



On Michalski's Nietzsche, Christianity, and Cognition

Tom Rockmore

Duquesne University

rockmore@duq.edu

Abstract: Above all through Heidegger's influence on the debate, Nietzsche has been extensively studied, most often as an anti-Christian thinker. In his recent book, *The Flame of Eternity: An Interpretation of Nietzsche's Thought*, Krzysztof Michalski offers a new interpretation in which Nietzsche is superficially anti-Christian but in fact on a deeper level a profoundly Christian thinker. According to Michalski, Nietzsche's central conception is eternity. Michalski considers Nietzsche's entire corpus and much of the surrounding debate. I reconstruct Michalski's argument in pointing to what seems to be a manifest tension between two incompatible conceptions of time: the Christian view of time as linear, and the eternal return of the same that is intrinsically circular.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Friedrich; Christianity; eternal return of the same; eternity; cognition.

Western philosophers until recently were generalists, not specialists, interested in all facets of the human condition. This approach persisted through modern times almost up to the contemporary period. It was especially strong in French philosophy, including Michel de Montaigne and René Descartes. It was a staple of British empiricism, which was overtly based on philosophical anthropology. Yet as part of the emergence of analytic philosophy, which at least initially and perhaps even still centers on the problem of reference central to Gottlob Frege and those influenced by him, the generalist approach earlier typical of Western philosophy abruptly vanished. Ernst Cassirer was perhaps the last distinguished member of a long line of thinkers whose range of interests appeared to be nearly limitless.

The present historical moment is an age of specialization. Specialization affects all facets of the philosophical pursuit, including textual interpretation.

Whole careers are based on the close reading of the texts, sometimes on only a significant part of a single text, for instance Immanuel Kant's transcendental deduction in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. This approach spills over into many contemporary philosophical fields. Interpretation of Friedrich Nietzsche, who is a most enigmatic thinker, is about to become or perhaps already is a small cottage industry. Since I do not pretend to master Nietzsche's published and unpublished corpus, I am not well equipped to do battle with his many expert interpreters. In the present context, I am more interested in drawing attention to some possible implications and lessons that Krzysztof Michalski's reading of Nietzsche suggests.¹

Nietzsche continues to attract attention. There

¹ Krzysztof Michalski, *The Flame of Eternity: An Interpretation of Nietzsche's Thought*, trans. Benjamin Paloff, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. [Henceforth cited as *FE*]

are a number of radically different views of Nietzsche, who has become a fixture across the board as it were in both the current continental as well as the current analytic debate. The current widespread fascination with Nietzsche is in large part a result of the fascination with Martin Heidegger that was so widespread in the twentieth century, but that seems now be quickly receding. Nietzsche has perhaps never been a neutral figure. Since he died in 1900 his position has often been appropriated for purposes foreign to his thought. Unlike Heidegger and a number of other Nietzsche-interpreters in the first part of the last century, Michalski clearly focuses on what the latter actually says in his texts, as distinguished from what he ought to have said, in presenting a supposedly coherent formulation of Nietzsche's position.

Michalski's Nietzsche stands out among the available approaches. A clear virtue of his interpretation is to turn away from the obvious political instrumentalization of Nietzsche's thought. Many, in fact a surprising number of those who write on Nietzsche have their own ax to grind. Though interpretation is difficult at best, Nietzsche's readers are often not more than incidentally concerned to understand what he arguably thinks in going beyond what he in fact says in his writings.

It is not hard to find examples. It is well known that Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche, Nietzsche's sister, depicted her brother as anticipating the Third Reich. She published Nietzsche's *Nachlass* and notes under the heading of the *Wille zur Macht* as his supposedly central text. Alfred Baeumler was with Ernst Krieck and Heidegger one of the few philosophers to make his way during National Socialism. Baeumler, who accepts Förster-Nietzsche's approach to her brother's position, reads Nietzsche as a political thinker in order to legitimate Nazism.² Heidegger, Baeumler's rival during the Nazi period, also participated in the Nietzsche cult, which emerged at that time.³ Heidegger is perhaps most responsible for the currently widespread interest in his German predecessor. He partially perpetuates the familiar tendentious reading of Nietzsche's position. Heidegger's "violent" interpretation is arguably not directed or at least not mainly directed

at understanding the latter's position but rather at incorporating its insights into his own theory of being.⁴ He follows Baeumler's view that the *Will To Power* is Nietzsche's central work while rejecting Baeumler's political reading in favor of an overtly metaphysical reading consistent with his own emphasis on being. Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche is widely influential on such postmodernist writers as Gianni Vattimo, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.

Nietzsche is a strong critic of Christianity. Michalski invokes (and clearly also defends) a resolutely Christian perspective in contending that eternity, or again the eternal return of the same, is the central ordering concept in Nietzsche's apparently disparate writings. He reads Nietzsche in a series of nine essays, which are directed to expounding but not to evaluating various aspects of the latter's writings. Indeed, it is difficult to evaluate Nietzsche's views in virtue of the way in which he writes. Perhaps because of his background in classical studies, he often proclaims rather than argues, states rather than attempts to justify his views. Hence it is difficult in interpreting his texts to do more than to identify the links between the various strands. Yet even to do that much is to make an important contribution.

Michalski states his thesis clearly in the first paragraph of the introduction: "I contend that Nietzsche's thought can be organized into a consistent whole through precisely his concept of eternity" (*FE* vii). If this is correct, then, since eternity is by inference central to his thought, to understand what Nietzsche means by "eternity" is to understand his deepest insight. According to Michalski, this concept is both rooted in the tradition as well as an original dimension in Nietzsche's incessant concern with human life.

Nietzsche's understanding of this concept is atypical, not at all obvious. In ordinary usage, eternity seems to lie beyond time and change. Spinoza, for instance, appeals to this concept in his view of truth as *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is, as universally and necessarily true. This idea is widely present in the philosophical debate about knowledge, perhaps in

² See Alfred Baeumler, *Nietzsche, der Philosoph und Politiker*, Leipzig: Reclam, 1931.

³ See Martha Zapata Galindo, *Triumph des Willens zur Macht: Zur Nietzsche-Rezeption im NS-Staat*, Hamburg: Argument, 1995.

⁴ "Indem Heidegger das von Nietzsche Ungesagte im Hinblick auf die Seinsfrage zur Sprache zu bringen sucht, wird das von Nietzsche Gesagte in ein diesem selber fremdes Licht gerückt. Ausdrücklich sucht Heidegger Nietzsche anders zu verstehen, als dieser selber verstand: anders, keineswegs 'besser'." Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, *Heidegger und Nietzsche. Nietzsche-Interpretationen III*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2000, p. 267.

ancient Greece, but certainly as a staple of the modern debate. Perhaps this is part of what is meant in the more recent expression: true in all possible worlds. On the contrary, Michalski draws attention to an intrinsic link between Nietzsche's view of temporality and time.

The view of time Michalski ascribes to Nietzsche is hardly obvious. According to Michalski, for Nietzsche eternity is paradoxically a dimension of time that explains why today becomes tomorrow, as well as a physiological notion rooted in the body. "Eternity," a term that Nietzsche uses in a nonstandard way, for Michalski apparently refers to the way that human life at any given instant resists a so-called "totalization." He may have Kant in mind. The author of the critical philosophy, who denies that we can complete an unlimited series of experiences, apparently holds a similar theory. Nietzsche supposedly applies a related perspective to life as a possible conceptual object. According to Michalski, Nietzsche thinks that try as we might we cannot invent a successful concept about life, which supposedly resists this.

Michalski believes that Nietzsche's conception of eternity is related to his conception of nihilism. "Nihilism" is used in widely different ways. Ivan Turgenev popularized a term that Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi apparently invented to characterize Enlightenment rationalism in general, especially Kant's critical philosophy, which he opposes to *Glaube* (faith or belief). In the *Will to Power*, Nietzsche writes:

A nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist. According to this view, our existence (action, suffering, willing, feeling) has no meaning: the pathos of "in vain" is the nihilists' pathos – at the same time, as pathos, an inconsistency on the part of the nihilists.⁵

This definition, which Kaufmann calls "remarkable," appears to leave the door open for many possible interpretations. Michalski ascribes a precise view to Nietzsche. According to Michalski, who perhaps has Christianity in mind, Nietzsche understands "nihilism" to refer to the so-called threat, sickness or pathology of the essential discontinuity of life. He attributes to Nietzsche the view that life consists in a constant but unavailing effort to overcome nihilism, to attempt to return to a new beginning, for instance in

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage 1968, p. 318.

art, which is not restricted to the few, but constitutes the countermovement to nihilism. If this is correct, then for Nietzsche life consists in striving endlessly but fruitlessly, as Albert Camus reminds us much like Sisyphus, to overcome nihilism.

Michalski's study peaks in the ninth and last chapter in his account of the difficult concept of the eternal return of the same, which he analyzes both separately and in tandem with the concept of the will to power. Eternity, which often refers to the idea of extra-temporal permanence, here apparently idiosyncratically refers to the idea of incessant, unalterable change. Michalski points to various forms of this ancient idea throughout the tradition as well as in the New Testament (*FE* 153). He notes that for a Christian, death and resurrection divide the past from the future. He links this point with Zarathustra's teaching of the eternal return (*FE* 155). He further points out that will to power, or the will to will (*FE* 171) is related to the eternal return of the same (*FE* 178). In the latter concept, the difference between past and future disappears (*FE* 179) since in each instant we find the past and the future (*FE* 184), and since each moment is at the same time a beginning and an end (*FE* 201).

Michalski calls attention to the anti-rationalistic epistemic consequence of the eternal return of the same. He suggests that life cannot be cognized since

every concept, any knowledge, contains within itself an internal tension, a tension that cannot be abolished. This view assumes that there "is" something that can be known, and by so doing it negates life (which passes and becomes, but "is" not) and is simultaneously the necessary expression of that life. [*FE* 191]

In my view, this is only an assertion, which requires an argument. How are we to understand the idea of the eternal return of the same? Here are two suggestions: this is no more than a useful myth, or it is best understood along pre-Socratic lines. Leo Strauss follows Heidegger in suggesting that Nietzsche wishes to combat the consequence of historical relativism, hence nihilism through myth.⁶ The second approach

⁶ According to Strauss, Nietzsche believed "our own principles, including the belief in progress, will become as relative as all earlier principles had shown themselves to be" and "the only way out seems to be...that one voluntarily choose life-giving delusion instead of deadly truth, that one fabricate a myth." Leo Strauss, "Relativism," in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism. An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. and intr. Thomas L. Pangle, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1989, 13-26, here p. 25.

is suggested by an apparently Heraclitean echo in Nietzsche's texts. If that is correct, then Nietzsche can be understood as suggesting that life lies beyond knowledge on the grounds that epistemology depends on ontology. An advantage of this interpretation is that it provides an argument leading to the skeptical conclusion about knowledge of life.

The basic idea goes all the way back in the tradition. Plato can be read as opposing the Heraclitean view of permanent change in favor of Parmenidean resistance to change. In the *Cratylus*, Plato writes:⁷

How can that be a real thing, which is never in the same state? ... for at the moment that the observer approaches, then they become other ... so that you cannot get any further in knowing their nature or state but if that which knows and that which is known exist ever ... then I do not think they can resemble a process or flux

The comparison between Heraclitus and Nietzsche is suggestive. A consequence of an ontological view that everything is in constant flux is that nothing can be known as it in fact is. Many thinkers believe, on the contrary, that to know is to know the mind-independent world as it is. Plato, who rejects change, can be read as suggesting that some among us on grounds of nature and nurture can literally see reality. This approach survives in the Marxist reflection theory, which is already anticipated by Plato, and which presupposes that in reality nothing changes. The later philosophical tradition develops, builds on, and draws the consequences of the Parmenidean insight that to know is to know what is as it is, presumably as it is beyond time and change. A recognizable avatar of this approach survives in the modern concern with metaphysical realism as the criterion of knowledge.

I come now to my conclusion, which concerns Nietzsche's link to religion as well as the implications of his view of knowledge. Nietzsche can be read in many ways. Michalski innovates in accentuating a link between Nietzsche and religion, especially Christianity.

He believes Nietzsche, who is widely known as a radical critic of Christianity, provides a new way to understand religion. I take him to be suggesting that Nietzsche is misunderstood as simply rejecting Christianity, but better understood as advancing an alternative, arguably deeper interpretation of Christianity. Nietzsche, like Hegel before him,

famously proclaims the death of God. Nietzsche like Hegel can be understood as noting that, because of the increasing secularization of Europe, the Christian religion can no longer play its historical role. This view is not inconsistent but rather consistent with a Christian commitment tempered by an awareness of social change. If this interpretation were sound, Nietzsche would not be opposed to religion, or even opposed to Christianity. He would rather be deeply religious in an obviously unorthodox sense.

Michalski, who stresses the religious dimension, attributes to Nietzsche the view that God is everywhere in human life (*FE* 166). When Paul announces the arrival of the Messiah, the expected consequence, in Michalski's words, is "the unlimited potential for freedom" (*FE* 205). According to Michalski, eternity, which Jesus heralds, is the impossibility of enclosing meaning within human life (*FE* 206-7). Hence, for Michalski, human freedom is attained not outside of Christianity, but rather in realizing it.

Yet the link between Nietzsche and a renewed view of Christianity appears tenuous at best. Nietzsche can be read as preaching freedom from religion, which is not the same thing as submission to any of its codified forms. Further, religious freedom, which is central in the cited passage, is not and should not be confused with freedom in general. Individuals will still grow old and die. It also does not follow that despite his rejection of Christianity Nietzsche's position is Christian in any recognizable sense. Presumably Christians think that human lives are meaningful not in themselves, and certainly not in distinction to Christianity, but rather insofar as specifically illustrating Christian values, above all the return to God after the fall as it were.

There is a further difficulty in respect to the apparently manifest incompatibility between two conceptions of time. For Michalski eternity is the central concept of Nietzsche's superficially anti-Christian but in fact deeply Christian position. The simultaneous commitment to Christianity and the eternal return of the same requires clarification. To make out Michalski's interpretation it would be necessary to overcome a deep tension between two incompatible conceptions of time. The Abrahamic faiths, including Christianity, rely on a linear conception of temporality. The Christian view of time has a before and an after, a moment before the birth and death of Christ, then a period of transformation and redemption leading from Athens to Jerusalem. At the end of the process of the fall away from and return to God, time itself can be said to end.

⁷ "Cratylus" 440 c-d, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. with intr. and notes by John M. Cooper, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997, p. 156.

The eternal return of the same relies on a circular conception of temporality, in which there is not and cannot be progress. In a circular cosmology, there is no difference, no advance of the human agenda as it were, but only eternal sameness, in a word constant change. If this is correct, then Nietzsche cannot simultaneously accept a Christian view of salvation and feature the eternal return of the same.

A non-religious, epistemic interpretation of Nietzsche is also possible. Nietzsche can be read as suggesting that, if everything changes, then nothing stays the same and hence knowledge, if it is understood as a grasp of the unchanging, is impossible. The implicit presupposition is that it is only possible to know what does not change. Nietzsche seems to equate the possibility of knowledge with interpretation. If there is only interpretation, then one can claim that knowledge, which lies beyond interpretation, cannot be reached. If this is true, then interpretation is incompatible with claims to know.

Nietzsche is sometimes read as advancing a form of this view. Thus in *The Gay Science*, in presumably rejecting any effort to equate knowledge with the hermeneutical process, he famously claims that, since the possibility cannot be excluded, in effect there are

only interpretations all the way down.⁸ Michalski does not specifically address the problem of knowledge. Yet he seems to generalize this epistemic claim in writing that "modern science fails in its attempt to give life a solid foundation" (*FE* 73). The statement is unclear. Perhaps it means no more than that epistemological foundationalism is not possible for the biological domain. Yet it does not follow that knowledge in general or even knowledge of life is impossible. Modern biology identifies cognizable structures within the daily round. Examples include Darwinian and other theories of evolution, theories of the genome, analyses of DNA and RNA, and so on. Nietzsche appeals to anti-rationalists such as Heidegger and Derrida. He may further be correct to oppose Kant's form of speculative idealism. Yet, despite his attraction to postmodernist writers, he clearly does not undermine reason, which cannot be undermined through rational argument, and he also does not show there is no knowledge of life.

⁸ See *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, §374, in *Friedrich Nietzsche-Werke II*, ed. Karl Schlechta, Frankfurt a. M.: Ullstein 1972, p. 250: "Die Welt ist uns vielmehr noch einmal 'unendliche' geworden: insofern wir die Möglichkeit nicht abweisen können, daß sie unendliche Interpretationen in sich schließt."