

Received: 5 November 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/agon.v17i2.3199>

## Book Review

Donovan Miyasaki, **Nietzsche's Immoralism. Politics as First Philosophy**. Palgrave MacMillan, 2022, 298 pp.

Donovan Miyasaki, **Politics After Morality. Toward a Nietzschean Left**. Palgrave MacMillan, 2022, 324 pp.

Michael Steinmann<sup>1</sup>

Nietzsche's politics continue to fascinate. After Kaufmann's successful efforts to wrangle him free from his appropriation by the Nazis, many have ventured to explore what are considered to be the bad-boy corners of his thought. There is also an intellectual challenge in doing so, given that political implications are ubiquitous in Nietzsche's work but never really spelled out systematically. Is there something worth digging out or not? Call it the logic of human attraction: the more ambiguous the signs, the more likely we are to be interested in someone's attitudes.

After many book-length approaches by Strong, Conway, Ansell-Pearson, Clark, and others, Donovan Miyasaki has taken on the challenge again. The outcome is impressive, laid out not in one volume, but two: *Nietzsche's Immoralism. Politics as First Philosophy* and *Politics After Morality. Toward a Nietzschean Left*. The titles make clear that the work does not amount to another philological reconstruction of Nietzsche's thoughts on politics. Instead, Miyasaki wants to take him seriously as a systematic thinker and use him to develop a viable, contemporary conception of the political. A leftist position, no less, although he admits that the analysis will eventually lead to "a Nietzschean left rather than a left-Nietzscheanism" (I, 9). The author is well-aware that he cannot turn Nietzsche into something he was not, but has to use selected insights against other tendencies in his work. In a sense, Miyasaki engages in yet another act of hermeneutic appropriation, this time, however, by laying the cards on the table right from the start.

Overall, the analysis in the two volumes is based on the works of Nietzsche's last year before his mental breakdown, from *The Case of Wagner* to *The Anti-Christ* and *Ecce Homo*. In these works, the author claims, a shift occurs so that the response to nihilism is no longer given aesthetically, as in the early texts, or by way of a naturalistic psychology, as in the mature works, but in the form of politics, understood as an attempt to create new conditions under which humans can live (I, 16). Among other things, Miyasaki takes Nietzsche's remarks on "breeding" more seriously than is often done. "Breeding" is not

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Steinmann, Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey, USA. E-mail: [msteinma@stevens.edu](mailto:msteinma@stevens.edu)



education, as the early work suggests, or as one might like to have it in order to avoid any allusion to eugenics, but is really just that, a way to change humans by changing them physically (I, 114, footnote). It is, first and foremost, “animal training” (I, 220).

The first book lays the foundations of this Nietzschean political theory. There are two philosophical ideas which underwrite the author’s approach. The first one is the claim that Nietzsche was a hard determinist or an incompatibilist who did not believe that ideas of freedom can or should be made compatible with natural determinism (I, 25). “All of Nietzsche’s late philosophical preoccupations and commitments revolve around the rejection of freedom” (I, 22). Political philosophy, therefore, requires a “radical reworking of the tradition” (I, 24). Among other things, Nietzsche has to give up his early fascination with great individuals who would be able to steer modern culture in a new direction, such as Wagner and Schopenhauer. The idea of a great individual, Miyasaki believes, is too much aligned with now-obsolete assumptions of creative freedom and responsibility.

The other guiding idea is immoralism. Immoralism, for the author, is not so much the negation of moral ideas, but the rejection of “moralism,” which for him is the attempt to make ethical ideas binding, to present them in the form of ‘ought.’ Morality’s main error is that it wants to transform people as they are (I, 61). Miyasaki emphasizes Nietzsche’s famous remark in *Ecce Homo*, “the fact that one becomes what one is presupposes that one has not the remotest idea of what one is.” If hard determinism holds, then all attempts to actively change oneself are illusionary and “whatever one does,” a certain outcome will be reached no matter what (I, 73). One cannot believe that moral ideas would help anyone to become better, or simply different for that matter. Not only does political philosophy have to give up the idea of freedom, it can also no longer be based on moral ideas.

On the individual level, say, of the members of a political community, the place of freedom and morality is occupied by the will to power. Miyasaki takes up Nietzsche’s idea of power as the fundamental human drive and motivation. However, he deviates in one important aspect from him by distinguishing between what he calls the quantitative and qualitative aspects of power. While the former comprises the physical or factual domination that agents strive to achieve, the latter only concerns the “*feeling* of power. Its aim is not conquest but *contest*, not domination but pleasure in the feeling of *resistance*” (I, 77). One could say that instead of a Schopenhauerian, voluntaristic interpretation of the will to power, Miyasaki prioritizes a Humean one, which turns the experience of power into a form of desire. As the reference to “contest” shows, the model for his interpretation is sport, where it is less important to dominate or to win than it is to be joyfully engaged in the experience.

It is crucial for Miyasaki that the interplay of power happens without being supposed to achieve anything in particular, because this would take one back to the flawed assumption that intentional action works. Experiencing the pleasure of overcoming resistance here and there is the kind of open-ended feeling that is necessary to keep agents motivated without them actively pursuing a normative goal. The leading term for this attitude is *amor fati*, a total acceptance of life as it is (I, 128). The goal of politics is to strengthen and enhance human life, but to do so behind the agents’ backs. They must not be focused on creating and then measuring real improvements that are made.



I am not fully convinced that a Humean interpretation of power works in such an exclusive way. It discounts the achieving of real domination because it assumes that all experience, whether it leads to domination or not, can be felt as overcoming resistance. The author also tries to minimize Nietzsche's own assumption that there is a significant difference between "strong" and "weak" wills, an assumption which seems central in the late works. The arguments he provides seem to me a little forced (I, 87). For example, if only the feeling of resistance counts, then the "strong" wills would actually be experienced as less powerful than the "weak" ones which encounter resistance more poignantly.

The Humean understanding of power allows, of course, for a strategy that avoids the unpalatable sides of Nietzsche's political ideas, such as his positive description of noble masters. The ideal of an active political agent, according to Miyasaki, lies rather in "[t]he manifold soul [who] derives its feeling of power primarily from internal rather than external resistances, its health is manifested precisely in self-mastery rather than mastery in general" (I, 188). Such an internalization of power can find support, among other things, in the shift from the traditional, aristocratic "pathos of distance" to the attitude of the solitary, independent "noble soul" in Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (e.g., section 287). One could ask, however, whether this internalization does not rather lead to an apolitical conception of life, a preference for the private over public engagement, which would be at odds with the goals of a political philosophy in the proper sense.

The author's terminology sometimes makes it difficult to follow his argument. For one, the notion of freedom can be understood in a variety of ways, not all of which have to be excluded by incompatibilism. Is "political freedom" really impossible without free will, as Miyasaki suggests (II, 83)? I am afraid that the conception creates a false dichotomy between absolute freedom on the one side and its complete absence or irrelevance on the other.

Additionally, the idea that Nietzsche would "completely reverse[] the traditional method of legitimizing political concepts and institutions on more foundational ethical grounds" so as to lay the grounds for a "post-moral and immoralist politics" (I, 197) goes counter to passages in which the author holds that Nietzsche's "values are minimally 'moral'" (I, 134) or that his "naturalism" would be "accidentally moral, inadvertently solving the very problem that morality has traditionally tried and failed to solve" (I, 135). Apparently, even an immoralist conception of politics needs to have a normative dimension (otherwise, what would political action be good for?), but this dimension is not acknowledged as clearly and systematically as one might wish. It does not seem to me that a commitment to "minimally moral" values would jeopardize or contradict the overall immoralist thrust of Miyasaki's interpretation.

The second book delves into the political implications of Nietzsche's theory and its compatibility with leftist politics. One of the main tasks that the author pursues is the overcoming of the "aristocratic radicalism" that Nietzsche deems necessary for the production of higher types. Miyasaki rightly points out that Nietzsche "never rigorously defends" his preference for a hierarchical stratification of society (II, 53). The problem with this stratification, if taken in real, socio-economic and political terms, is that it leads to the "reproduction of the slave" (ibid.). There are two problems that come with the existence of a lower, slave-like class.

The first problem is that those enjoying a position of “supremacy” will most likely not develop a “need for self-overcoming and enhancement” but “complacency” (II, 58). Real aristocrats do not represent the ideal of internalized nobility that Miyasaki takes to be the basis of Nietzsche’s political ideas. The second problem is that the creation of a lower class leads to “the recreation of slave psychology” (II, 66) which cannot be the foundation for a stable social structure that can be accepted by all members. The author therefore concludes that “[o]ur critical reconstruction of Nietzsche’s political philosophy must begin with the complete rejection of its foundational error: aristocracy” (II, 84).

Nietzsche’s aristocracy does not need to be replaced with a conception of society that is based on the equality of citizens. For a hard determinist like Miyasaki, who rejects the universal ability of rational, free will in agents, the enhancement of human life cannot be achieved in egalitarian ways. As shown above, the stimulation of feelings of power needs resistance which only the “diversity” of individual drives can provide (II, 116). A Nietzschean society makes do instead with a conception of justice that would require “not a strict *equilibrium* but a precarious, tense, and *minimal disequilibrium* or *near equilibrium*” of human drives (ibid.).

Overall, Nietzsche’s politics can be read as a form of “historical materialism” (I, 255) whose goal is “to identify the contingent, changeable, and thus *controllable*, material socio-political conditions of human enhancement” (I, 230). There are in fact more similarities with his contemporary Marx than one might suspect (see I, 240; II, 264). However, compared to Marx, the foundations of Nietzsche’s materialism as outlined by Miyasaki are rather thin, relying both on notions of “health as qualitatively heightened will to power” (II, 33) and “a very novel kind of happiness [...] grounded in the internal tension produced by a rich diversity of drives” (II, 57). It is a little unclear to me what these notions entail in practical, socially relevant terms. If *all* human activity is fueled by “drives,” then what does it mean to use drives as the foundation of a new form of politics?

While Miyasaki rejects political liberalism because of its reliance on equal rights, which in turn presuppose rational agency (see II, 123), he eventually seems to envision an even greater liberalism, not only because of the rejection of moral norms, but because “a Nietzschean non-liberal theory of rights, in contrast, promises not merely opportunity but reality: the concrete, material conditions that enhance the feeling of freedom” (II, 127). However, the question can be asked again: what can the Humean formalism provide in terms of institutional, economic, or social provisions? The author engages very little with political philosophy in the concrete, nitty-gritty sense. Paradoxically, it seems that his effort to leave the early Nietzsche’s fixation on culture behind to focus instead on the political alone leads him right back to cultural politics insofar as the main thrust of the interpretation lies on individual empowerment and expression, on creating “a pluralistic social-political order that aims to protect every individual’s values, their particular form of power, and heighten every individual’s feeling of power” (II, 170). One could then ask whether the interpretation can yield anything new beyond the well-known image of Nietzsche as a postmodern thinker *avant la lettre* as presented by Rorty or Nehamas. At times, Miyasaki’s approach also comes close to presenting Nietzsche’s ideas of society as a utilitarian theory of the maximization of happiness, shifted only to a less calculable, individual level (see II, 133).



As a genuinely political outcome, Miyasaki believes that it is possible to derive a positive conception of democracy from Nietzsche despite his own anti-democratic sentiments. In fact, if there are no moral boundaries to democratic self-expression, and people can develop in any way that the deterministic play of drives and forces allows them to do, then one might end up with a more democratic democracy than we have now, where the existing structures actually “represent the interests of the pre-democratic world, embodied in that past aristocratic world’s continuing cultural and economic power” (II, 180). The theory would then also be more egalitarian than the current forms of egalitarianism insofar as it sees the promotion of difference as the goal of equal opportunities, rather than “superiority of wealth, status, or privilege” (II, 230).

As attractive and plausible as such a theory sounds, the question is whether it provides enough concrete solutions to the structural problems that affect current societies. At times, the author seems to promote a form of anarchism, for example, when he claims that “a Nietzschean democracy would [reduce] the risk of excessive state power” (II, 189). In other passages, a socialist or even communist order is stipulated which “would enable the state to have sufficient power over the economic elite” (*ibid.*; see also II, 209). Can capitalism be overcome by a theory that relies so heavily on individual initiative (see II, 257)? None of these questions are meant to reject Miyasaki’s political theory, but they do show that this theory would eventually need to overcome its inherent formalism, which is mostly due to the formalistic interpretation of Nietzsche’s conception of the will to power. A Nietzschean leftism is sure, however, never to leave us bored, given that it would be “revolutionary in a deeper sense,” as Miyasaki contends, through the “state’s continual political activity of maintaining and restoring a relative, imperfect, and never complete power equilibrium among individuals and groups” (II, 266).

To conclude, a few remarks have to be made concerning the hermeneutic premises of the attempt at using Nietzschean principles against his intentions. Miyasaki claims that he is “reconstructing [Nietzsche’s] politics in a form consistent with his philosophy as a whole,” which lies in his, Nietzsche’s, commitment to immoralism and incompatibilism (II, 88). The author contends that “[w]e must betray Nietzsche to whatever degree he betrays us with philosophically inconsistent positions, and to whatever degree he betrays himself by preferring his arbitrary prejudices to his own philosophy, failing to be equal to his best, most fruitful and interesting insights” (II, 134).

Of course it should always be possible to criticize Nietzsche, especially with respect to his classist and authoritarian political ideas. However, does this mean that one has to make him more “consistent,” as the author says? For one thing, consistency is never neutral, but depends on one’s own point of view. If Nietzsche can be made consistent only at the cost of formalizing his philosophy in the way the author suggests, then perhaps a consistent Nietzsche is no longer Nietzsche at all. Is consistency even a worthy goal in a thinker who has chosen to work in a fragmented, aphoristic way? Perhaps it might be good to let inconsistency be, especially in relation to politics. If one can only work with a sanitized version of Nietzsche’s thought, then why not abandon him completely? If one chooses instead to speak with or from Nietzsche’s perspective, then it might be better if the interpretation became more of a dialogue which permits each interlocutor their own level of ambiguity and contradictoriness.