

Reply to Bret Davis

Zarathustra and Asian Thought. A Few Final Words

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Vienna, March 6, 2014

Dear Bret,

Many thanks for your long and thoughtful reply to my letter on egoism, laced with wit and framed by such generous remarks about friendship and that massively ignored book *Composing the Soul*. You're quite right to suggest that "decomposing" is crucial: a more informative title would have *Decomposing and Recomposing the Soul*, but I thought that was too clunky. And you're kind to call it a classic (of course what I wished for it); I think the publisher once called it a "sleeper" (sleep, the brother of death). At any rate your response has clarified for me our interpretive differences, and I hope that a few more words on that topic will be of interest to the readers of this exchange.

But first, on a personal note, let me say something about that first meeting at the Zen Symposium in Arashiyama. I remember being amazed at the ability of this PhD student from Vanderbilt to do immediate translation of the philosophical discussions that took place after each presentation there. While I was struggling to get some general sense of what the previous Japanese speaker had said, you were already translating the current intervention! This man will make a great contribution to the field, I thought to myself. And you have, already, and even greater than I expected.

You suggest that my approach is somewhat uncritical, and that I could use some of the "ironic resistance" Nietzsche recommended in that letter to Carl Fuchs. I do try for irony, but confess that I often fail. My admiration for Nietzsche as a philosopher is perhaps excessive, but I keep on finding him helpful with respect to philosophy as a way of life. I admit to writing about him affirmatively, but that's because so much that's written about him is negative and based on inadequate understanding. In my experience, most taxi drivers in the United States (many of whom have PhDs in philosophy) somehow "know" that Nietzsche prepared the philosophical ground for Nazism and spins in his grave with glee every time the blond beasts rampage. *Composing the Soul* is admittedly a selective treatment because it seeks to complement and compensate by introducing "a more congenial character than many of the other Nietzsches we have been presented with" (*Composing the Soul* 3).

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Nevertheless, I believe our readings of Nietzsche in the context of Zen Buddhism are in some respects closer than you think, in part because you've misread what I was saying in my response. Let me first try to clarify that, and then explain why I find your persistence on the topic of "egoistic will to power" unconvincing.

What I'm *Not* Saying

For example, I think "Nietzsche as Zebra" is great! (Gotta love that *zebraic* reading.) But it's by no means incompatible with Nietzsche as elephant. Yes, I did have in mind his remark that Buddhists might think he's a female elephant, and was thinking of making it multicolored, like the Motley Cow; but since the investigators in the Indian story are blind, there wasn't much point. In any case, an elephant extrapolated from the feel of a pointed tusk contrasts with one from a rounded flank just as much as a black stripe against a white.

There's no need to argue for "A Zebraic rather than an Elephant Reading," since I fully agree that "it is not a question of either/or but of both/and." Where in my letter do you find such an "either/or approach" ("Nietzsche as Zebra" [NZ] 66)? Ever since studying Heraclitus, Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Dōgen, I've been a both/and type guy. My intention in distinguishing Nietzsche A from Nietzsche B was by no means to set up an either/or opposition between your reading him as A and my taking him as B: I wanted rather to suggest that you overemphasize the A stripes of the zebra while I'm interested in pointing out the B stripes, which most commentators overlook. This is the great advantage of thinking in images, as Nietzsche so often does, rather than in concepts: Nietzsche as elephant doesn't preclude Nietzsche as zebra, and there's no problem with fitting them both into the same room.

You're right to question the elephant metaphor for its suggestion that "Nietzsche is a great organically connected whole" (NZ 66), since, as you say, he's a wilder beast riven by contradictions. (But a zebra is also an organism, whose stripes only go skin deep.) So I certainly don't want to claim that "*all* of the main lines of thought in Nietzsche are compatible with Zen," nor do we "disagree on whether Nietzsche is always in agreement with himself." Like Emerson, whom he greatly admired, he surely isn't. But if we say he's a zebra, I suppose you're looking at him from an angle where you see thicker and mostly A stripes, while I see thicker and more stripes of B. I didn't claim that my view gives rise to "a more coherent account of the whole than an account that favors Nietzsche A"—just that my account is coherent, and more interesting in the context of a comparison between Nietzsche and Zen.

In response to my pointing out that Nietzsche introduces will to power in association with self-overcoming, on the part of individuals and peoples, you

write, “No, for Nietzsche, the commanding and obeying is going on *between* as well as *within* individuals and societies” (NZ 72). Of course it is, and I’ve never suggested otherwise. Nor do I say that “the drive to dominate is only directed inward as opposed to outward,” or argue that “Nietzsche restricts his affirmation of violence, injury [etc.] to operations within the individual” (NZ 72). Never have and never will. It’s simply because you and so many other commentators overlook the “inner-directed” aspect that I emphasize it. An important feature of my reading is to show that Nietzsche consistently undercuts the dichotomy between inner and outer: if the individual is a configuration of interpretive energies within a field of will to power, there is only a distinction and no dichotomy between inner and outer.

Finally, you question my suggestion that “the best way to distinguish between Jesus, Socrates, and perhaps Nietzsche on the one hand, and Hitler, Stalin, and Mao Zedong on the other, is to view them on ‘a continuum of forms of power, from brute force to philosophy’” (“Letter on Egoism” [LE] 52–53, NZ 81). I didn’t suggest any such thing, but was proposing the opposition to illustrate will to power as interpretation, and Nietzsche’s attitude toward different forms of power. It’s not a matter of “influence” but *interpretation*: the brute force power of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao ended with their deaths, whereas the power of the world interpretations of Socrates and Jesus (self-overcomers both) are still going strong. Mao as a philosopher?! Surely none of those totalitarians had any kind of coherent philosophy worth the name: only crude ideologies, and nothing like the spiritual will to power that is philosophy.

Will to Power from Egoistic to Cosmic

You say that in *Composing the Soul* I ignored the characterization of life (as will to power) in *BGE* 259 as “*essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering what is alien and weaker,” and so on, and you suggest that I now have to exercise “damage control” to square it with my reading of Nietzsche (NZ 71). I call the passage notorious because so many people—including you—have misinterpreted it, taking it not as a description of life but as Nietzsche’s prescription of how it ought to be. As you remind us, Nietzsche says, “Life lives always at the expense of other life,” but the Zen Buddhists acknowledge this fundamental fact too. And although there’s cooperation and symbiosis in the natural world, nature is indeed “red in tooth and claw”—and human history is a “slaughter-bench,” a festival of cruelty and oppression, a horror show that’s ongoing to the present time of atrocities in Syria and other countries. No damage control needed because Nietzsche is stating an undeniable fact, and surely neither you nor the Buddhists would want to deny these horrendous manifestations of *duhkha*. As I wrote earlier, the man is in no way advocating a life of killing, raping, and pillaging.

Another persistent misunderstanding: that it might be possible “to twist free of the will to power” (NZ 70)—whereas I keep trying to show you (LE 51) that it doesn't even *make sense* to speak of twisting free of will to power if the world is will to power. Might I agree with you “that this No-saying explaining [of world as will to power in *BGE*] is a move backward”? Sorry, no: I think it's rather an advance in his thinking, as he expands the notion of will to power to cover not only life but also the world—an advance that brings Nietzsche closer to Daoist *qi* cosmology and Dōgen's idea of the whole world as “buddha-nature” (*shitsu-u busshō*).¹ You wonder that I “hold fast to the idea that all existence is ‘the will to power—and nothing besides’ (*KSA* 11:38[12])” (NZ 70). Well, yes I hold fast to it insofar as I'm trying to get you to understand a core idea in Nietzsche's philosophy by explicating a passage or two from the locus classicus, *BGE* 36 (LE 53–54). This idea of the world as a configuration of will to power in the context of the world as will to power is germane to any comparison between Nietzsche and Buddhism or Daoism.

You can't agree, you say, with my suggestion that Nishitani's field of emptiness as a field of force “can be equated with” Nietzsche's idea of the world as will to power (NZ 53–54). I didn't and wouldn't say they're equatable, just that there's an illuminating correspondence between them—insofar as Nishitani characterizes “the force of each and every thing in the world” as its *virtus*, its potency, its *de* in Daoist terms: the thing as configuration of will to power. I know Nishitani says in this context that Nietzsche remains tethered to a “standpoint of will,” but this is one of the few points where I think he's missing something, through failing to fully appreciate the cosmic and interpretive aspects of will to power.

I don't suppose I'll ever be able to persuade you to drop the idea of “The Egoism of the Will to Power” (your term, not Nietzsche's), for I see it's now been promoted to a section title in your response. When I reject your idea of will to power as an “egoistic force” you say that I “simply pass over in silence most of the passages” that you quote in support of your interpretation, and you claim to have demonstrated that “Nietzsche's call for an affirmation of egoism is very often quite clear” (NZ 71). Well, no: I asked you to tell us where you get the idea that he's concerned with “the task of constructing an ego,” since he never uses the phrase and the passages you cite don't make your case at all (LE 43ff). But in your response you simply reiterate the same claims:

To be sure, the ego itself is a composite of multiple drives, but each of these is a force of will to power that can well be characterized as egoistic in the sense of self-centered and self-assertive over others: “every drive is a kind of lust to rule . . . each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm” (*The Will to Power* 481). (NZ 71)²

Yes, the ego is a composite of drives, but what's the point of calling them “egoistic” when Nietzsche doesn't, and when he consistently distinguishes

between the ego and the drives? Actually *KSA* 12:7[60] is one of a series of notes that show “belief in the ego” to be untenable. The note argues that the subject is a fictional projection, and questions our habit of positing an interpreter behind every interpretation. It goes on to say (just before you pick up the quote with “every drive is a kind of lust to rule”) that what’s doing the interpreting are “the drives and their for and against” (*KSA* 12:7[60]). To call that interpreting “egoistic” is to miss the point of the whole section and to conflate a distinction that’s fundamental to Nietzsche’s entire psychology.

Your next sentence cites a phrase from *The Will to Power* 426: “The ego is thus composed . . . by what Nietzsche calls ‘the great egoism of our dominating will.’” But the “our” here refers to “we psychologists of the future” who are “psychologists to an eccentric degree,” and the great egoism of whose will wants us “to properly shut our eyes to ourselves” (*KSA* 13:14[27]). When Nietzsche chooses to publish this idea (*TI* “Sayings and Arrows” 35), he makes no mention of egoism.

Let’s look at a passage that you quote from again in your response, twice: *BGE* 265, which you first conjoin with *KSA* 10:1[20]. There’s no need to “studiously ignore” or “interpretatively tame” this aphorism: we just need to read it carefully, in context. You write that you wrote,

“The ‘ego’ subdues and kills,” writes Nietzsche in his notebooks, “it operates like an organic cell: it is a robber and is violent. It wants to regenerate itself—pregnancy. It wants to give birth to its god and see all mankind at its feet” (*The Will to Power* 768 [= *KSA* 10:1[20]]). The “noble soul,” he tells us in *Beyond Good and Evil*, “accepts this fact of its egoism without any question mark” (*BGE* 265). (NZ 73, citing Davis 2004, 113)

There’s a distinct scent of smoke and flash of mirrors here. The note in question talks of truthfulness as “a mask *without consciousness of the mask*” (*KSA* 10:1[20]). There’s no mention anywhere of will, or will to power.

Aphorism 265 in *BGE* can’t be connected to this note by “this fact”: indeed it’s completely unrelated, embedded as it is in a discussion of historical aristocracies and their instinct for rank and reverence for what is superior. Nietzsche knows there’s a risk of “displeasing innocent ears” when he talks this way, because we live in an egalitarian age that distrusts natural orders of rank (except in sports) and promotes mediocrity.³

But you have to be careful to distinguish among the various human types Nietzsche discusses, because the noble soul is nothing like the soul of Zarathustra or the Overhuman. The nobles carry too much of their “barbarian” beginnings in them: they were “human beings with a nature that was still natural, barbarians in the terrible sense of the word.” Possessed of a preponderance of psychical rather than physical forces, they were “the more complete human beings,” which always means “the more complete *beasts*” (*BGE* 257–64, emphasis added). But for Zarathustra the rope over the abyss that we humans are is “fastened between

beast and Overhuman" (ZP:4): the idea is to keep connected to the beast within but to go further, over, across. But at least the noble is on the way: "In the foreground, there is the feeling of fullness, of power that wants to overflow, the joy in high tension, the consciousness of a wealth that wants to bestow and give away: —the noble human being helps the unfortunate too, although not or hardly ever from pity, but more from an urge generated by the overabundance of power" (BGE 260). You persist in holding fast to the misleading idea that Nietzsche advocates an "elevated egoism" (your term, not his), because you conflate egoism with selfishness: "This is what I call his 'elevated egoism.' Nietzsche calls it a 'whole and holy selfishness'" (NZ 74). If you would drop the "elevated egoism" and instead talk about holy "selfishness," *Selbstsucht*, all would be well. As I pointed out, Zarathustra thinks the proud leapings of the I, or ego, are pathetic, but reveres the deep wisdom of the Self, as the body (ZI: "On the Despisers of the Body"). And so the basis of "the bestowing virtue" is a wholesome selfishness, as you appreciate (NZ 70, 76), which "compels all things" toward and into itself—so that "they may flow back out of your wells as gifts of your love" (ZI: "On the Gift-Giving Virtue"). Great selfishness wants to embrace all things, so that it can bestow and contribute to the world with no egoistic thought of thanks or return.

This is also the topic of the last published mention, "The Natural Value of Egoism," which you cite in support of the egoistic Nietzsche (TI "Forays" 33, NZ 72). But this aphorism, as its first words attest, is about *die Selbstsucht*, and so the title is somewhat misleading. (In the white heat of his manic productivity in 1888, Nietzsche perhaps forgot the distinction between ego and Self that he consistently drew up to that point.) The aphorism emphasizes the temporal dimension of great selfishness by dismissing the individual—and by implication the ego—as "an error," and asserting its belonging to "the entire line of humanity" and "the totality of life."

To sum up: a major theme of Nietzsche's psychology, from *The Birth of Tragedy* to *Twilight of the Idols*, is the rejection of the ego as a convenient but ultimately unnecessary fiction. (Much of *Composing the Soul* is devoted to showing the importance of decomposing the ego.) In the process of self-overcoming, the I that wants to remain self-identical is deconstructed and replaced by a plurality of drives that changes according to the stage on life's way, and that orders the polis of the psyche. Finally, since self-mastery is for Nietzsche a means and not an end in itself, the discipline can be relaxed in favor of granting oneself "the full range and richness of [a higher] naturalness" (TI "Forays" 14–49).

Since you can't demonstrate a consistent affirmation of egoism in the published works, you are reduced to citing passages from the *Nachlass*, some of which you misinterpret. Yes, Nietzsche claims that individual drives, as manifestations of will to power, interpret from their own perspectives and try, as it were, to co-opt the perspectives of other drives—but that's not egoism.

And yes, Nietzsche advocates a “whole and holy” selfishness that is opposed to one that is egocentric and “sick”: “the wholesome, healthy selfishness that wells up from a powerful soul:— / from a powerful soul, to which the lofty body belongs [. . .] the supple and persuasive body, the dancer, whose allegory and epitome is the self-enjoying soul” (Z I: “On the Gift-Giving Virtue”; III: “On the Three Evils,” 2).

I’m sorry that space doesn’t permit an engagement with all the issues you raise, or answers to all your questions, but I thought it more important to clarify our remaining differences. Let me end by thanking you again for your friendly and generous response, and with the hope that our exchange will prove helpful and stimulating for at least some of the journal’s readers.

All my very best to you,

Graham

Graham Parkes

NOTES

1. For an explication of this notion in Dōgen, see my essay “Kūkai and Dōgen as Exemplars of Ecological Engagement,” *Journal of Japanese Philosophy* 1 (2013): 99–105.

2. Reference is to the note at *KSA* 12:7[60].

3. On this topic, you may find Dan Conway’s treatment of the “pathos of distance” helpful, in the second chapter of his *Nietzsche and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1997). I also heartily recommend Laurence Lampert’s discussion of chapter 9 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, “What Is Noble?,” in his exemplary study *Nietzsche’s Task: An Interpretation of “Beyond Good and Evil”* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).