considering some of the more important ways he is misrepresenting himself. For the moment, let’s just register that what is evidently the same agenda is prominently on display elsewhere: *Beyond Good and Evil* promotes ‘philosophers of the future,’ who are characterized as legislators of new values.28

This gives us a different way to think about the Eternal Return: as an ideal to bring to bear in the assessment of, not in the first place decisions or self-interpretation, but values that we currently deploy or are considering adopting. If that is right, we should be construing the Eternal Return as something on the order of a proposed metavalue: a value whose function is the first place to regulate other values. And we also have in the offing an associated way of understanding the Overman, although to reintroduce this concept we need to invoke Nietzsche’s proprietary notion of

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28See, e.g., BGE 203, 211/5:126f, 144f.
The life cycles of important practices, values, institutions, character traits and so on, Nietzsche has it, typically have crude beginnings, but over time, the practices, etc., become ever more refined and purified versions of themselves. That very process brings them to a point at which they are transformed into something deeply different from their earlier versions, and are cut loose from their original functions and uses: they ‘overcome themselves’. Being a gentleman might serve as an illustration, though it is not Nietzsche’s own. Originally, behaving like a gentleman was a matter of requiring others explicitly to acknowledge one’s aristocratic social status; now we think of a true gentleman as someone who puts people at their ease, especially by never reminding them of differences in social status.

Now, in “On Old and New Tablets,” Zarathustra explains: “There it was too that I picked up the word ‘overman’ by the way, and that man is something that must be overcome”; so we can take it that the Overman is what man will overcome himself into. And in a section titled “On the Thousand and One Goals” (Z I.15/4:74–76), Nietzsche’s character announces that

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29Nietzsche’s account of the process, in the section “On Self-Overcoming,” makes it out to be a side effect of enforcing standards on oneself: “whenever the living... commands itself... it must become the judge, the avenger, and the victim of its own law.” The motivation for pressing towards ever more rigorously construed versions of one’s ideals, standards and so on is put down to ‘will to power’ (Z II.12/4:147f), a famous Nietzschean notion that here we will leave unexplicated.

30The canonical but overinvoked model is the self-overcoming of the will to truth, as recounted in the Genealogy. “All great things bring about their own destruction through an act of self-overcoming” (GM 3.27/5:410); once the will to truth has been sufficiently refined, the question of the value of truth becomes unavoidable. The upshot is to free up the scientific and intellectual discipline developed in its service for other uses.

31Z III.12.3/4:248; it is, however, almost certain that Nietzsche in fact picked up the word “overman” from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay on “The Over-Soul” (1971–2013, vol. ii, pp. 157–175). Once our discussion is farther along, it may be useful for the reader to compare and contrast the regulative functions served by the respective constructs. Emerson famously calls on you to, as a recent idiom went, tell it like it is—that is, tell it like it seems to you that it is, whether or not you agree with others, or for that matter with what you’ve insisted on previously. That the Over-Soul is speaking through you assures you, as much as that’s possible, that when you speak your truth, it will be recognized as truth by others, and will prove to be more than an expression of your merely personal proclivities and illusions. There is, however, no account of how the Over-Soul works through you, and why it expresses itself consistently across persons; Emerson is giving a placeholder for an explanation—an explanation by magic—rather than a philosophical argument. As we will see, the Overman is being positioned as a supremely important value, one that is in the business of regulating what it vouches to be a supremely important activity; you may want to consider whether we are told enough about the Overman to make it any more than just another explanation by magic.
“man’...means: the esteemer”—that is, the creature that creates values. He explains that hitherto “peoples” have introduced systems of values that allowed them to meet pressing collective challenges, and these have accordingly varied with group environments. (That is, if you live on Dune, your tribe probably holds the supreme value to be water conservation.) So the Overman will exhibit a refined, purified version of value creation, presumably one that has pulled itself free of its original function: it will no longer primarily serve group self-preservation, and values will come to be selected in view of very different considerations. Once again, it looks like Nietzsche is sketching the formal outlines of a metavalue. The Overman, who is supposed to justify and redeem humanity and its past, to make life worth living, and to make humanity command respect, is a personification of an improved form of value creation: bringing to bear Nietzsche’s view of those improvements elsewhere, what is being advertised to us is the supreme value of inventing values.

The Overman and the Eternal Return are sketched or gestured at, rather than concretely presented. This is a point we will return to shortly, but for now, we can suppose the reason to be that the values that Nietzsche wants us to invent and adopt cannot be exhibited, if they have not yet been invented. Instead, Nietzsche turns his attention to the question of what is involved in inventing values, and to an apparently insuperable problem that such a program faces.

The notion of a value travels with a great deal of baggage: just as a reminder, values are today thought to be either something you discover, in which case they are, in J. L. Mackie’s familiar description, ‘queer,’ that is, too unlike anything else in the world to be either comprehensible or believable; or they are, again per Mackie’s characterization, mere projections of your emotions or other attitudes onto the world around you.\textsuperscript{32} Invoking the term nowadays gets in the way of clear and productive discussion, and accordingly, I’m going to deploy a handful of partial substitutes to the extent that I can. Standards are suitably innocuous and will serve us for part of the way—although there is more to a value than just the standards it imposes, for as the discussion

\textsuperscript{32}Mackie, 1977, ch. 1; to be sure, metaethicists do their very best to propose alternatives, but since in doing so these options are taken, seemingly inevitably, as their foils, it’s hard to avoid the sense that this is how philosophers today (and not just philosophers) do think about values.
of self-overcoming informs us, values also behave like the sort of ideals or aspirations whose nature it is to be progressively refined.

Standards can be big and hifalutin, as the Eternal Return seems to be, or small and low-key—as in sheepdog trials. Standards are used in assessments, but they can, importantly, themselves be assessed; which means we can use them to represent Nietzsche’s interest in the ‘value of values’ (GM P.6/5:253). Standards can be introduced and discarded, and so they track Nietzsche’s insistence that values come and go. Nietzsche’s proposals quite reasonably set off alarm bells: if people are going to be inventing idiosyncratic values, well, who knows what’s going to come of that? By thinking through the ways we have of introducing and assessing standards in ordinary life, we can somewhat reassure ourselves on that score; the invention of values doesn’t have to mean that anything goes.

Now, philosophers who are used to thinking of values as though they were Plato’s Forms will ask how we are to assess novel standards or values more generally, and be likely to leap to this conclusion: by appeal to the real values, which consequently can’t be themselves invented. If you have this impulse, let me ask you to resist it. Values are, inter alia, assessment tools. When you assess one thing or another—which may itself be a novel assessment method, for instance, a proposal for ranking philosophy departments—you deploy forms of assessment you already have available. (You might, in this case, consider the effect on your faculty of adopting a software package that measures ‘productivity’; or you might think about the pros and cons of relying on the Leiter Report; to do so, you might examine the effects of using these metrics on faculty research programs.) But there is no standard set of assessment tools you always deploy, and at this point there are no methods of assessment that were not once themselves, perhaps long ago, adopted in roughly the same manner. In Nietzsche’s way of thinking, to be what we nowadays call a moral realist is to imagine that your standards are somehow just there; that is, it is to have forgotten that

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33E.g., “good and evil that are not transitory, do not exist” (Z II.12/4:149).
34Let me mention a category of standards in order to put it to one side: if I already have a standard available, I may use it to frame a derivative standard. For instance, once we have ways of measuring temperature, along with a specification of a range of temperatures, given in degrees Fahrenheit, that an oven is supposed to stay within, we can produce a new standard for the European market; rendered in degrees Celsius, it sets tighter bounds on fluctuations in oven temperature. Following Nietzsche, we are interested in independent standards: standards conformity to which cannot be specified in terms of the standards and standard-related techniques that one already has available. (If this is your home philosophical vocabulary, here we are interested in standards that aren’t reducible to other standards.)
the components of our collective cognitive repertoire have histories, and are found there because, one by one, they were added to it.\textsuperscript{35}

The design and implementation of standards is generally a nontrivial exercise. Legislatures are in the business of passing laws, that is, of introducing new standards of a certain sort, and none of us are surprised when a law turns out to have been badly drafted. Further, once the law is on the books, it is normal for a regulatory agency to be given the ongoing task of determining what it requires; it is normal for courts to have to determine what the law says about this or that case.\textsuperscript{36} The need for these expedients makes it obvious that even competently drafting legislation is not sufficient to determine its content; that is done gradually, through that body of incrementally built up regulation and precedent. We are also used to the idea that as the content of a body of law is firmed up in this manner, it can fail to unfold the law as intended, and we even have a word—“originalism”—for the program of keeping interpretation in line with the initial intent. Evidently laws can gradually be corrupted in the course of their interpretation, in practice replaced by very different laws, and even neatly inverted into their opposites. Moreover, all of that supposes that the regulating agencies and the accretion of precedent \textit{do} work to determine a content; however, if precedent isn’t treated as binding, if there are many inconsistent precedents or regulations, and if a citizen can pick and choose, then in the end, functionally there is no law at all. Now, legislation is a special case, but it is representative of the issues that have to be managed for the introduction of standards more generally.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{35}The exercise here is not to reconstruct Nietzsche’s objections to moral realism, but it’s worth registering how different they will be from those that figure into today’s back and forth, and here is a passage that encapsulates the contrast:

\textit{Historical refutation as the definitive refutation.} —In former times, one sought to prove that there is no God—today one indicates how the belief that there is a God could arise and how this belief acquired its weight and importance: a counter-proof that there is no God thereby becomes superfluous. —When in former times one had refuted the ‘proofs of the existence of God’ put forward, there always remained the doubt whether better proofs might not be adduced than those just refuted: in those days atheists did not know how to make a clean sweep. (D 95/3:86f; the translation is Hollingdale’s)

Showing how moral realism would be the side effect of memory loss is, in this way of thinking, its definitive refutation.

\textsuperscript{36}For a quick illustration, presented however as a way common law might develop, see the “series of imaginary judicial decisions” at Fuller, 1958, pp. 96–99.

\textsuperscript{37}To invent a value is not at all to have a light bulb go on over one’s head, as in a cartoon, and in the somewhat different form that Wittgenstein gave it (1998, e.g., Part I,
As Plato noticed, a philosophical problem which arises with respect to individuals can sometimes be seen, writ large, in political or social structures, and the converse is true as well: the problems that governments face when introducing novel standards are present, writ small, when we focus on the lone value innovator. Nietzsche returns to them repeatedly in *Zarathustra*, where they take an especially poignant form. For instance, in “On the Way of the Creator,” the value innovator is advised that he is in for a rough time: it is not just that he will have to surrender his former ambitions, which generally have been framed in terms of other people’s values and standards, but that he will have to enforce adherence to his novel standards on *himself*; this is difficult in particular because it is hard to stay on track in the face of self-doubt. Elsewhere, and recall why it matters that we can identify a Nietzschean concern in his other writings, he tells us that “whoever attempts [independence]... without inner constraint... enters a labyrinth... [where] no one can see how and where he loses his way...” (BGE 29/5:47f).

So suppose you take yourself to have invented a value, say, the Eternal Return, or the Overman. Suppose, for that matter, that you have a ‘eureka’-like epiphany. What is there to make all of that more than merely the illusion of comprehension and commitment, more than just empty patter? There is all the difference in the world between really having (or coming to have) a

§§143–146, 151–157), this point received a good deal of attention during the late twentieth century. Presented with a novel rule or concept (thus, with a novel criterion for successful performance or concept application), the student’s feeling that *now he has got it* counts for little or nothing in determining whether he *has* got it. What *does* matter is the student’s ability correctly to apply the rule or concept in an indefinitely extensive range of further somewhat different cases.

The importance of this thought for understanding the form that Wittgenstein chose to give his own polished writing is insufficiently appreciated. He tells us in his Preface that “the very nature of the investigation...compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction... The same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions...”—the reason being that, on the views he is developing, only this sort of display of competence shows us that there is genuine understanding. The feeling that one has followed a single argument, say, the so-called Private Language Argument, and even the ability to recite it to a classroom of students, is, if Wittgenstein is correct, not enough to tell us that there is a philosophical insight one has understood—and therefore, that there is so much as a philosophical insight to be understood. (I’m grateful to Brooke Hopkins for discussion of these passages.)

I don’t think that Nietzsche anticipated Wittgenstein’s Private Language Argument, but he was quite aware of the more informally put version of the problem that I am posing. If I am reading Nietzsche correctly, the literary form given to his later works, taken as a group, is motivated by closely related considerations—but here that will have to remain a promissory note.
value, and simply saying that one does. The job of ‘philosophers of the future’, we are told, is to invent values, but this will require that the values be filled in with a determinate content.

If this is to happen, long-term consistency matters; the value must be, I will say, stabilized. For instance, “it is enough to create new names and estimations and likelihoods in order to create in the long run new ‘things’”. New nomenclature has to be held onto until “it gradually grows to be part of the thing and turns into its very body”; if everyone adopts the posture of Humpty Dumpty—that words mean what I want them to mean—there won’t be a stable vocabulary picking out stable objects. That is, insisting on ‘new names’ and so on will be effective only if one succeeds in being persistent and consistent in how the assessments, etc., are applied.

We cannot expect this sort of consistency unless something has been done to make sure that many individuals, over a long period of time, exhibit it. A church that maintains and enforces a theological outlook, by suppressing heresies, for example, might do the job. Universities that train up generation after generation of students into a Kuhnian ‘paradigm’ might do so as well. I’m going to quickly generalize, and let these observations stand for the following claim: that, normally, new values are stabilized by institutionalizing them. Indeed, our discussion of what it takes to implement legislation has likewise suggested that the well-trodden path to stabilizing a value is institutionalizing it.

7

Now, Nietzsche has presented us with an elaborate warning against just this sort of institutionalization, or so I have been arguing. Zarathustra invokes the Higher Criticism to bring home the point that institutionalizing Nietzsche’s own new values would invite the treatment that the dictum that

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38 Pippin, 2010, p. 82, registers the point this way:

if the most important deed is the legislation of values, what actually is legislated cannot be fixed by the noble man’s strength of resolve alone or guaranteed by his “pathos of distance.” There is a difference between actually legislating values, that is, succeeding in doing so, and, on the other hand, engaging in a fantasy of self and value creation.

39 GS 58/KSA 3:422; I have amended Kaufmann’s misleading translation of “Wahrscheinlichkeiten” as “probabilities”. Perhaps the most famous extended discussion of the role of value terms in crystallizing values is to be found in the first Essay of the Genealogy.
all animals are equal received in George Orwell’s Animal Farm. Zarathustra exhibits to us a future perspective, one which incorporates Nietzsche’s values and views, and for which they are no longer revolutionary novelties, but a matter of course. This particular perspective, we saw, is modeled on Wellhausen’s priestly forgers (or perhaps their analogs in Strauss’s treatment), whose most important trait is that they systematically misrepresent the history, the mores, and indeed the values of the past they describe. We are, I concluded, being invited to see the postulated author of Zarathustra as bound to misrepresent Nietzsche’s own ideas and values, and now would be a good time to give a Nietzschean example of the effect he is anticipating.

Since both the misrepresented past and the misrepresenting author are fictional, we should tread with caution when embarking on a catalog of the errors being made by the would-be author of Zarathustra—and this is in any case not the place to assemble the full list. That said, at least one iconic misrepresentation is prominently on display. We noted that the title, and repeated refrain, is an allusion to an Old Testament prophetic signature. But that signature runs, Thus says the Lord—not, Thus says the prophet. Nietzsche’s reason for the substitution is clear enough: God is dead, and so the prophet cannot be his emissary. However, that over-famous pronouncement is just a dramatic way of saying that there is no supernatural or metaphysical authority on which to foist responsibility for one’s evaluations. Thus there is never really any authority for your assessments but your own, and when you evaluate one thing or another, you could, if you wanted to be up front about what you were doing, append: I’m speaking for myself here.

That is what Nietzsche’s Zarathustra does. But in the soppy and worshipful perspective of the future religion of Nietzsche, it is inevitably treated as a sacred pronouncement, and as itself authoritative, and so the very low-key gloss on Zarathustra’s assessments, “or anyway, that’s what I say,” becomes the prophetic “thus spoke Zarathustra”. That is, the utterance has been recast, Wellhausen-style, into a form which gives it a significance almost exactly opposed to its original content.\footnote{As Nietzsche puts it elsewhere, apropos another Strauss-influenced discussion, the doctrine of the religion ends up being “the opposite of that which was the origin” (AC 36/6:208). Again, whatever Nietzsche is, he is not a latter-day Zoroastrian; nonetheless, he chooses to appropriate the figure who was the first to insist that both good and evil are built into the metaphysics of the universe, and to make of him a character who denies precisely that claim.}

These iconic examples do not stand alone; although this is not the place to trace out the pattern of inversions in Zarathustra, here is one more, just to make it more plausible that there is a pattern. In Zarathustra, we are given the sort of paeans to Life—two ‘Dancing Songs’—that have led to misclassifying Nietzsche as an especially uninteresting Romantic:
Nietzsche is pointing us to a trap. Values are not effective—they are not socially or personally real—until they are embodied in an appropriate perspective. That evidently takes time, and so producing the perspectives that new values require normally presupposes more than a modicum of evaluative stability, which in turn normally requires institutionalizing those values. Institutionalizing a value requires perhaps reverence for it; or treating it as authoritative; or taking it absolutely seriously. But if you are a value inventor (or, more carefully, if you are the self-aware inventor of values that Nietzsche hopes you will become), you cannot have too much reverence for any extant values, and if you are going to put yourself in a position to reassess favorably the parts of your world that you now find unbearably disgusting, you cannot have too much reverence for the values that underwrite your present assessment. If the values which Nietzsche is recommending to us are betrayed precisely by being institutionalized, it is no wonder he has his character worry:

my teaching is in danger; weeds pose as wheat. My enemies have grown powerful and have distorted my teaching till those dearest to me must be ashamed of the gifts I gave them.\footnote{Z II.10, III.15/4:139–141, 282–284. Whereas in Twilight of the Idols, we come across the dry pronouncement: “the value of life cannot be estimated. Not by the living, for they are an interested party... not by the dead, for a different reason” (TI II.2/6:68).}

We have three interrelated claims on the table: First, that we should take very seriously the enterprise of inventing new values. Second, that the Overman and the Eternal Return are best thought of as metavalues which Nietzsche’s protagonist is prescribing, the one recommending the invention of values, and the other, a benchmark to use in assessing the values that we have and that get invented. And third, that we should be reading Nietzsche on the assumption that he is misrepresenting his own view. Where is the misrepresentation in those first two claims?

Let’s return to “On the Thousand and One Goals,” and give a more extended paraphrase of the prophetic-sounding speech. What today we call moral realism is an error; values are a human production, and are to be understood as, in the first place, an aspect of a survival technique. Until

\footnote{Z II.1/4:105—and notice the conspiracy-theory dress given to what the Higher Criticism makes out to be in large measure a side-effect of impersonal sociological forces and constraints.}
recently, systems of values have been specific to ethnic or cultural groups; they normally set a high value on demanding activities and achievements that are critical for the collective survival of the group that adopts them. Different environments present different challenges, and it follows that different ethnic and cultural groups will typically have very different systems of values.

Individuals creating values is a novel phenomenon (as is the individual itself and, Nietzsche suggests, not coincidentally). When individuals create values for their ethnic or cultural group for self-interested reasons, things don’t work out well for the collective; but there is room as well for value creation by individuals that is not driven by self-interest ... and at that point there’s a sudden swerve, to the suggestion that in place of the multiple “goals” of the many peoples, we might have a single goal for humanity—“one yoke for the thousand necks,” a single system of values that will one day direct everybody. And although it is unstated here, we know from other passages that the single goal is to be the Overman.

For more than one reason, it is hard to believe that the complaint that “humanity still has no goal” represents Nietzsche’s views correctly. First, in The Gay Science, he takes time out to criticize the notion that goals are a primary explainer of action—that they control what it is that people actually do—as a naivety and a misconception. Second, the Overman as a goal won’t make humanity valuable in anything but an instrumental sense. Certainly we shouldn’t assume that Nietzsche shares now-prevalent, that is, generally Kantian attitudes about what acknowledging the value of another person comes to; for instance, he seems to think that one way to respect someone is to treat him as your enemy. Nonetheless, to see someone as an instrumentally necessary precondition to something you care about will not underwrite anything on the order of respect for them.

Third, a large part of Nietzsche’s diagnosis of the ills produced by our extant one-size-fits-all values is that they are one size fits all. As we have registered, in Beyond Good and Evil, the inventors of values are called “philosophers of the future”; Nietzsche looks forward to their very finicky stance when it comes to foisting their opinions and values on others: “My judgment is my judgment: no one else is easily entitled to it—that is what such a philosopher of the future may perhaps say of himself” (BGE 43/5:60).

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42GS 360/3:607f; of course, we should probably not expect the heavy-handed priesthood of Thus Spoke Zarathustra’s imagined future to track Nietzsche’s subtle criticism of what we would now think of as Anscombean action theory.

43Just for instance, at BGE 221/5:155f—although notice the qualification at the end of the section.
Similarly, at one point Zarathustra tells us that “he has discovered himself who says, ‘This is my good and evil’” (Z III.11.2/4:243). But if Nietzsche’s doctrines were to be institutionalized, all this would have to change; a church cannot persist if it allows constant and idiosyncratic evaluative innovations on the part of its members, and it will have no alternative but to streamline the range of allowable options, probably down to one.

And finally, the book conveys the impression that the Overman is a dominating feature of the landscape of a far-off future: “you could well create the overman. Perhaps not you yourselves, my brothers. But into fathers and forefathers of the overman you could re-create yourselves: and let this be your best creation” (Z II.2/4:109). “In your children you shall make up for being the children of your fathers: thus shall you redeem all that is past. This new tablet I place over you” (Z III.12.12/4:255). But the Overman, we have been supposing, is Nietzsche’s icon for the metavalue of inventing values; if the invention of values is as pressing a matter as Nietzsche seems to think, why should it be deferred to some apparently indefinitely later time? In any case, we are given mixed signals as to whether it is being deferred: we have noticed Zarathustra giving advice to aspiring value inventors, quite definitely in the tone of voice one adopts when encouraging younger contemporaries.

The early Christians understood the kingdom of God to be just around the corner—or perhaps to be already present, Nietzsche suggests (AC 34/6:206f). This state of mind is not compatible with a long-lasting, stable, continent-spanning ecclesiastical bureaucracy, one that is in the business of accumulating such assets as the Vatican art collection. In order for there to be a Catholic Church able to promulgate the values of Christianity, the kingdom of heaven has to be put off until much later. Rather similarly, an institution that was in the business of inculcating Nietzsche’s dramatic metavalues would have to itself be stable: stable enough, inter alia, to administer the relevant standards consistently. Perhaps institutions don’t do a bad job of it when the standards they are administering are the same for everyone. But what institution could survive a constant diet of idiosyncratic, personalized, newly invented standards, aspirations and so on?44 In very much the manner of inversions of value that the Higher Critics ascribed to the authors of

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44The rhetorical question fairly represents the relevant step in Nietzsche’s reasoning, it seems to me, but we shouldn’t treat the question as rhetorical ourselves. Recent philosophical discussions of liberal institutions have had as an ongoing theme the extent of their ability to handle an ongoing stream of different and perhaps unanticipated evaluative postures. (For an entry representative of the post-Rawlsian phase of the debate, see Gaus, 2016.)
both the Hebrew and the Christian Bibles, the holy scripture of the imaginary religion we are contemplating will have to have transformed the value of inventing values into something manageable, something bureaucratically safe, something that will go into effect only one day.

9

If those two very dramatic and larger-than-life metavalues are Nietzsche showing us what institutionalization would make of some very differently intended evaluative innovation, then our next question is what this way of stabilizing the original innovation must be getting wrong.

The Overman and the Eternal Return make humanity, or anyway its successor, out to be valuable in a manner that is peculiarly reminiscent of Kant: rather as human beings were held to be unconditionally valuable, in that they are the creatures that rationally set ends for themselves, so future humans will be valuable in that they invent values for themselves—and present humans will be valued as a necessary precondition to all of that. However, we have also been piecing together another picture, on which we had better not be preoccupied by one or two supreme values, which we construe as goals to be achieved in the distant future. The invention of novel values is important, alright, but what you need are values that are suited to you, and starting right now. If that latter view is Nietzsche’s, the mythologized super-values get his ideas upside-down and backwards—just as the literary frame we have identified instructs us to anticipate.

Nietzsche’s composition of the book, I have been suggesting, gives us reason to prefer the second of the two strikingly different views as that of the imaginary religion’s founder. But can we advance philosophical reasons for taking Nietzsche to endorse it, over and above the textual considerations?

If, as we saw, novel values acquire determinate contents over time, that should be true of Nietzsche’s evaluative proposals as well. And a little experimentation will confirm that conclusion. Even if we are right in thinking that the Overman is meant to represent the value of inventing values, we do not have a determinate conception of what doing so would amount to—not enough to see how it is going to make humanity and its past worthwhile. (Are we supposed to be inventing just any values? What if they are silly, or demeaning?) The point goes for the Eternal Return as well: there are many ways we could end up looking back at human history and affirming it, and not all of them can be what the Eternal Return ought to come to represent. For example, in Zarathustra itself, we are told that if your affirmation is
merely indiscriminate, you are an ass:

Verily, I also do not like those who consider everything good and this world the best. Such men I call omni-satisfied...I honor the recalcitrant choosy tongues and stomachs, which have learned to say “I” and “yes” and “no”. . . . Always to bray Yea-Yuh [“I-a,”
that is, a phonetic rendering of “Yes” in German]—that only the ass has learned, and whoever is of his spirit.45

We need to discriminate among the ways we might affirm our past and accept our fellow human beings.

Without having the superlative metavalues clearly in focus, we aren’t able to make sense of the personal investment we’re supposed to come to have in them; if we know next to nothing about the Overman, how can we care enough about the prospect to will the Eternal Return? If we know next to nothing about the Eternal Return, how can we decide whether to sign on to the success concept we are apparently being offered?

10

The Celestine Prophecy Problem turns out not to have been easily avoidable; if we can only take seriously a value whose content has been sufficiently firmed up, and if the values that Nietzsche is trumpeting are only beginning that process, they will at the outset be very, very thin, and we should not be surprised if they seem not to amount to much. One way or another, the evaluative novelties that Nietzsche has his character advance will have to themselves be articulated and stabilized, and we should be interested in what they can amount to when they are. Let’s first turn to the strategy of institutionalization as it has been playing out in the real—as opposed to Nietzsche’s fictional—world.

For academics such as ourselves, the obvious way to go about determining what Nietzsche’s superlative metavalues come to would be to interpret

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45 Z III.11.2/4:243f; cf. IV:17. Relatedly, when he looks back on his own life, Nietzsche pronounces: “I do not want in the least that anything should become different than it is; I myself do not want to become different.” But when he says so, he has just announced how seriously he takes “the imperative...to say No as rarely as possible” (EH II.8–9/6:292–295). The self-mocking pose he strikes in this section of Ecce Homo indicates that he is displaying one more way not to affirm things, an indication reinforced by the reason he doesn’t want anything different: “Willing’ something, ‘striving’ for something...I know none of this from experience.” Coming from the pen of the philosopher of will to power, we have to understand that as making the author of Nietzsche’s autobiography convict himself of failure out of his own mouth.
his writings; exegesis is among the more delicate facets of the institutionalization of a value, but it is the one we’re most at home with. How should we think of what that process comes to, when the text in question is Thus Spoke Zarathustra?

We can find Nietzsche orienting us in a passage from The Gay Science—which is, once again, the runup to Zarathustra—in which he is considering what it takes to make innovations stick.46

An innovator’s disciple announces to his master:

I believe in your cause and consider it so strong that I shall say everything, everything that I still have in my mind against it.

To which the innovator replies:

This kind of discipleship... is... the most dangerous, and not every kind of doctrine can endure it.

In order for a new doctrine to become a full-fledged and worked out position, it must survive long enough to acquire followers with the sort of commitment and training that enables them first to fill in the details, and then to defend it. The innovator tells us that he wishes

for the seedling to become a tree. For a doctrine to become a tree, it has to be believed for a good while; for it to be believed, it has to be considered irrefutable. The tree needs storms, doubts, worms and nastiness to reveal the nature and strength of the seedling; let it break if it is not strong enough. But a seedling can only be destroyed—not refuted.

If we take Nietzsche to be strategizing about the reception of his own innovations, we should conclude that he is looking for a way to make his doctrines and evaluative claims (or demands) temporarily irrefutable. And his innovator tells us how one might go about this:

I am thirsting for a composer... who would learn my ideas from me and transpose them into his language...: who could refute a tone?

Nietzsche did try his hand at composing a “Hymn to Life,” not very successfully. He was much more adept at literary than at musical composition,
but he apparently treated the former on the model of the latter. Thus the tactic of deferring the straightforward presentation of a philosophical theory and of argumentation for it until the ideas themselves are relatively entrenched was implemented by presenting them as inspiring prophecy, and even as ‘songs’ and rhymed verse. That is, it looks like Zarathustra is written the way it is in order to postpone the standard philosophical assessment of Nietzsche’s proposals until such time as they have a following, and, more ambitiously, until such time as the values being advanced have been sufficiently articulated to withstand—and to merit—the assessment.

The apparent success of Nietzsche’s manipulations is genuinely astonishing. Popular uptake of his writing, and especially of Zarathustra, has indirectly generated sustained interest in his work among a still small but ever-growing community of professional philosophers. These philosophers, some of whom have come to devote their lives to commentary on Nietzsche’s writings, are progressively articulating ever more carefully debugged versions of his theoretical views. As objections are raised to one scholar’s formulation of, again for instance, the Eternal Return, another scholar produces a more sophisticated reformulation that handles those objections; and as objections are raised to the reformulation in turn, yet another and still more nuanced reformulation is produced. Nietzsche could not himself, in the short time he thought he had to live, and at the frenetic pace at which he consequently worked, have managed these elaborately crafted constructions; instead, he seems to have delegated, and successfully, much of the step by step fabrication of his intellectual position to his followers. Again, the task of constructing theoretically refined versions of Nietzsche’s view, and a practice of exegetical casuistry around them, is part (the part that is, for academics, closest to home) of the institutionalization (and thus the stabilization) of the evaluative stances which Nietzsche appears to recommend.

However, although I have just made a show of being amazed at Nietzsche’s success in recruiting today’s Nietzsche specialists to fill in his ideas and values for him, recall that Zarathustra is warning us that their exegesis and casuistry is not, after all, going to count as success. The problem is not just that Nietzsche’s parable asks us to resist the posture historians of philosophy naturally assume, that they are telling you what is there on the page already. I began by pointing out that academic philosophers today respond to Thus Spoke Zarathustra with a collective cringe: if only Nietzsche hadn’t written that. But although in this case the responses tend to be extreme,

\textsuperscript{47}For background, see Liébert, 2004, and Perrakis, 2011; see also Janz, 1981, vol. ii, pp. 211–220.
the initial reaction on the part of academics to just about all of Nietzsche’s mature writing has been to balk at it, and understandably so. His views about morality, about social organization, and much else have struck his readers as outrageous; Nietzsche’s criticism of the value of truth, and of the motivations and the social function of academics are hard to square with conducting an academic life within academic institutions.

And consequently, we have been positioned to witness the very phenomenon that Nietzsche represented and anticipated in Zarathustra: that of his own doctrines being turned upside down in the course of being assimilated and appropriated—albeit within universities, rather than by a newly founded church. Nietzsche scholarship has taken form as a succession of interpretations that have over time rendered Nietzsche’s views ever more familiar and ever less shocking.\footnote{The phenomenon seems to have been anticipated by his earliest readers; see the excerpt from Otto Erich Hartleben’s diary reproduced in Wunberg, 1978, vol. i, p. 68. Bloom, 2012, pp. 148–156, 198–214, 226, 228f, complains that something of this sort has also taken place in the popular reception of Nietzsche’s ideas in the United States.}

As an aid to the reader, I can propose a litmus test for whether a commentator is treading this path. In one of his middle-period works, Nietzsche remarks:

> It goes without saying that I do not deny—unless I am a fool—that many actions called immoral ought to be avoided and resisted, or that many called moral ought to be done and encouraged—but I think the one should be encouraged and the other avoided for other reasons than hitherto. (D 103/3:91f; as before, Hollingdale’s translation)

Nietzsche’s appropriation of Wellhausen et alia suggests that we should expect academics’ readings of Nietzsche to make him progressively more tame, and invoking this passage is a highly suggestive indication that an academic reader is trying to disarm Nietzsche’s views in just the manner we are considering. Indeed, these lines are widely quoted, with one recent book reproducing the excerpt twice.

Here I am myself presenting an interpretation of the doctrines of Zarathustra, and I am myself an academic. So we need to take fully seriously the possibility that I too am succumbing to the temptation to make of Nietzsche’s ideas something that will have a comfortable home in the academic institutional environment. But for now, we can say this much: Nietzsche’s Wellhausian concerns about the reception of his work do not seem to have been misplaced.
Let’s accordingly proceed to an alternative way of figuring out the content of the two metavalues. When we squinted at their larger-than-life, mythologized versions, we were unable to see why inventing values is valuable enough to redeem humanity and its past; further, we were unable to see what redeeming humanity and its past would amount to clearly enough to explain the stake Nietzsche seems to think we have in it. One might well think that the pieces would only fall into place as we worked our way into coherent candidate understandings of the value of inventing values; surely we could not do that other than by accumulating experience with inventing one value after another.

Although the metavalue of inventing values is perhaps novel, values have been invented before, and they do change our assessments of people of the past. To the ancient Greeks, work was a humiliation, not a source of pride; today, it is normal for someone’s self-esteem to be tied to their occupation. Our historically recent value—call it the *dignity of labor*—allows us a newfound retroactive respect for members of the Greek lower classes. Perhaps as we make the metavalue of inventing values our own, that will change our assessment of former value innovators. The Impressionists formulated a system of standards and aspirations, enunciated an accompanying ideology, and cultivated a distinctive painterly sensibility—that is, they produced a novel, local and temporary value, one that governed the production of works of art over the lifespan of their movement. So perhaps in the future we will come to admire them not just as painters but as, more importantly, evaluative innovators. Alfred Otto Wolfgang, who took “Wols” as his working name, turned his compulsive doodling into moderately ambitious art, thus making his own early doodles important in retrospect; because of his efforts, some of his viewers have come to see doodles differently in general; here, an artist’s adoption of idiosyncratic values made something of a trivial activity.49 Perhaps his viewers should be admiring his evaluative innovation as much as they admire his doodles.

At this point we can take up a concern that the reader has no doubt had for some time now. Early on, I started using the notion of a value, but without properly introducing it; I managed stretches of the argument with the help of more modest surrogates, such as ‘standard’ or ‘ideal,’ and I suggested that, in Nietzsche, ‘value’ labels a concept that folds together standards, priorities and the initially vaguely formulated, but incrementally

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49 For an overview, see Becker and Hans, 2013.
refined aspirations that mobilize individual personalities and whole societies. And by this point you are probably wondering what exactly values are, and how exactly they are supposed to work.

Nietzsche’s style, all on its own, makes it unlikely that we will find answers to those questions which meet the demand in that exactly. But prescinding from such answers is not merely a matter of interpretative responsibility to Nietzsche’s intellectual and literary mannerisms. Values are inventions; as they cease to be inadvertant and become the self-conscious products of our efforts, we can expect that what it is to be a value will change, firm up, and quite possibly do so in more than one configuration of its components. Think of analogous questions: What is an automobile? What is a computer? What is a telephone? How exactly do each of those devices work? They have come to have more definite and much better understood answers after a century of experience with seeing them repeatedly reinvented. (At the outset, there was no useful answer to: what exactly are they, and how do they work?) And our sense of what an invention can be has similarly developed, especially over our last several hundred years of ever more rapidly paced and diversified experience with the phenomenon of the self-conscious inventor.

In roughly the same manner, we can expect to be much clearer in due course about the ways in which the assessment dimension of a value is integrated with its motivational aspect, with its role as a progressively articulated ideal and so on—but only once we have accumulated experience with self-consciously fabricating values and putting them to use. We can also expect to arrive at a much better sense of the various purposes to which values can be put, in something like the way that we came to see what could be done with computers, cars and telephones as we accumulated experience with them. In Nietzsche’s writings, we have already observed values serving in different roles: there were the older, shared values, which mobilized groups and coordinated their activities, and the values, tailored to individuals, that help them to accept what they can no longer change. I have found that philosophers tend to assume that what a value is for is, as it were, written into the value itself. But if tools generally have as many functions as you can find for them, that will also be true of assessment and navigation tools in particular.

Our appreciation of past episodes of evaluative innovation is what makes the importance of the invention of values intelligible. The more of these episodes we investigate, the stronger and more entrenched that attitude may come to be. If value invention is done well, rather than as it has gone in the past, people will both become valuable per the values they invent,
and valuable in that they are inventors of values—and to the extent that Nietzsche’s proposals get uptake, these will turn out to be much the same thing. As our appreciation of the value of inventing values grows, our respect for those who participate in it may well extend to those further portions of humanity that have been (usually undercover) inventors.

If this is the process by which we come to grasp the superlative metavalues that seem to be on offer, then that grasp is acquired incrementally and is always incomplete. Moreover, the redemption of the past seems to be a piecemeal matter; we now respect laborers, but not everyone is a laborer, and we may one day come to admire value innovators, but not many people invent values. What Nietzsche finds, not to mince words, revolting about humanity is in large part how successful the Christian-inspired striving for a kind of generic littleness has been; undoing that can only be an arduous and step-by-step process, because each person has to come up with an individualized way to grow and flower. All of this suggests that, whether or not Nietzsche meant it this way himself, the Eternal Return is best thought of as something like a Kantian Idea of Reason—a limit concept, a pole star that we can orient ourselves toward but at which we should not expect ever to arrive.

But now, and breaking off our anticipations of how this version of the process of articulating these metavalues is going to pan out, it seems clear that we cannot use the Eternal Return and the Overman to leapfrog over the piecemeal, much more mundane invention of much more ordinary values. The only agenda we have any real grip on is that.\textsuperscript{50}

If I am seeing it aright, then, the most important of the intentional mis-

\textsuperscript{50}Can we take seriously the supreme value of the Overman, and the absolute rigor of the Eternal Return, as these notions have traditionally been construed? (That is, that the Overman will be valuable enough to redeem all of his past, the upshot being that we regret nothing?) After all, we can be enthusiastic about the prospect of making up new values, of personalizing them, of embedding them in one’s life or profession and so on without taking the activity to be overwhelmingly important in the way that Nietzsche’s character makes the Overman out to be. And we can look forward to the invention of values putting us in a position to assess our world much more positively, without insisting that every last snippet of one’s life, of humanity, and its past will end up worthy of respect.

Here is one reason to allow that to suffice. You only do have to insist on this sort of rigor in your positive thinking when you’re one of those people who can’t simply nod when their friends tell them not to sweat the small stuff: when you can’t just let things go. Nietzsche has an account of those people—they’re eaten away by ressentiment—and whatever the correct interpretation of his view, we surely don’t want to adopt, as our own, a benchmark of success tailored to clients who are psychologically sick. Nietzsche is committed to the idea that different values are suited to different clients; the rigorist reading of the Eternal Return is not, you should hope, suited to you.
representations in Zarathustra is the substitution, for an important, very demanding, even urgent call to arms, of a pair of utopian, impossibly hyper-valuable metavalues, which have been displaced into a future distant enough so that we don’t now have to live by them.

That suggestion invites a textual objection, and I want to raise and address it in order to bring into tighter focus the status of Nietzsche’s insistence that values are to be invented rather than discovered.

First, the objection: the very large project on which Nietzsche claimed to be working before his collapse was the “Umwertung aller Werte,” conventionally but clumsily translated as the “revaluation of all values.”51 Throwing out all of the values we now have, and replacing them with the Overman, the Eternal Return, will to power and so on would be upending our values; but could the piecemeal, step-by-step introduction of one idiosyncratic value after another really be the global “Umwertung”? And in that case, could this have been, as I have just claimed, the real agenda?

Today we (that is, we analytic philosophers) operate with a distinction between substantive moral theory and metaethics; while it’s not part of Nietzsche’s vocabulary, it will serve us as a useful shorthand. Upending our values could be merely a (substantive) matter of displacing them with other values, or it could in the first place be a matter of reconceiving what values are (metaethics). Under the latter heading, we might cease to understand values as, say, unchangeable Moorean properties, belonging to a world peculiarly above or behind the ordinary one, and instead take them to be devices which we can design, produce, deploy and discard. The metaethical reimagining of value is no less dramatic a global reversal of our evaluative practice than the substitution of one set of values for another.

Anticipating how a priestly caste, still as seen through the lens of the Higher Criticism, would be pressed to reconstrue this metaethical proposal, we can flag two aspects of the doctrine it would be likely to evolve. First, priests have a stake in making their supreme values out to be the way things simply are. (You will recall—from note 13—Nietzsche telling us that what they want is announced to be the will of God.) Thus one plausible perversion of Nietzsche’s views would be to tone down his metaethical revolution, which has to do with what being a value is—there is no way values simply are;
rather they are to be made—into no more than a change in the contents of
the values.

But second, the priestly reflex is to further make values impressive by
making them impossibly large. In the instance I was just alluding to, what
the priests want is “the tastiest pieces of meat”—which is implausibly made
out to be a matter of divine concern. The business of religious functionaries
is making big deals out of little things; even today, we are all-too-familiar
with the notion that deviating from locally standard procedures for human
reproduction will get you sent to hell, to be tormented forever. That cast
of mind is reflected in the impossibly large hyper-values that ‘Zarathustra’
ends up preaching: the Eternal Return means that you will do what you
are doing, over and over, forever; and the Overman is likewise made out to
sound larger than life, in rather the way gods have always been.

If that is the right way to read Zarathustra, the moral seems to be that
the thoroughgoing revision of our evaluative practices should not be confused
with grandiose but superficial changes to those practices as we have them.
Nietzsche’s theoretical and practical innovations are meant to be deep and
demanding, which is not the same thing as ostentatiously gigantic.\(^{52}\)

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You might think at this stage that I’m claiming to have reconstructed what
Nietzsche really thought—the true doctrines underlying the Overman and
the Eternal Return—as opposed to the misrepresentations of the implicit
author of Zarathustra. I’m going to very tersely (and a little dogmatically)
explain why I don’t take myself to have done quite that, and in the course
of doing so, introduce a tricky caveat for the reader to keep in mind.

I have been suggesting that, in Nietzsche’s later works, ideas, theories,
arguments, ethical stances and so on are inflected by the personalities of the
implicit authors of the various books that Nietzsche wrote: by, to use his
own term for it, the several perspectives that he puts on display in them.
If that is right, it has three immediate consequences for how we are to read
those books.

First, earlier on I concluded that it’s illegitimate to treat Zarathustra’s
utterances as assertions of Nietzsche’s views; but a rather similar, albeit less

\(^{52}\)There is a further question to address: Nietzsche seems to have thought that The
Antichrist was going to serve as the first volume of his magnum opus. But if the Umwer-
tung of all values is as I have just described, how could that book be the first lap of it?
For reasons I am going to gesture at momentarily, I will defer an answer to a full-dress
 treatment of the book itself.
extreme warning is in place for Nietzsche’s mature corpus in its entirety. Passages that have the Eternal Return and the Overman as their topic are distributed—albeit sparsely—throughout both Nietzsche’s later published work and his Nachlass. But they do not allow for the straightforward transcription of the views Nietzsche actually endorsed. For each pronouncement about, say, the Eternal Return, a reader will have to ask: who is supposed to be speaking to me, and what does that tell me about how to take what I’m reading? That complicates the task of saying what Nietzsche thought about any particular topic considerably; you cannot simply turn from Zarathustra to, say, Beyond Good and Evil, find a seemingly salient passage, and conclude that this is Nietzsche’s real view. Rather, you have to develop a reading of, in this instance, Beyond Good and Evil that allows you to frame that passage first. That assortment of tasks is not something to be undertaken in a discussion focused on Thus Spoke Zarathustra.

Second, and this is a philosophically more delicate point, I think we need to resist the temptation to try to look behind those differently inflected presentations of Nietzsche’s ideas, to find out what he really thought. Nietzsche is exploring an alternative mode of philosophical deliberation, on which there are just the different perspectives, and the views taken on various questions within them; you can move from one to another, and develop a progressively clearer and richer understanding of the subject matters you are considering, but it is not as though there is an aperspectival way things really are, that Nietzsche, casting off his own wardrobe of personalities, is going to endorse.

Third, this means that we also need to resist the temptation to turn to Nietzsche’s pronouncements about the Overman and the Eternal Return in his journals, as telling us what he really thought—or maybe, what he tentatively really thought. The notebooks contain a great deal of raw material, some of which was used for the published work. But it is, just by virtue of being unframed raw material, still waiting to be positioned within one perspective or another.

E.g., GS 109, 341/3:467f, 570; EH III.BT.3, III.Z.6/6:313, 345; WP 1057, 1060–1067/10:645, 11:224f, 11:556f, 12:205, 11:536f, 13:43, 13:374–376, 11:610f. Not nearly all of what are on their face discussions of the Eternal Return or the Overman deploy those labels, which seem to be largely but not exclusively reserved for the use of the fictitious priestly authors of Zarathustra.

That was, as announced, dogmatic: here I cannot give the arguments for this set of Nietzschean reading instructions. But it will go down more easily with an illustration; Beyond Good and Evil contains what is clearly enough a discussion of the Eternal Return, and we can excerpt the parts that we need.

Whoever has endeavored... to think pessimism through to its depths... may just thereby, without really meaning to do so, have opened his eyes to the
And this means that I now need to add a retrospective qualification to my descriptions, both in the course of the argument to this point and below, of positions, claims, assessments and so on as Nietzsche’s. Because Nietzsche is taking issue precisely with our practices of (as philosophers of my tribe say it) propositional-attitude ascription (if you’re from a different tribe: of saying that such and such is what so-and-so thinks), all of those attributions have to be taken with a grain of salt: they are more complicated, and more hedged, than they sound.

If I am viewing him correctly, in Zarathustra, Nietzsche does not present a solution to the problem he is pressing on us: that the normal method of stabilizing a novel value, namely, institutionalizing it, will corrupt the very sorts of values that Nietzsche is calling on us to invent. Identifying the problem, which is what the book does, is headway enough. And while we have been exploring various paths through it, I don’t believe that Nietzsche signed off on any of them. You will have noticed that they shared an assumption, to wit, that making a value determinate enough to be put to use, whether by baking it into an institution, or by accumulating the sort of hands-on experience with it that I am myself inclined to recommend, takes a great deal of time. But if the values you invent are supposed to be tailored to your own personality and needs, they had better be available in time for you to use them.

opposite ideal: the ideal of the most high-spirited, alive, and world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have what was and is repeated into all eternity, shouting insatiably da capo—not only to himself but to the whole play and spectacle, and not only to a spectacle but at bottom to him who needs precisely this spectacle—and who makes it necessary because again and again he needs himself—and makes himself necessary—What? And this wouldn’t be—circulus vitiosus deus? (BGE 56/5:74f)

Here the Eternal Return is presented as a way of understanding the world to revolve around you: you are so wrapped up in yourself that you accept the world in its entirety as a sort of appendage. The problem with taking this way of construing it for Nietzsche’s is not just how unattractive this sort of hypernarcissism is, and not just that, as we’ve already noticed, the thought seems to be very differently motivated elsewhere, but that the early stretches of the book in which it appears are devoted to criticism of the traditional, robust conceptions of the self on which this sort of emotional investment in one’s own self would be supportable. The passage presents us with a puzzle—how could the author of this book, at this point, be saying this?—and so can’t be used as is, as a shortcut to what Nietzsche himself really thought.
My take on it is that Nietzsche’s subsequent efforts were focused on putting in place—and demoing, in his own work—a method that would allow the rapid prototyping and stabilization of novel values, and so avoid the trap laid out in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. We have just gestured at what I think that method was: surveying and articulating such a value from different perspectives, which here take the tangible form of differently oriented versions of Nietzsche’s own personality. Again, that is too large a topic to pursue here, and I will leave it to further occasions.

It remains to address a question about Nietzsche’s motivations. The self-aware invention of quite possibly idiosyncratic values is a general-purpose capability that Nietzsche is adding, or so he hopes, to our practical and intellectual toolkit. But the concern that evidently drove his efforts was one highly specific application, namely, correcting the (near-)worthlessness of humanity as it now is. Sports fans have a good deal of latitude in deciding which team to root for; why does Nietzsche insist on rooting for humanity as a whole, rather than dismissing the parts of it that he finds unattractive, as belonging to some other team?

We reminded ourselves that, for Nietzsche, values should not be one size fits all: that something counts as a deal breaker for you, when you are thinking about whether your life is worth living, may be, entirely legitimately, a fact about you, rather than a generally required commitment, to be supported by compelling arguments. And this is in fact how Nietzsche’s unusual efforts on behalf of the value of humanity strike me. If God is dead, we have lost the original warrant for the old monotheistic notion that, like coins minted bearing the face of the monarch, human beings are imbued with value by being made in the image of their Creator. Rather in the manner of Enlightenment intellectuals, who had argued themselves into atheism and then experienced it as a devastating loss, to be made good through philosophy, Nietzsche seems impelled to make good the loss of the religious, but also—following on his treatments of morality—the metaphysical and moral versions of the value of humanity.

We ourselves can ask whether, as its religious sources become ever more distant, the production of intellectually sanitized surrogates will continue to be a nonoptional philosophical activity. In perhaps the most famous passage

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55 Gen. 1:27; the coinage metaphor comes with unwelcome implications—for instance and especially, money is fungible—and Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 is a rabbinic attempt to forestall them and bring this way of explaining the value of humanity into line with our own more recent attitudes: “the King of kings…has stamped every man with the seal of the first man, yet not one of them is like his fellow. Therefore every one must say, For my sake was the world created” (Danby, 1933, p. 388).
in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche’s ‘madman’ proclaims that, like light on the way from very distant stars, the news of the death of God has not yet arrived (GS 125/3:480–482). Today, most philosophers no longer regard themselves as having to take a stand on the existence of God, the historicity of miracles and so on. The value of humanity was originally a theological view, and has recently become a dogma of moral metaphysics; historically-inclined readers will recall how Auguste Comte thought he had discerned a pattern in the history of science, in which the metaphysical replacements for theological doctrines wash away, leaving behind purely ‘positive’ theories. Over the long term, is the notion that human beings are ends in themselves likely to fare any differently?

In attempting to look beyond Nietzsche’s own preoccupation with shoring up the value of humanity, I don’t want to be heard as implicitly advocating a savage future of Einsatzgruppen and concentration camps. The practical analog of the shift to Comte’s positive stage of a science is taking hands-on responsibility for the things that matter to us. To forestall those concentration camps, it will not suffice merely to incant phrases like “human rights”; if we want human beings to have (as philosophers say it nowadays) moral standing or moral status, we will need to make those arrangements ourselves, and not pretend that there is somehow a metaphysical fact of the matter, already. That might be addressed via the Nietzschean expedient of value invention, or in some other manner.\(^56\)

For now, however, allow me to second Nietzsche’s view that fully acknowledging the problems involved in firming up the content of a novel value is philosophically important. One of his genuinely liberating innovations in moral philosophy is the thought that our values do not have to be the ones we have inherited, do not have to be taken as given, and do not have to be one-size-fits-all. We can *invent* values. As we have seen, it is quite possible to overstate the promise, both philosophical and practical, of this insight; but it has great promise, nonetheless.

The promise is only realizable, however, if the idiosyncratic values one invents are made full-bodied and effective—real, we might say, rather than merely prophesied. The normal and relatively well-understood path to the stabilization of value is institutionalization. Nietzsche reappropriated Higher Critics such as Wellhausen to produce, in *Also sprach Zarathustra*, a display of the ways in which institutionalization is likely to turn precisely the sort of values that Nietzsche most hoped we will come up with entirely inside-out

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\(^56\) For some discussion, but in a non-Nietzschean accent, of how we manage moral standing, in both senses of the verb, see Millgram, 2009.
and upside-down. Without alternative methods of solidifying our evaluative inventions, they will not be at all the liberating steps forward that Nietzsche had hoped for; and that is every bit as much our problem, today, as it was Nietzsche’s in 1883.

The payoffs, even if less dramatic than those Nietzsche announced, may after all be in the neighborhood of the ones he anticipated. It is an unavoidable truth about philosophy that you don’t get anything for free, but in moral and political philosophy it has for some time now been taken for granted that we get the value of humanity for free—and not just of ‘humanity’ as an abstraction, but of each and every last human being. It is even an indicator of how much this has been taken for granted that it is never put in quite those words.

Thus I’m sympathetic to Nietzsche’s insistence that if we are to respect our fellow man—and ourselves—that will have to be earned. The idea that a large part of earning both the right to such respect and the ability to muster it up can come of making the invention of novel values an ongoing activity seems to me an original and promising tack. It is one that I think we can take without adopting the over-the-top postures that Nietzsche has the implicit author of Zarathustra attribute to his prophet, and as perhaps the discussion to this point has convinced you, that is probably just as well.

References


