



Comments on Krzysztof Michalski's *The Flame of Eternity*

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Abstract: Emphasizing romantic tendencies in Nietzsche's philosophy allowed Krzysztof Michalski to build a more comprehensive context for the understanding of his most cryptic philosophical concepts, such as Nihilism, Overman, the Will to power, the Eternal Return. Describing life in terms of constant advancement of itself, opening new possibilities, the flame which "ignites" human body and soul, etc, also positioned Michalski closer to spirituality as a human condition and existential interpretation of Christianity which implies reliving life and death of Christ as a real event that one lives through and that burns one's heart, i.e. not as learned from reading texts or listening to a teacher. The image of fire implies constant changing, unrest, never-ending passing away and becoming phases of reality and seems losing its present phase. This makes Michalski's perspective on Nietzsche and his existential view of Christianity vulnerable because both of them lack a sufficient foundation for the sustainable present that requires various constants and makes it possible for life to be lived.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Friedrich; life; eternity; spontaneity; spirituality; Romanticism; existential Christianity; death of God; eternal return; overman; time; temporality.

People often say that to understand a Romantic you have to be even a more incurable Romantic or to understand a mystic you have to be a more comprehensive mystic. So to understand Nietzsche one should be a more radical Nietzsche—this is what Krzysztof Michalski's book on Nietzsche suggests and demonstrates. But is it possible to be more Nietzschean than Nietzsche himself? Yes and no. It seems that developing Nietzsche's arguments in Nietzsche's spirit allows Michalski to better understand his metaphysics of Eternal Return. But staying on these arguments for too long leads him to the implosion of Nietzsche's philosophy from within and the eternal return interpreted in terms of flame is transformed into burning sameness of an empty eternity.

The most comprehensive concept of Nietzsche's philosophy, life as endless and purposeless re-

occurrence of itself through the eternal game of self-asserting forces, becomes Michalski's major explanatory metaphor, his Ur-metaphor, in explicating Nietzsche's landmark pronouncements: Nihilism, Death of God, Overman, Will to Power, and Eternal Return. Life has been expanded in all directions; everything that can have possible meaning is put in the context of life living itself for itself and by itself. In Michalski's view of Nietzsche life gains even more demonic features: it is the element, spontaneous occurrence, unrestricted instinctual force of Nature, the open horizon of endless possibilities, basic uncertainty of options, a blissful playing child oblivious of time, the state of eternity which careless lovers can experience at the moment of unleashed emotion, blind ardor, a stormy drive, a moody and capricious woman, striving avidity, ever-

changing flashing instances of inexhaustible energy, a wheel's gear point with zero gravity, the dancing flame, abysmal mystery of joy and horror, etc. Many of these characteristics belong to the old Romantic attitude to life expressed in *Sturm und Drang*, the attitude which presupposes reality exceeding and breaking any structure in ontology and fundamentally irrational, i.e. incomprehensible for any conceptual treatment. Michalski traces these characteristics in every move Nietzsche makes in his philosophical writings.

But Michalski also made an attempt to put this Nietzschean attitude to life in the wide context of Christianity, though not of the Christian doctrine, but rather the Christian religiosity, a particular type of religious spirituality, a person's unique discovery of God's presence inside his or her heart. Michalski views experience of gaining a Christian identity as existential, i.e. catching a divine flame and by igniting a little spark inside a human heart putting it on fire, and projects it onto Nietzschean metaphysical discoveries of the Death of God, Will to Power, and Eternal Return. By doing so he thematizes bursting and sweeping inflammatory spontaneity of life, which in Nietzsche seems to resist any conceptual explication. Naturally, Michalski appeals to those Christian founding fathers and theologians who emphasized mysterious aspects of Christian faith not as a creed, institutionalized mode of behavior, or comfortable pattern of socialization, but as an ecstatic state, both mental and existential, a heroic effort, an individual's dangerous attempt to participate in a cosmic fire, or capacity to carry the burning presence of God in human hearts (as in St. Augustine, the Desert Fathers, Origen, St. John of the Cross, Blaise Pascal, or Søren Kierkegaard).

In this way Michalski appears to have "doubled" irrationality in interpreting Nietzsche. First, he radicalized Nietzsche's fundamentally irrational vision of life up to the point of impossibility to grasp by any human faculty its most immediate manifestations—the present moments. They became so illusive as a result of being inflated and swollen up by the constant simultaneous shifting of its passing-away and becoming aspects, that they have lost all ontological traces and assets. Second, in explaining Nietzsche, Michalski operates with passages from the most existential Christian mystics and poets with irrational transcendental inclinations like Rainer Maria Rilke in such a way that a reader gets an impression that these thinkers were instrumental in his own spiritual development. He sounds like he is talking about what

happened personally to him, sharing his reactions, doubts, confusions, and revelations with readers. By doing this he managed to escape "objectivizing" of the subject matter, i.e. treating Nietzsche's philosophy as an object to handle or fact to look at and analyze it from the outside point of view. Precisely that would prevent a person, according to Nietzsche, from getting the real knowledge of life as it is. Michalski treats both Nietzsche and Christian mystics in an existential way which yields a rich context and a chance to re-live Nietzsche's philosophical journey and experience his anguish as well as his triumphs first hand. Michalski made it possible for Nietzschean philosophy not to be swept away by its own wave of Nihilism; he saved Nietzsche's thinking from Nietzsche's philosophy.

The history of the post-Nietzsche European culture and philosophy have proven that his most lethal announcements of ontological changes in reality and basic shifts in knowledge about this reality—nihilism and death of God—turned to be very productive and led to development of new humanitarian sciences, creation of new meanings of religion, divinity, divinization, mythologization, faiths, religiosity, as well as the new types of philosophizing that culminated in phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics, and other post-Modern philosophies based on results gained in structuralism, literary criticism and linguistics, cultural anthropology, sociology, and psychoanalysis. Research fields that have been cleared off old metaphysical systems of reference, analytical habits to search for essences, and traditional theoretical attitudes to reach out to absolute truths blossomed with hundreds of new beautiful flowers.

If God no longer serves as a foundation of reality and life starts to be its own foundation and goal, unfolding itself as simultaneously passing and becoming at each moment of its occurrence, a man should adapt to these new conditions. That is to say, a man should change his ontological characteristics, i.e. his system of orientation in the world (a religion, social norms, value system) and his identity, to find a new way to secure and justify his existence—in a word man must go over himself, i.e. develop super-reflective capacity and become almost "supernatural" in losing and finding himself every moment of his life again and again. The new man is supposed not only reflectively contemplate his social roles, political positions, emotional states, moral obligations and develop awareness of all his profiles on his own; but literally he is supposed to build up himself in order to

handle the destructive and constructive force of life, i.e. to be creative. The new man is supposed to step over himself not only in everydayness and surprise himself, for example, with unexpected love and immerse himself into it, entirely forgetting about time and living, as Michalski puts it, in a moment that is eternity. But the new man must face and withhold the Unknown, the Dread, the existential traps and holes; the new man must learn how to live in the primal loneliness, manage nothingness, keep balance in free fall into the abyss of Existenz, pass through all kinds of ontological voids. The new man has to be himself and more than himself at the same time, he as living and breathing being has to be his own foundation and goal in his life. Changing the traditional metaphysical paradigm which was presupposed by sciences and was based on the absolute trinity of the truth-good-beauty turned to be easier than changing the traditional transcendently secured image of man tacitly presupposed in human mentality. Transformation of man into overman suitable for the new ontology required super-powers. Surprisingly religion, more precisely a living faith, could be one of these super-powers.

Exactly at this point Michalski refers to Zarathustra who is trying to wake people up from their constant sleep of comfortable lies of old science and metaphysics and make them face the terrible reality of life: death, the end of the world, the Last Judgment, the Apocalypse. Michalski quotes Nietzsche's *Gay Science*: "we godless anti-metaphysicians still take our fire ... from the flame lit by the faith that is thousand years old... that God is the truth," looks into the Gospel of Matthew which tells the story of the Christ dying on the Cross, to demonstrate how a man can rediscover God in his heart, and concludes that "Christ's crying on the cross reveals the world as the place where we are waiting for God."¹ That is to say religious events are not historical ones, but are taking place now as events within the scope of our present experience. They do not belong to the realm of time; they are eternal "events" which penetrate our lives and unfold themselves in the midst of temporal events. We constitute ourselves a-new, along the lines of Overman if we discover an eternal source of creativity that is both inside and outside of us. Once we hear Christ crying on the

cross – and not just learn the Ten Commandments – we begin living in eternity.

With this in mind another Nietzschean revelation, the will to power, becomes more concrete. Once the new man engages his eternal reflective and existential capacity he begins to feel more fitting in life which is an unlimited force of discarding itself and creating itself, rejecting certain forms and affirming the other ones, eliminating the old ways and unfolding the new options. It is as if life has its own will to advance itself and power to do that without limit. However if the will to power, i.e. the self-advancing life potentially reaches a totality of complete self-presentation, overman becomes mortal, i.e. death limits his existence and knowledge. Though when he affirms the living Christ in his heart, i.e. begins to live in eternity, he can have an authentic experience of being eternally present in his own life just as Christ was in his. For Christ does not teach man a finite set of rules to follow, but enlightens one's heart, like the teacher in an old saying: a student is not a vessel to be filled up, but a torch to be lit up.

It seems that Michalski's interpretation of overman and will to power through the living Christ elucidates not only the content of Nietzsche's concepts, but vice versa, the essence of Christ who does not teach rules to man, but who ignites his heart with divine flame.

Eternity does not have any direction. But humans move through life from the beginning (birth) to the end (death). Humans do not live their lives in a Nietzschean sense as will to power; they just live their own lives. There are stages in life, clearly defined by the way humans experience its fullness and intensity. Does it mean that man somehow instantiates eternity, makes it happen, makes it an event? But in Nietzsche any manifestation of overman and life as will to power seems to be non-existing in the constant recurrence of passing away and becoming; life which has replaced reality does not have any base to stick to or any hook to catch on and dwell at least for a short while. Yes, a while, that is a temporal order of any unfolding phenomena is a big problem both for Nietzsche and Michalski. I believe this is because both Nietzsche and Michalski have saved at least one notion of traditional metaphysics and made it work for all the rest they have abandoned. The notion of eternity is the last fortress of metaphysics. Michalski gives many metaphors to demonstrate its meaning: child at play, forgetting time, death interrupting the habitual rhythmical daily proceeding, lovers under an apple tree naively immersed themselves into unleashed emotion, ignoring time and dwelling in a moment,

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*]

cosmic fire igniting constant ups and downs of the universe, Christ crying on the cross, putting a seed of faith in human heart, resurrection as manifestation of the divine love. Rationally it is very hard to combine the meaning of constant change and that of eternity. This is the case even if constant change does not refer to concrete changes in substance, quantities and qualities, but to changes in proceeding of life per se. Eternal change implies an intrinsic contradiction like a long shortness. Eternal change is not changeable; the meaning of changeability does not apply to it. These are many unsettled issues with the last and the most obscure Nietzsche's antimetaphysical metaphysical discovery: the eternal return.

Unlike most metaphysical ideas which in spite of their very high level of abstraction are deeply rooted in our sensual experience and intuition, the idea of eternal return is counterintuitive. We rather sense and feel life as something which never returns to itself, never repeats itself, and never reappropriates its own happening. The same could be said about many different forms of life or many spheres to which the metaphor of life can be applied if one thinks that the only justified usage of the notion of life would be biological. We talk about historical life, cultural life, religious life, social life, political life, and the life of the soul, the life of the universe, a planet or the Sun. The notion of life is applied whenever we find events which are unique, i.e. which have happened once and never will happen again, ontologically they are irreducible to each other. From the first sight, exactly this motive is what Nietzsche could pick up and utilize in his thinking paradigm emphasizing changes of all sorts. But he insisted that the eternal return is for him the most important "abysmal thought" which even made him to lower his voice when he mentioned it. So great was its significance.

Michalski analyses Nietzsche's arguments in the defense of eternal return in great detail. There could be at least two lines of unfolding events: (1) as happening in reality, i.e. in life, as being experienced from inside; and (2) as observed from the outside. In the first case the present moment becomes more pronounced because one lives in it and through it, but both past and future are out of focus and the difference between them is faded. In the second case one observes the present, past, and future clearly and with the same intensity, but the difference between temporal differentiations and the privileged status of the present is gone. All events are perceived by an observer as a sequence of points

in line with no beginning and no end. Essentially time loses its meaning. To save the specific characteristics of all temporal differentiations, the unity of time, as Nietzsche calls it, and to hold them as different from each other is what constitutes the challenge.

The most elementary cell or the simplest particle of time is a moment which is described by Nietzsche in terms of passing and becoming instances. These instances are not changing one after another or replacing each other in a sequence; they work in tandem: each moment is passing away and becoming simultaneously. Therefore the past and the future are two sides of the same coin, which is ... eternity. "Eternity is not the opposite of time, but its aspect, its necessary dimension... without it time would disintegrate into disparate pieces" (*FE* 186) which we would not be able to identify as the past, present, and future. Eternity is what holds time together and what differentiates temporal profiles in one and the same gap. Of course one should keep it in mind that the interpretation of time as intrinsically linked to eternity makes sense only if we see time from inside of our lives, i.e. if we are doers, not observers of events in our own life. Then with an intention to develop the meaning of eternity deeper Michalski performs a cascade of metaphoric steps: eternity is the engine of my life... eternity is a hidden current of my life... eternity is "internal determination" of my life"...and concludes: "eternity makes time flow, that makes life go on without end" (p.188).

Eternity being linked with what is the core in life, the will to power, assumes some of its characteristics, it becomes a kind of self-propelling independent force which lies in the foundation of life and ontologically operates on the same level on which life is lived. But if life does not have any goal except its own advancing occurrence, any pre-designed agenda, any pro-claimed end, any book to read the destiny of people and at the same time the present does not have any ontology but is the illusive moment of a zipped double-dare act of passing and becoming, where can eternity obtain building material to sculpture life of? Eternity is forced to return to itself and repeat itself and it can do it only the way it is and it knows – eternally. The eternity as life and as the will to power has shaped as a wheel and can be comprehended not as an observable fact of life, i.e. as a conceptualized, clearly articulated, finite piece of knowledge, but only from within of life, only as a lived experience of life in living. So, authentic knowledge of life does not yield awareness of time, i.e. events of life entangled in a network of the present, past and future,

but those moments one feels like falling out of time like a child playing and forgetting time, when one is in love under the apple tree and forgets lunch break, when one hears Christ's anguish as present in the heart, as if killing history with a rapier of one's immediate participation in the event which took place 2,000 years ago, and opening one's heart to the eternal Kingdom of God and breath in God's eternal love.

Thus, according to Michalski, we as living and breathing creatures happen to be in two dimensions: temporal and a-temporal. The first dimension puts us in the context of our ancestors and days we live by – birth, maturing, and death. The second one goes beyond temporal differentiations and continuum of instances into eternity which is "a blink of eye" that "gathers together my entire past and opens my entire future" (p. 205), which is experienced by us in a profoundly different way than temporal realities because it presupposes the change of heart, i.e. the change of the Self, and which is identified by Nietzsche and Michalski as "the touch of God." Though there is a serious tension between Nietzsche's rejection of all Christian realities as transcendental mechanisms depriving man of his life, and his appeal to a religious image to express the deepest meaning of its own philosophizing, it does not present a problem for Michalski to develop further his religious metaphors. For Nietzsche inasmuch as Christianity presents a stabilizing factor in life he rejects it; on the other hand, inasmuch as Christ is an element of unavoidable Nihilism he is welcome as an opportunity for something new. But Michalski believes there could be even more radical reading of Nietzschean Christ based on experience of eternity as "being sick" with it or as "living present." Experiencing eternity one is open to any possibilities to become a real opportunity and therefore one is open for the future to come any moment; one is totally prepared for the future. The Messiah or Kingdom of God become internalized, the distant historical event becomes existentially present and Christ gains the whole set of different characteristics, basically Romantic. For a person who lives his life in Christ's presence Christ opens new existential opportunities because he is identified with a free spirit and a sailor whose very occupation might bring something new to his or her life.

I think that Michalski's reading of Nietzsche as a radicalized Romantic view of life within a broader context of existential Christian religiosity yielded the interpretation of time, temporal differentiations, and eternity, which fundamentally lacks meaning and

content of the present as necessarily related to the past and the future. In other words, the present which provides the condition for a typically Nietzschean attitude to life, i.e. a foundation for an actual display of life as it is happening at the moment which is not just a transitory connection point between the future and the past, but has a kind of substantial body of an event. The present, the reality of present has been sacrificed in the name of the ultimate reality. The latter is the most telling example of essence or absolute truth of the old metaphysics that Nietzsche was fighting against in all his philosophical writings.

I believe that the meaning and status of the present in Nietzsche's version of philosophy of life can be saved if one adopts treatment of time by two other philosophers: Henri Bergson and Edmund Husserl. Bergson insisted on intuition of the present as duration; he viewed the present as stretched in its temporal phases or the present as moving through its own phases of actuality and grasped in one act of perception. Husserl developed the phenomenological theory of time based on multi-layered awareness of temporal differentiations that combines conscious and automatic, sub-conscious, experiences of consciousness which participate in formation of the meaning of the present, past, and future. If for Nietzsche, according to Michalski, the very same moment of passing was that of becoming, not allowing the present to be stopped and lived through, then for Bergson and Husserl the present has gained weight. But if for Bergson it was an actual duration of an appearance grasped in perception; for Husserl it was constituted within the structure of the flow of consciousness as the meaning in various experiences of consciousness: sensation, perception, recollection, or fantasy. In other words, the past was never pushed completely out from the next present experience; it was an integral part of the present if it was a perception of duration, an event of transition of the present into the past, in Bergson. And in Husserl it was an aspect, nuance, a profile of the present that has left an actual perception, but was retained as just-passed within the present phase of perception or any other experience of consciousness. As a temporal phenomenon the present was fuzzy, it was never a clear-cut piece of time, or an ideal point on a line. Husserl called this partially past aspect of perception the primary memory which functioned spontaneously within the flow of consciousness and which made possible formation of the very sense of temporality. The present cannot be thought without

its immediate aspects of the past and the future given to consciousness together. Husserl compares this three-fold cell of temporality which functions in any experience of consciousness—perception as well as in sensation, fantasy or recollection—with a musical tone: RE can make sense AS RE only when is heard in the tacit company of DO and MI. An enormous effort—thrust into eternity or eruption of eternity into temporality—does not really save reality from running away. Time does.

In my opinion, the meaning of time and temporal differentiations is the weakest link in Nietzsche's philosophy that undermines validity of his philosophical discovery, i.e. the transcendental essences, truths, absolute forms do not exist. Michalski tried to reinforce Nietzsche's philosophy by letting eternity play the key role in his fundamentally dynamic world outlook. But the present is not omnipresent of eternity; the omnipresent does not have the past and future; it does not need them in order to be; its meaning does not presuppose it either tacitly or explicitly. However, if we value life and feel its presence in what we are, what we do, and what we feel and think we are living in the present; we do not momentarily pass through it into the space beyond time, i.e. in eternity. Not everything is renewed in renewal. Life also requires constants. Biological life presupposes a genetic code, physiological life—a cell, psychological life—the Self, religious life—a creed, doctrine, and institutions, cultural life—tradition and archetypes, political life—law and institutions. All these elements secure the present in as much as it presents itself in presenting. Life needs to be protected with the thick and dense present. Otherwise we have to appeal to the highest authority of eternity to keep life as contained and structured even in a negative, disappearing way—in flames. Time linked with eternity consumes life, not sustains it. Omni-presence of eternity implies omni-absence.

We use the term "life" in a very complex way, mostly metaphorically. There are many forms of life: biological, physiological, psychological, cultural, religious, political, etc. They all are layered in the way humans are and they all are zipped, pressed, and tangled together. To understand how all these forms of life sustain themselves one has to determine types of time each of them implies. Eternity might be the same, but time is very different because the present as capable of carrying a structured reality is different. For example biological time cannot go back—we live by changing from the being young to being old. But cultural time travels back easily: practically all forms

of Chinese cultural awareness presuppose the Golden Age, the perfect human condition which history is striving for, in the past. Political time might start counting time a-new at the revolutionary moments discharging the previous events as having no time, i.e. not really existing. Religious time or metaphysical time can have the eternity element functional since it is given intuitively, in the believer's immediate experience of faith or philosopher's contemplation of ideas.

The real novelty of Michalski's book is his description of the experience of eternity, the different ways a person sees or hears, or senses in some other way, internalizes, lives through and deals with eternity. When people talk about eternity they do not operate with the definition of eternity; they are aware of what it is; they have a kind of intuitive knowledge of it. For Michalski as for a classic type metaphysician, not Post-Modern philosopher, eternity is "the engine" of life, it holds life up and running, it pools the moment out of itself—in passing, and makes it possible for the next moment to take place—in becoming.

And yet, if eternity is the inner experience of a believer or philosopher it must take place in time, it should be an event, it is constituted as something finite and is indistinguishable from any other human experience. In other type of experiences times goes, passes by, flows, etc, not because of the efforts of eternity, but because of what is going on in the present. The present, by generating itself, generates the future and the past. That is why it becomes important to look into different characteristics of time: duration, succession, directedness, irreversibility, density, speed. If eternity is not overbalanced with the finite structures, it consumes life and eventually destroys it in its flame of sameness. To articulate life-sustaining forms of time, not life-consuming forms of eternity is what would make justice to both temporal and eternal elements of the phenomenon of life. Krzysztof Michalski came up with a very original romantic existential religious interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy, the flaming eternity, in which he shed the light onto his most obscure concepts such as total nihilism, will to power, overman, and eternal return. But this interpretation also by refraining from capturing this flaming eternity into finite temporal structures in which life as lived in various forms and shapes takes place might easily turn into the fire that burns the very reality it tries to represent.