

## ***Nihilism, democracy and liberalism: Maudemarie Clark's 'Nietzsche on Ethics and Politics'*<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract:**

Maudemarie Clark is a leading interpreter of Nietzsche's theory of truth, and as such we are fortunate to have her papers on his ethics, politics and metaphysics collected in one volume. Opening her section on politics – the subject of this review – with a critique of Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, she condemns Bloom's Straussian demand that philosophers lie about the fact that no truth exists to protect their way of life as a recurrence of the nihilist ascetic ideal Nietzsche rejected at the end of the *Genealogy*. In doing so she definitively frees Nietzsche from Strauss' grip, and opens up the possibility of questioning anew Nietzsche's relationship to feminism, queer theory, democracy and community. Her most striking claim is that Nietzsche's aristocratic ethics can be reconciled with modern democratic politics. Whether that is the case or not is up for debate, but what clearly isn't, as this collection reminds us, is that our thinking about politics cannot be done without him.

### **Keywords:**

Nietzsche, Allan Bloom, Nihilism, Feminism, Democracy, Liberalism

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Maudemarie Clark is considered, on the basis on her book *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (1991), one of – perhaps *the* – leading interpreter of Nietzsche's theory of truth. As such to have access to her collected papers, some of them unpublished or maybe less readily accessible, on Nietzsche's views on ethics, politics and metaphysics is indeed very welcome. Readers are able to follow the evolution of her thought over a 25 year span, starting with the fact that whilst her first book focused on Nietzsche's views on truth, her PhD actually addressed his critique of morality. The development of her thinking on that topic can be followed chronologically through the papers presented in Part I of the collection, and how she was able to stake out her own

distinctive position in contrast to other commentators in the field, most notably Brian Leiter. It also reveals how much Bernard Williams' distinction between ethics and morality helped her articulate her own theory of Nietzsche's rejection of morality (and not ethics), to which we shall return. Part three of the collection, on metaphysics, links up most strongly to her second book, co-authored with David Dudrick, *The Soul of Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil* (2012), and the development on her views on those matters up to and including her latest book are most evident there. As such it offers a full and fertile backdrop to two books that have marked recent Nietzsche scholarship, and in having access to the still evolving 'workshop of the mind', a number of paths not taken come to light that other students of Nietzsche can gainfully venture on.

For the purposes of this review, however, I wish to concentrate on the second part of the book, on politics. Not least because that is the primary focus of this journal, but because some of the writings there might otherwise be less familiar – often either unpublished or harder to track down – and also because they open up in a highly stimulating manner much broader vistas that are worth exploring further. Indeed, when a leading expert in one field of inquiry (truth, knowledge and metaphysics *chez* Nietzsche) turns their eye to another (politics), the results that might accrue must surely retain our attention, and Clark does underline strong continuities between Nietzsche's ethical and political thought on her reading, notably in how they relate to the ascetic ideal. Moreover, some of the topics she addresses, such as feminism (chapter 7 'Nietzsche's Misogyny') and gender (chapter 8 'On Queering Nietzsche'), are quite personal in nature, and we are privileged to have access to them here.<sup>2</sup>

In truth if I did have one brief reservation to start off with – and this will turn out to be only a reservation in the sense of a demand for more – it is that Clark's writings on politics are typically reactive to debates in the field: about democracy, feminism, and the role of the individual and community. She does not, regrettably, set out to develop her own positive theory of how we should approach Nietzsche's political thought. But everything she has written here suggests that she could and should do so. Her work is characterised, in this book as elsewhere, by a true depth of reflexion, based on very serious and intelligent research, and grounded in an excellent command of German and the secondary literature, which allows her to articulate an always-distinctive position. She proceeds with care – away from sometimes more ideologically-driven agendas – is even-handed and fair in her appraisals, which are often laced with a good deal of humour.<sup>3</sup> What she would produce would undoubtedly

help move the field forward – even more than she has already done so here – if not become another reference work like her *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*. Clark opens her introduction to the collection by stating that what is collected here will not be her final word on the subject, and I can only hope that that will indeed be the case.

Clark opens part II of her book with a review ('Bloom and Nietzsche') of Allan Bloom's – a noted disciple of Leo Strauss – infamous *The Closing of the American Mind*, a book which caused much controversy when it came out in 1987 because of its indictment of the American university. Although it is perhaps the shortest text of the collection, it is also, possibly by the same token, its most punchy: Clark writes that she was, like many, 'clearly offended' by the book (11), and there is a lot of straight-talking here, aided and abated by the slightly less academic setting for its first publication.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it alights upon a number of different themes that were to be the subject of the subsequent papers that form that part of the collection, namely feminism, queer theory, democracy and community, as she herself notes (16-17).

*The Closing of the American Mind* was challenged from a number of different quarters when it was first published: its Straussian reading of Plato's project, the narrowness of the 'Great Books' curriculum it advocated, and more generally the anti-democratic rhetoric and reactionary politics it appeared to endorse all came under severe attack (Nussbaum, 1987; Barber, 1988; Nehamas, 1987). And whilst a number of different reviewers and critics noted the (often misguided, on their view) central role Nietzsche played in Bloom's account, Clark's review stands out as one of the few that not only tackled that strand head-on, offering a critique of the use Nietzsche was put to in the book, but also offered a Nietzschean critique of the position Bloom defended. As Clark came to realise through collecting her papers on Nietzsche's views on ethics and politics, what she was in fact articulating was a Nietzschean critique of Strauss (10).

In her review Clark characterises Bloom's position as a form of the ascetic ideal Nietzsche criticises at the end of the *Genealogy*. She writes that Nietzsche 'would not see the self-affirmation of philosophy' in Bloom's demand that philosophers should lie about the fact that no truth exists to those living outside of the promised Elysian Fields of culture, so as to protect them from being invaded by the *hoi polloi*, but instead 'the nihilistic will of the ascetic ideal once again taking its revenge against life' (139). Nietzsche, according to Clark, would instantly recognise Bloom's view that philosophers should constitute a separate community to the rest of

the population as the same reflex the ascetic priests had had. But that reflex, for Nietzsche, did not provide the foundation for a new mode of life as Bloom would have it. Rather, it was simply meant as a means of coping with reality. ‘Man still prefers to *will nothingness*’, as Nietzsche famously puts it at close of the *Genealogy*, ‘than *not will* at all’ (Nietzsche, 2006: III # 28). As Clark explains: ‘Nietzsche therefore interprets the ascetic ideal as a nihilistic will directed against life in an act of imaginary or spiritual revenge. The idealisation of self-denial, with its devaluation of human life, constitutes a spiritualised version of burning one’s opponent in effigy, in which one’s opponent is life itself’ (138).

We are agreed that Truth, in the absolute sense of the word, cannot found values, but this does not leave us with Bloom’s stark choice of either pursuing knowledge for its own sake or having it co-opted by a foreign political ideal, namely Nazism. To force that type of choice is to resort, as Clark puts it, to scare tactics. Nor does it mean that if Truth cannot give us new ideals, this does not mean that (smaller, more discreet) truths have no role in determining which ideal we should follow, which on Nietzsche’s account must be conducive to life itself (Williams, 2002). To pursue knowledge for its own sake is of course already to have chosen an ideal, but most importantly it is to remain precisely in the nihilism both Bloom and Nietzsche decried. It is to continue in the life of self-denial the priests in Nietzsche’s account had given themselves as the highest human value.

In a famous passage from *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche explains that

Philosophers and moralists are lying to themselves when they think that they are going to extricate themselves from decadence by waging war on it. Extrication is not in their power: what they choose as a remedy, as an escape, is itself only another expression of decadence – they *change* the way it is expressed but do not get rid of the thing itself (Nietzsche, 2005: TI ‘The Problem of Socrates’ # 11).

This is the force of Clark’s Nietzschean critique of Strauss and Straussianism, and represents, to my mind, the first great contribution this book makes to our understanding of Nietzsche in general and his relation to Straussianism in particular: that the latter is an expression of life-denying, plebeian and priestly resentment, which in no way allows us to overcome the nihilistic situation we find ourselves in; a nihilism Nietzsche diagnoses and criticises, but never endorses. Rather it is the continuation of that same nihilism, perhaps changing, as Nietzsche notes in *Twilight* above, how it is expressed, but a continuation of it nonetheless.

If this emphasis on Strauss might strike some readers as a little odd, we should not underestimate the influence Strauss has had both on the continent, notably in France where his presence is still keenly felt today, and in the US. If that influence is (thankfully) on the wane in America, it has certainly marked post-war American political theory and the history of political ideas, and Strauss always entertained a close, although complex, relationship with Nietzsche (Lampert, 1996).<sup>5</sup> By mounting a Nietzschean attack on Straussianism, Clark has not solely managed to definitively sever Nietzsche from Strauss' grasp, but has moreover formulated a devastating critique of Straussianism from a perspective it is, because of its proximity to Nietzsche, particularly vulnerable to. As noted above, it is by collecting her writings on politics that Clark realised that through Bloom she was in reality targeting a much larger figure, namely Strauss, and the fact that she chose to open her section on politics with her review of Bloom underlines the significance she gives to her critique of Straussianism for posterity.

Nietzsche believed that the only way to overcome nihilism was to affirm values that are the most favourable to life. These do not appear ex-nihilo, and it is not the case that all values that might be posited are of equal worth: Nietzsche's search was precisely for a new *Rangordnung* that did not rely on transcendental values. Philosophy, through the analytical distinctions it can provide, has an instrumental role in determining which values might be best for us, but not in bringing them into being (Williams, 2011). That transformative role Nietzsche attributed first to music – Wagner's 'total work of art' – but once disabused of that hope, because of Wagner's (re)turn to Christianity and German nationalism, he turns to politics, a new 'Great Politics' of European cultural and political unification (Nietzsche, 2001: # 208; Drochon, 2016a).

What would such a politics look like? Who is it aimed at? It is democratic? Are women included? Should it be led by an elite distinct from, and perhaps in opposition to, the masses? These are topics Clark addresses in the next four papers that make up the rest of her section on politics: 'Nietzsche's Misogyny', 'On Queering Nietzsche', 'Nietzsche's Antidemocratic Rhetoric' and 'The Good of the Community'. Arguing against the (often conservative, who see this as cause for celebration) view that Nietzsche was a misogynist, Clark claims that Nietzsche was much more sympathetic to feminism and the liberation of woman than he is usually thought to be. Indeed, much of Clark's work is to show a more left-leaning Nietzsche than the commonly

received view. That openness, according to Clark, held throughout his life. His commitment was present not just at his early beginnings at the University of Basle where he voted in favour of admitting women to the university, even whilst one of his heroes at the time, Jacob Burckhardt, voted against, but moreover it survived the resentment he experienced towards women after his abortive relation with Lou Andreas-Salomé. When we know of Nietzsche's continued frequentation of the leading feminist thinkers of the time, Clark is absolutely right in stating that we need to see beyond the infamous quip about the 'whip' – not iterated by Nietzsche or even Zarathustra himself, but an 'old woman' talking about younger girls – when we approach the thorny issue of Nietzsche's relation to women (13). Furthermore, whilst it looks unlikely that Nietzsche was in fact a closet homosexual – a rumour first peddled by Wagner, who accused him of 'excessive onanism' – he appears also, on Clark's account, much more sympathetic to homosexuality and gay emancipation than what we might have conventionally, on the basis of his supposed reactionary stance, conceived.<sup>6</sup>

There is, however, absolutely no doubt that Nietzsche had a rather elitist view of humankind. But is that view compatible with modern democratic institutions? This is what Clark wants to argue in her paper on democracy – Nietzsche's relation to democracy is still perhaps the hottest issue in contemporary Nietzsche scholarship – and she does so by separating out the notion of individual worth from the idea of equal political rights. Nietzsche, on her account, certainly believes that individuals are not of equal worth, but this need not mean that they cannot be attributed equal rights and representation. What Clark identifies as Nietzsche's critique of democracy is his rejection of the democratic *values* it appears to promote. In her words: 'in alphabetical order: fame, money, pleasure, power, sex', and the dominance of athletes and movie stars as the highest exemplars of success (177). The problem with democracy, according to Clark's interpretation of Nietzsche, is that it tends to put *common* values on a pedestal, and does not allow for other, perhaps higher, values, namely those associated with 'higher states of the soul', to develop.<sup>7</sup> So if Nietzsche rejects democratic *values*, this does not mean he automatically rejects modern democratic *institutions*, and Clark believes that Nietzsche's demand for aristocratic values can be made 'compatible' with modern democracy.

In drawing out the distinction between values and institutions, Clark has made a fundamental contribution to our understanding of Nietzsche's relation to democracy,

which makes up, on my reading, the book's second major intervention in the field. Most of the literature on this question has so far been preoccupied with trying to figure out whether Nietzsche should be considered to be either 'for' or 'against' democracy, and thus on that basis what role he should play in contemporary democratic theory: either as a thinker to be mined for philosophical resources upon which to build a new radicalised, postmodern and agonistic democracy, or whether he is to be the modern arch-critic of democracy budding democratic theorists should hone their arguments against (Drochon, 2016b). Clark asks the question of what we mean when we say democracy – do we mean democratic values, or do we mean democratic institutions? – and Nietzsche does indeed appear to discuss both: in *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (1879) he describes democracy in an institutional way, in that democracy is the attempt to create institutions that preserve independence, whereas in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), he associates it more clearly with slave morality.

But can this analytical distinction hold true throughout Nietzsche's writings? And is it the case that values will never impinge on the functioning of institutions? Here I am less sure. For Nietzsche at least, there appears to be a strong interconnection between morality and politics. In *Beyond Good and Evil* 211 he writes of the 'realm of *logic* or *politics* (morality) or *art*', and previously in the aphorism 202 he had stated that 'morality is increasingly apparent in even political and social institutions: the *democratic* movement is the heir to Christianity'. So there is a strong link between the two, which would make Clark's project of keeping politics as it is and simply changing our moral values more complicated than it would at first appear.

One way of thinking about this problem is to see that for Nietzsche the institutional and moral understanding of democracy will coalesce into ultimately serving as a stepping-stone towards the formation of a new form of aristocracy. In *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, to return to the passages cited above, Nietzsche writes that the democratic work of 'building protective stone dams and walls' is done so as to guarantee the 'orchards of culture' and lay the foundation for the new 'highest artist in horticulture' (Nietzsche, 1996: # 275), and this seems to chime well with what Nietzsche says in *Beyond Good and Evil* – thereby underlining the continuities on this point between his 'middle' and 'later' periods – that the 'democratisation of Europe is at the same time an involuntary exercise in the breeding of *tyrants*' (Nietzsche, 2001: # 242).<sup>8</sup>

So democracy and democratic institutions, on Nietzsche's account, do not solely promote either, on the one hand, independence, or on the other, democratic 'herd' values, but also seem to call upon the creation of a new type of aristocracy. How are Clark's views and Nietzsche's writings made to chime? There is of course a long line of thought going back to at least the 'elite theorists of democracy' – Mosca, Pareto, Michels – of the turn of the twentieth century who claim that behind the façade of democratic politics an oligarchy still rules – that modern democracy remains fundamentally elitist – and Clark certainly agrees with the liberal view that modern democracy need not be egalitarian, in the sense that everyone should be considered of equal *worth*. So modern democratic institutions can be reconciled with Nietzsche's aristocratic ethics because modern democratic institutions are not, in fact, that democratic to start off with. From this perspective reconciling aristocratic ethics with democratic institutions starts to appear much more feasible.

The question then, which Clark readily admits, is what we are to make of Nietzsche's phrase that 'slavery in some sense or other' is necessary for a higher society to come into being (171). Clark interprets this slavery as being non-institutional, that slaves can exist in the 'metaphorical' sense – she writes of how scholars and scientists serve as 'slaves' to philosophers in Nietzsche's account – but that strikes me as a position a little too difficult to hold. If by slavery Nietzsche means essentially the transfer of surplus resources from one group to another, so that the latter need not work and can devote themselves to artistic pursuits, then that redistribution will necessarily be institutional. Indeed, the fact that Clark accepts that modern democracy need not be egalitarian in effect concedes the point, as the *worth* of people is determined through the transfer of resources from one group to another. Whether that is done through the economy or the state, both rely on certain types of institutions to do so. So when Nietzsche says 'in some sense or other', what he is referring to is the fact that slavery needs to be reinterpreted in its given context: what slavery meant for the ancient Greeks cannot be what it means for us today, and Nietzsche is quite clear that the wage-labourers of his time led in some sense a slave-like existence.

With the notion of modern democracy calling a new aristocracy into being we begin to see the contours of the elusive figures Nietzsche seems to value most – the *Übermenschen* – those who shall overcome modern man and lead to a higher stage of human development and culture. But if Nietzsche holds the exceptional individual in

the highest esteem, this does not mean that the rest of the community has no value at all, as Clark correctly to my mind argues in her last paper of the section on community. Community has not just instrumental value in being a necessary means to genius, but both individual and society have a role to play in the coming of the *overmen*: even the dreaded ‘last man’ must be affirmed in Nietzsche’s eternal return, both as a means of preserving the species but also as a negative ideal which the exception can develop in contradistinction to. Thus, both the exceptional individual and the community of modern man are required for the formation of the *overmen*. They are, in many ways, co-constitutive of them. It is only through this antagonism that something new might be created. It cannot, without once again falling back into nihilism, be created ex-nihilo. For that to happen, however, each party must have its own sphere of existence, and indeed its own valuation and morality. Or rather they would need, as Williams put it, their own ‘ethics’.

In this we return to the theme of the first part of Clark’s book, on ethics, where she drew on Williams’ distinction between ethics and morality as a way of making sense of Nietzsche’s rejection of morality, which did not mean a rejection of ethics per se. Indeed, it is precisely the absolutist claims that Christian morality makes that riled Nietzsche most: he was open to the idea that Christian morality might be the most fitting to a certain way of life, but refused the idea that that must be the only way of life possible. That would be to exclude the development of other forms of ethical existence that are a pre-requisite to the appearance of the *overmen*. So whilst a secularised Christianity – socialism or democracy on Nietzsche’s account – might be an adequate ethics for the ‘last men’, for the chosen few another type of ethics needs to be developed, one without the Christianised notions of virtue, obligation and guilt Clark explores through Williams in her papers on ‘On the Rejection of Morality: Bernard Williams’ Debt to Nietzsche’ (and indeed Clark’s to Williams) and ‘Nietzsche’s Contribution to Ethics’. In this I disagree with Clark’s view that morality is ‘not simply...not good for higher types, but that it is ultimately not good for anyone’ (7): it strikes me that Nietzsche is quite happy for the herd to have their own (Christian moral) ethics, and that that ethics might indeed be the best for them, once there is space for other types of ethics. Indeed, in the necessary opposition between the herd and the exception I sketched above, such a configuration seems indispensable.

Clark is undoubtedly correct in claiming that Nietzsche, because he places culture over and above the individual, who is only valued as a means to culture, is not a liberal in the sense that ‘individual personhood is itself the source of value’ (17). But perhaps one of the most surprising conclusions one must draw from studying Nietzsche’s politics is that it would appear to require – in its need to keep different spheres apart, but at the same time in coexistence – some form of *political* liberalism. In his rejection of modern herd-like individuality as the sole source of value Nietzsche surely cannot be a *metaphysical* liberal, but in demanding a political space within which the overcoming of modern man can be attempted Nietzsche might paradoxically appear to be a *political* liberal. How the coexistence between the two spheres is to be established and made to work has been the challenge of political theory and politics since Nietzsche’s time. Clark’s book reminds us, if we needed reminding, that that work cannot be done without him.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Robert Jubb for his helpful comments and suggestions to this review.

<sup>2</sup> ‘On Queering Nietzsche’ was a lecture to the Society for Gay and Lesbian Philosophy in 1997, previously unpublished. The book is dedicated to Clark’s wife, Connie Jones.

<sup>3</sup> When discussing Allan Bloom’s suggestion in *The Closing of the American Mind* that philosophers must retreat to the Elysian Fields to pursue true philosophical conversation, Clark writes ‘at the risk of revealing my own lack of astuteness here, I must admit my difficulty in seeing how the conversations of these philosophers can avoid boredom, given Bloom’s further insistence that their “inner teaching may be to all intents and purposes the same”’(135).

<sup>4</sup> It was first published in *Nietzscheana*, a slightly obscure publication we seem to have lost sight of.

<sup>5</sup> For a contemporary Straussian position see Mansfield (2007). Nussbaum has continued her crusade against Straussianism with her review of Mansfield’s book (2006).

<sup>6</sup> For a more critical appraisal of the uses Nietzsche is put to in gender studies, one Clark does not herself fall into, see Drochon (2010).

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<sup>7</sup> Here she is in accord with Brian Leiter's view of 'morality in the pejorative sense', although her criticism of Leiter is that he does not sufficiently take into account the demise of the ascetic ideal (7).

<sup>8</sup> Clark also sees strong continuities between Nietzsche's middle and late periods, although a much more left-leaning one than I will defend here.

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