

**Jonathan Cohen**

*Science, Culture and Free Spirits: A Study of Nietzsche's Human, All Too Human.*

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Nietzsche was a romantic until he wasn't. He was a romantic until 1876, when he published a paen to Richard Wagner. He was obviously no longer a romantic in 1878, with the publication of *Human, All Too Human*, which contained numerous thinly veiled attacks on Wagner. There are few areas in which Nietzsche and his readers are more solidly in agreement about his life and works than on the matter of this deep change in orientation. Nietzsche discussed it in his autobiography and in the prefaces of some of his works. Biographers, supporters and critics alike are aware of those discussions. Having also noted the starkly different positions taken by Nietzsche in the two periods in question, they have as a bloc accepted this change of orientation as an essential element of any credible account of Nietzsche's development.

While marking the most widely recognized turning point in the development of its author's thinking, *Human, All Too Human* also marks an equally critical point in the development of Nietzsche's life as a writer. It is his first conventional philosophical work. It is also his first published collection of short, numbered sections—a stylistic convention that became the most outstanding characteristic of his widely loved prose. Indeed, *Human, All Too Human* occupies such an important place in the story of how Nietzsche became what he was that it is distressing to learn that it has languished in obscurity for well over a century. Among Nietzsche scholars, it has usually been pigeonholed (along with two other works) in what is commonly called Nietzsche's 'middle period', and then ignored in favor either of the traditionally more important, later, 'mature period' or the traditionally sexier, earlier, romantic period. History has placed no premium on understanding Nietzsche's 'middle period', and that fact may help to explain why no study has ever been published devoted to Nietzsche's first book of aphorisms, his first conventional book of philosophy, his first book of anti-romantic, historically based positivism, and his first book about free spirits, until now.

Cohen reads *Human, All Too Human* in the context of Nietzsche's other works. The book explores the contrasts between this work and the works of the early romantic period in greater depth than any other work available. Its development of the connections between this work and the later works, especially *Beyond Good and Evil*, is unparalleled. It also offers a unique take on Nietzsche's prose style and how it relates to his overall project as a writer and thinker. The pace is crisp, the arguments are polished and the structure of Cohen's project is always apparent. It is impossible to lose the thread in this book, which contains an introduction, seven chapters, notes, an analytical table of

contents for *Human, All Too Human*, and two indexes, one for passages cited from *Human, All Too Human*, the other for subjects and proper names.

The focus on science and culture keeps everything on track. Cohen explores various existing explanations of why Nietzsche changed his mind about the value of science as dramatically as he did with this work, challenges each and offers a new, alternative explanation. Prior explanations have most often been biographically and psychologically based. Cohen's is based on logic: Nietzsche reconceptualized both science and culture at this time, and thus he was forced to revalue the relationship between them as a consequence of these new descriptions. Where he had valued art above science for the sake of culture in his earlier period, he now depicts a higher culture as one that finds art and science to be of roughly equal value.

At this same time, Nietzsche launched what would become a career-long, hostile analysis of metaphysics, morality and religion, and introduced the free spirit as an image of one who has escaped these traditional forms of romantic and idealistic illusion through science, even if he or she can never emerge fully from historically, physiologically and linguistically based illusion. Cohen explores Nietzsche's attack on metaphysics at some length, and develops the thesis that it is based on two forms of argument: a non-fallacious genetic argument, and a plea for an alternative explanation. For example, the God concept is attacked by Nietzsche's pointing out the shoddy methods by which it is derived, while also talking up naturalistic accounts of the things God is used to explain. In another instance, feelings of guilt and of the need for redemption are treated in this fashion. The genetic argument is non-fallacious because it does not argue for the falsehood of an opposing belief, but merely points out that the belief does not have derivation from a good method to fall back on as a justification for itself. This realization can be devastating to metaphysical, religious and moral beliefs, because they thrive amid tales of their derivation from presumably irrefutable methods, such as origin in a miracle or in an inspired perception. Cohen is the first author to suggest such an elegant and compelling understanding of Nietzsche's critical approach.

'In the middle period', Cohen believes, 'Nietzsche exemplifies the free spirit's activity, in his later period, he attacks the conformism of morality so as to liberate free spirits more effectively' (18). However, 'the basic outline of Nietzsche's philosophy remains in place from *Human, All Too Human* through the rest of his career,' despite the fact that 'there is another crucial shift' around 1881 (19).

Cohen undertook this project 'to show the importance of the individual work as a unit of interpretation for understanding Nietzsche' (175). He is able to demonstrate not only that *Human, All Too Human* stands on its own among Nietzsche's works, but also that it served as a model for later works. In addition, his chapter on the structure of *Human, All Too Human* is one of the few treatments available that acknowledges more than the most cursory basic structure in Nietzsche's writings. A happy product of long

deliberation, this book will prove to be a net gain for Nietzsche's readers far and wide.

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