

Paul S. Loeb

The Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra.

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There are serious disagreements among Nietzsche scholars about many aspects of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. None are more fundamental than the disagreements about its structure. It is composed of four parts, with Zarathustra's death occurring at the end of Part 3, and thus the question of how to read Part 4 (in which Zarathustra is very much alive) as a part of the narrative has been particularly vexing. Some divide Part 4 from the rest of the work. Some deny that Zarathustra dies at the end of Part 3. Others suggest that Part 4 belongs where it is as a post-mortem retrospective. Still others suggest that Part 4 is a prequel of the sort seen in the second of the *Star Wars* trilogies.

Paul Loeb recommends yet another alternative, and goes to some length in explaining and justifying his view. As he sees it, Part 4 is to be understood as taking place between two passages in Part 3. Thus Part 4, which collects various wise and famous men into Zarathustra's cave for a feast, illustrates a segment of Zarathustra's life that is referred to in Part 3 but not depicted there. Read this way, Nietzsche's magnum opus matches the structure of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* tetralogy, and 'Part 4 was modeled on the satyr play at the end of the tetralogy that parodied the thematically related material in the preceding trilogy' (93). Loeb believes that both the satyr play and Part 4 are to be understood as possessing an analeptic quality that arises from their juxtaposition of the serious with the farcical. Where postmodern and other ironists have read Part 4 as wholly farcical, Loeb is careful to point out that, on his reading, Part 4 maintains its dignity by depicting Zarathustra's 'final and essential advance on the way to complete fulfillment' of his destiny (97). Thus it cannot be read as undermining Parts 1-3, but must be understood as supplementing and clarifying them, especially the later passages of Part 3.

Loeb offers studious and lively discussions of prior writers on *Zarathustra*, especially their comments on the book's structure and on crucial passages in Parts 3 and 4. Beyond these concerns, his reading depends upon his interpretation of Zarathustra's thinking on life, death and eternal return. Commentaries on these topics are taken up and responded to as well. Loeb disagrees specifically with the scholarly consensus holding that eternal return, which presupposes a circular notion of time, is inconsistent with the teaching of the overman, which presupposes a linear time. Insisting that Nietzsche took the doctrine of eternal return seriously and that readers have neglected this concept for too long, Loeb's patient interpretation of *Zarathustra* stands out among commentaries both for its treatment of eternal return and for its understanding of the book's structure.

It stands out for another reason as well. Nietzsche described *Zarathustra* as his

most important work, and discussed his later works as ‘fish hooks’ meant to attract readers who could comprehend this greater, earlier poetic work. Scholars have for the most part ignored Nietzsche’s claims here, and have come to regard *Beyond Good and Evil*, and especially *On the Genealogy of Morals*, as his most important works, expressing his most mature and polished views. They argue that *Zarathustra* is not written in Nietzsche’s voice, that it is poetry rather than prose, assertoric rather than argumentative, and that its central ideas of eternal return and the overman do not occur in his prose works. On this basis, what Nietzsche thought of as his greatest gift to us has come to be thought of as an embarrassment, or as a work primarily of artistic and only secondarily of philosophical importance. Loeb suggests that this consensus is probably mistaken. While his later works do not mention eternal return or the overman, they do point back to *Zarathustra* as the solution to their riddles.

On Loeb’s reading, *Zarathustra* is Nietzsche’s imaginary depiction of a philosopher who is stronger than himself, and thus represents ideals that only a philosopher who did not inherit the base-line weaknesses of Nietzsche’s age can represent. Most scholars agree that the third essay of the *Genealogy of Morals* clearly calls for but does not offer an ideal to counter the ascetic ideal. Loeb believes that *Zarathustra* represents the ideal that is missing from this essay. Similarly, the second essay of the *Genealogy*, after a rousing discussion of guilt and bad conscience, ends with the assurance that a stronger philosopher must arise one day who will be able to redeem us from the ‘curse’ of the ‘hitherto reigning ideal’ as well as from the ‘great nausea’ and ‘will to nothingness’ that are its consequences. At this point, the essay mentions *Zarathustra*. Loeb takes this quite seriously. Previous writers have not.

Because the *Genealogy* is widely taken to be Nietzsche’s most important work, Loeb’s attempt to resolve its paradoxes by reference to the doctrines of *Zarathustra* is both important and timely. It is important because the *Genealogy* is important. It is timely because Nietzsche’s moral thought has been growing in significance for over a decade now, and yet his principal work in this area remains more a source of questions than of answers. If Loeb is right that the most deeply troubling aspects of this work can be resolved by a reading of the earlier, poetic work, then authors who seek to make headway with Nietzsche’s moral thought may finally be able to move forward with the doctrines and innovations of the *Genealogy*, and spend considerably less time stumped over its lack of various elements. For Loeb, the work simply does not stand on its own, and can only be understood fully if it is read alongside *Zarathustra*.

This book includes eight well written chapters along with a bibliography and index. It also sports a final chapter that promises to provide several thesis topics for graduate students interested in Nietzsche’s moral thought.

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