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How Does ‘the New’ Come into the World? Nietzsche’s “Magic of the Extreme”

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Abstract

Nietzsche developed a special strategy for his philosophical reorientation, the “magic of the extreme,” as he calls it. Werner Stegmaier at first gives an overview of the most important problems Nietzsche faced and the extreme solutions he offered. Then, Stegmaier shows how, according to Nietzsche, especially Socrates, who stands for the beginning of European enlightenment, made use of the “magic” of extreme irritation and fascination in order to pave the way for this enlightenment.

Introduction

How do philosophers bring something new into the world? How are philosophical innovations successful? This question itself is new. For as long as philosophers were simply expected to enlighten the major connections of the world and human life within, there was supposed to be nothing new, but only something truer and clearer. Now, however – and already for quite some time – truth and clarity have themselves become problematic. Today’s philosophers, at least most of them, know that we cannot “have” the truth, as Nietzsche said, at least if truth means that our

ideas correspond to the things: of the things, too, we can only ever have our ideas, and today's philosophers too know that even the most precise clarification of the terms of our language will not change this because language does not represent the things but it interprets them in its own way. For millennia, philosophers have again and again articulated something new; and today we are in fact constantly awaiting something new, even in philosophy and now in shorter and shorter intervals. If something is older than 10 years, then we doubt if it can still be true and clear. Eternal truths and clarities, which philosophy has for so long been proud of, are no longer believed in today.

That something new comes, at all, into the world seems evident: the world obviously changes all the time. Every period believes that it perceives the world to change ever-more rapidly, and today we do so – with quite some right – even more. But it seems that it has never been easy for philosophers to perceive these changes and to also be perceived on its part. In any case, many philosophers, even the most famous ones, had obvious difficulties to be heard or, as it were, to assert themselves. For Kant's *Critique of Pure Judgment*, it took a whole decade and a new, extensively revised edition to receive considerable attention; the breakthrough of Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation* took 25 years and a supplementary volume; outside of Denmark, Kierkegaard's work was, for over 50 years, considered exotic up until existential philosophy spread widely; Nietzsche, whose world-wide fame set in during his lifetime, no longer witnessed it with a clear mind. He had to, as is well known, largely fund the print of his books himself. Marx needed Lenin to transform his will to a new praxis of philosophy into a social revolution. Perhaps there are already some philosophies that face the current change in the world, but they have not yet reached us. And perhaps there are even insightful philosophies that will never reach us. Young people, who live now in the media world, confidently confess that they stopped reading books altogether. But so far, philosophies have, in the West, indeed come into the world in the form of books.

After Nietzsche's death, it took 30 years to be discovered as a big philosopher. He spoke about the most significant changes of his time, in both the world and philosophy; he *wanted* 'the new,' innovation, or, in his own language, the transvaluation of all values; with this he has irritated and fascinated up to the present day. But he no longer relied on the traditional standards of truth and clarity, which seemed to him, as a critical philosopher, naïve. He instead focused on problems: the problems that arise from the vast changes in the word and in philosophy. But these problems do not just come up. At first, one has to see them, recognize them in their depth, and assess their significance. For Nietzsche this is the first task of the philosopher: going with the

times in a philosophical way. The second task is to have the courage to confront such problems; to endure them; to remain alone with them for a long time, which means: to not be understood by anyone for a long time; in sum: to deal with them for years and decades without breaking down. In his letters Nietzsche has again and again conveyed how difficult this is – in letters to close friends, who on their part could not support him in his “need,” as he called it. The third challenge, then, is to communicate these problems to the public – and Nietzsche tried to achieve this with what he called the “magic of the extreme.” It proved powerful in breadth and intensity. But it also created a strong backlash against his philosophy, which now itself appears extreme and therefore hardly plausible.

I explore his magic of the extreme in three steps. I start with the problems Nietzsche faces; then I address the extreme nature of his proposed solutions of these problems; at last I deal with the magic of the extreme, as Nietzsche himself demonstrates it particularly in the case of Socrates, who seems to have prevented precisely this magic for millennia by means of his dialogic enlightenment.

I. Nietzsche's Problems

I address only some of the most important problems Nietzsche faces, in chronological order. I connect them with Nietzsche's published works and present ten of them:

1. In the *Birth of Tragedy*, he raises the problem of the decay of European culture – “Europe”, for him, not a political, geographical, or economic entity, but the cultural and philosophical heiress of Judeo-Christian and Greek thinking.
2. In *Human, All-Too Human*, he sees the problem of global governance, ever since cultures have increasingly mixed and call for an economical management of the ecumenical world (HH I 23-25).
3. In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche assesses the problem of the self-deception of European morals, which, according to him, precludes Europe and the world from further developments: since the traditional moral philosophers only knew the “morality of their surroundings, their class, their church, their *Zeitgeist*, their climate and region” and since “they were poorly informed (and not particularly eager to learn more) about peoples, ages, and histories, they completely missed out on the genuine problems involved in morality, problems that only emerge from a comparison of *many* moralities. As strange as it may sound, the problem of morality itself has been *missing* from every ‘science of morals’ so far: there was no suspicion that there is, at all, something problematic about it” (transl. by Judith Norman, modified).

4. In the *Gay Science*, Nietzsche speaks about the problem of nihilism, which European morals are based on and which they continue to amplify: the highest values of God, truth, and reason have, according to Nietzsche, clearly devalued themselves as well as everything that depends on them; looking back at this process, Nietzsche notes down to himself: this is “the genuine *tragic problem* of our modern world and, as the hidden need, the origin or interpretation of all its needs [...]. *This problem became conscious in me*” (N 1886/87, 7[8], KSA 12.291).

5. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, these problems give rise to the problem of the will to truth, after one knows that one cannot have the truth: Nietzsche is amazed that he is the very “first to ever see it, fix our gaze on it, *risk it.*” But he knows: there is a great risk just to name this problem, “and perhaps no risk has ever been greater” (BGE 1).

6. In his later works, Nietzsche deals with the problem of the rank order of individuals in a time period of unstoppable democratization: since not everyone has sufficient “stature and power of spirituality (*Geistigkeit*)” to face the “highest problems”, not everyone has the same “right” to speak about them (BGE 213). In the fifth book of the *Gay Science*, which was written some years after the first four, Nietzsche adds that “it makes the most telling difference whether a thinker has a personal relationship to his problems and finds in them his destiny, his need, and his best happiness, or an ‘impersonal’ relationship, meaning he is only able to touch and grasp them with the antennae of cold, curious thought. In the latter case nothing will come of it, that much can be promised; for even if great problems should let themselves be *grasped* by them, they would not allow frogs and weaklings to *hold them tight*” (GS 345; see also GS 373).

Nietzsche declared that the “problem of rank order” in the spiritual sense is *his* problem; nobody else dared to see or articulate it (HH I Preface 7).

7. In his latest works, Nietzsche emphasizes the problem of being-able-to-say-yes to everything that happens, against moral prejudices, which manifest themselves in *ressentiments*: the “problem” of the “freedom from *ressentiment*” not only in what is evil but also in what is good. Without this freedom, unbiased philosophizing is, for Nietzsche, impossible (EH, Wise 6). Being able to unbiasedly say yes is what he also calls “amor fati,” and he discovers this ability, after all, especially in his “type of Jesus” or his “psychology of the redeemer” (AC 28): this Jesus has found, according to Nietzsche, “a being awash in symbols and ungraspables” without dogmas or resistance against reality (AC 27-31; transl. by Judith Norman, modified).

8. The problem of “war”: Nietzsche is regarded as an advocate of war; but what he affirms is unsparing competition – also, and especially, in philosophy. Here, he was unable to leave things as they are. Here, he “*look[s]* for resistance: the *aggressive pathos* is an essential component of

strength in the same way as lingering feelings of revenge are an essential component of weakness. [...] One way of *measuring* the strength of an attacker is by looking at the sort of opponents he needs; if something is growing it looks for more powerful adversaries – or problems: since a warlike philosopher will also challenge problems to single combat.” In doing so, Nietzsche dares compromising himself: “I have never taken a step in public that did not compromise me: that is *my* criterion of acting right” (EH, Wise 7).

9. The problem of the formation of philosophy: if there are *not* the same problems and solutions for everyone and if the fight against deeply ingrained *ressentiments* is possible only with aggressive pathos, “communication” is the “new problem”. Then, it is not a question of truth, but of “truthfulness” (N 1884, 26[407], KSA 11.259). Idealistic philosophies and the mechanistic natural sciences of that time claimed that they can explain the world in its entirety; but they in fact “strip it of its *ambiguous character*” (GS 373) in order to calm themselves with a truth of systematic and predictable surfaces of the world, which prevent one to hear the polyphonic and non-schematizable “music of life” (GS 372).

10. In all this, Nietzsche faces the problem of one’s diet not only with respect to keeping to healthy nutrition but also to managing one’s everyday life under the conditions of nihilism. You think differently depending on what you eat and drink. Nietzsche – this is often overlooked – paid great attention to this issue in his works and letters. But he was able to solve this problem only at certain times.

II. Nietzsche’s Extreme Solutions to the Problems

Nietzsche does not spell out these problems, but he only touches on them and, nevertheless, moves right away into the depth: “I approach deep problems such as I do cold baths: fast in, fast out. That this is no way to get to the depths, to get deep *enough*, is the superstition of those who fear water, the enemies of cold water; they speak without experience. [...] At least there are truths that are especially shy and ticklish and can’t be caught except suddenly – that one must *surprise* or leave alone.” And his “brevity has yet another value: given the questions that occupy me, I must say many things briefly so that they will be heard even more briefly” (GS 381). For, given the rank order of spirits, not everyone is capable of understanding everything: some are better spared from many problems and especially from their abysmal depths.

Yet, this was the reason that Nietzsche himself had the problem of getting heard at all and of being understood. This continued up until the final days of his mental clarity. We may suppose

that his growing unsettlement about not being heard and understood drove him into the extreme, to the exaggeration of facts, polemic escalations, aggressive formulations, and unreserved self-staging – all of which he has often been criticized for. But this is not everything one can say.

Let us briefly go through the solutions he proposes for his problems:

1. The decay of European culture: he believed, initially inspired by Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, that he could reverse the alleged process of decay into an enhancement of culture – all the way to a “higher-breeding of humanity” (EH, BT 4).
2. For the problem of global governance, he deems necessary the “breeding” of a “caste” of human beings that will in the future be capable of governing the world. He explicitly includes the Jewish people in this task (BGE 251). This first steps, however, must be, for him, overcoming nationalism and unifying Europe; for Nietzsche, Europe is, for the start, best prepared for the task to manage the world especially – because Europe has so far been most capable of a productive self-critique. In his time, this was an extreme position. And Nietzsche adds the problem of a “new slavery”: however, with this aggressive concept he does not opt for a new society of slaveholders; instead, he argues that the majority of people who will not be capable of participating in the complex and creative decisions on the new government of the world will need to submit to hard work to serve such decisions. Into these people, he includes the majority of scholars, too.
3. Hence, with regard to the problem of morals, he uses the distinction between “master morality” and “slave morality” – not in the sense of one dominating the other, but in the sense of a greater responsibility of one over the other, which also includes an overview of new possibilities of mankind’s development and the creation of new values (BGE 260).
4. The problem of nihilism, which Nietzsche very cautiously addresses in his published works, he all the more radicalizes it in his notes, which he keeps for himself: he expects of nihilism, once it spreads to the masses, a “will to destruction” and “self-destruction,” a “will to nothingness,” which eventually will bring the disappointed to “force” those in power to become their “hangmen” (N 1887, 5[71], KSA 12.215f.). This indeed had a prognostic force especially in Germany. On the other hand, Nietzsche notes down to himself, double underlined: “*nihilism is a normal state*” (N 1887, 9[35], KSA 12.350). It must therefore be possible to permanently and sensibly live in this extreme condition – if one is capable, over the course of the “transvaluation of all values” (GM III 27), of creating or accepting new values. It seems that after World War II this likewise happened in Germany.
5. To the problem of truth, Nietzsche again reacts in an extreme way: he contrasts the instilled

will to truth with the alternative of a vital will to untruth, to deceiving others, and to self-deception: “Granted, we will truth: *why not untruth instead?* And uncertainty? Even ignorance?” (BGE 1) For life requires those alternatives too; one must “acknowledge untruth as a condition of life”; and among these vital untruths may be logic, metaphysics, and morality (BGE 4).

6. The problem of rank order entails for the “genuine philosophers” that they have to go beyond the “philosophical laborer on the noble model of Kant and Hegel” and become “*commanders and legislators*” who “reach for the future with a creative hand” and provide for this future a plausible orientation (BGE 211).

7. Responding with *amor fati* to the problem of being-able-to-say-yes without ressentiment is in itself already an extreme and paradoxical concept: one would have to, just as Nietzsche’s type of Jesus (not the historical Jesus, of whom we hardly know anything), in an “evangelical practice,” love everything as it is, without reservation, and become blissful in this way (AC 29, 33). But “everything” then also includes – raging *ressentiments*.

8. Nietzsche’s solution to the problem of war, as he poses it, as the necessity of an aggressive philosophizing especially where the opponent is strong, is the will to the extreme itself – particularly if one considers it comes from a person usually calm, insightful, and gentle.

9. The problem of a kind of philosophizing that, in a most alarming situation of humankind, is not yet settled by at least having the time to write learned treatises; Nietzsche solves this problem with an unheard of plurality of forms of philosophical writing: from the pathos-laden treatise (*The Birth of Tragedy*) via the engaged essay (*Untimely Meditations*), the forceful *Sentenz* (i.e. one-sentence aphorisms), the multiperspectival aphorism book (*Human, All Too Human* and the like), the aggressive polemic (*The Genealogy of Morality*, *The Antichrist*), and insolent verses, all the way to the pensive song (*Dionysus-Dithyrambs*), always speaking in an unsettling variety and oftentimes in deliberate riddles. For himself, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* becomes his crucial work, being simultaneously an epic, dramatic, dialogic, and songlike poem of a semi-historical, semi-mythical philosopher, who lives in caves and has a sovereign command of the knowledge of life and who walks among human beings only once per decade to present them doctrines, such as of the overman, the will to power, and the eternal recurrence of the same – which nobody sufficiently understands. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a textual extreme par excellence. To this day, nobody can say that he or she has understood it. Nietzsche sees in it a piece of music, of the “music of life.”

10. The problem of one’s diet is, for Nietzsche, eventually pivotal for a good and – in his sense – healthy philosophizing. A good “dietetic” is “to make it as easy as possible for the spirit to run

long distances, to fly to great heights, above all again and again to fly away” (HH II, Preface 5); a bad one may arrest one; thus, philosophy is “at bottom the instinct for a personal diet” (D 553).

III. The Magic of the Extreme: Nietzsche and Socrates

Nietzsche’s extreme solutions for extreme problems, formulated in extreme ways, immediately startle and draw attention by anyone, especially if they pertain to the striving for truth, reason, and morals: “The magic [*Zauber*] that fights for us, the eye of Venus that bewitches and blinds our opponents, that is the *magic of the extreme* [*Magie des Extrems*], the seduction that carries out all that is most extreme [*alles Äußerste*]: we immoralists – we are the most extreme [*die Äußersten*] – – –” (N 1887, 10[94], KSA 12.510). The philosophical tradition, however, is based on the striving for truth, on reason and morals, as Socrates introduced them. And this is precisely where Nietzsche dares the utmost: in his late work *Twilight of the Idols*, which is at once a book of *Sentenzen* and aphorisms as well as a polemic, Nietzsche again deals with the “Problem of Socrates” in an entire section, after he had wrestled with him throughout his whole oeuvre. He presents Socrates as “an extreme case” (TI, The Problem of Socrates 9) for how that which is new comes into philosophy.

Nietzsche had outlined his basic idea already in *Daybreak*, No. 544: “He who does not hear the continual rejoicing which resounds through every speech and counter-speech of a Platonic dialogue, the rejoicing over the new invention of *rational* thinking, what does he understand of Plato, of the philosophy of antiquity? In those days, souls were filled with drunkenness at the rigorous and sober game of concept, generalization, refutation, limitation – with that drunkenness which the great ancient rigorous and sober contrapuntal composers perhaps also knew. In those days there still lingered on the palate of the Greeks that other, more ancient and formerly all-powerful taste: and the new taste presented so magical [*zauberhaft*] a contrast to this that they sang and stammered of dialectics, the ‘divine art,’ as though in a delirium of love” (transl. by R.J. Hollingdale).

In TI, Nietzsche asks how this innovation led to success and how Socrates was able to get through to the Athenians. For “Socrates was descended from the lowest segment of society: Socrates was plebeian. We know, we can still see how ugly he was. But ugliness, an objection in itself, was almost a refutation for the Greeks” (TI, PS 3). The Greeks suspected that there is nothing good behind this; and Socrates regarded himself – at least this is what Plato has him say at the beginning of his dialogue *Phaedrus* – as a monster: here he compares himself with the

most bizarre Greek mythic figures and calls himself *atopóotatos* – what is today best translated as “completely off.” And now Socrates shows up with his dialectics, a sophistic art, which he in turn drives into its most extreme form and with which he bluntly exposes not only the other sophists, but also the noblest Athenians. His dialectics must have, according to Nietzsche, made people all the more suspicious (TI, PS 6). But Socrates did not refrain from pursuing it further. Could it have been, Nietzsche continues, a kind of “last resort” (TI, PS, 6), a “plebeian *ressentiment*” against the nobility, that drove Socrates? In any case, he was successful: by “fascinating” the nobles for it (TI, PS 7). Nietzsche uses the word “fascinate” six times; he, as it were, hammers it into the ears of his readers. He explains Socrates’ fascinating effect on the noble and especially young Athenians, who were fully committed to compete, win, and distinguish themselves before others, by arguing that with this dialectics even a plebeian and ugly man could prevail and distinguish himself: by using the philosophical dialogue as a new form of competition, entailing the ironic and, for the Greeks, again humiliating consequence that he pretended to seek the truth in his dialogues through purely rational questions and objections but never found it; and whenever it appeared as though he found it, he would again undermine it with new objections.

To the young men, this had – as Plato, in the *Symposium*, has it described by the most noble and beautiful of them all, Alcibiades – almost erotic effects. And even in this eroticism, Socrates acted again ironically: he seduced the young men so that they would seduce him; but he would not let them seduce him, not even Alcibiades. In a different context, Nietzsche comments on it like this: Plato “says, with an innocence that only a Greek could have (and not a ‘Christian’), that there could never have been a Platonic philosophy without such beautiful young men in Athens: the sight of them is what first puts the philosopher’s soul in an erotic rapture and won’t let it rest until it has sunk the seed of all high things into such beautiful soil!” (TI, Skirmishes 23) It is surely an “extreme case” that such an “awe-inspiring ugliness” was able to induce so much fascination (TI, PS 9). Socrates, according to Nietzsche, was able to control others with his dialectics because he understood to control his erotic drives, which he openly admitted that he had them. He became the model for finding rescue from the “anarchy” of the “instincts” (*ibid.*) – finding rescue through dialectical reason: “The fanaticism with which all of Greek thought threw itself on rationality shows that there was a crisis: people were in danger, they had only one option: be destroyed or – be *absurdly rational...*” (TI, PS 10).

Socrates was able, as Nietzsche suspects already in *Beyond Good and Evil* (No. 191), to make, in this way, reason, which was supposed to control the instincts, into an instinct itself and

thus firmly anchor it in life. This led, for Nietzsche, to the “most bizarre of all equations”: that of “reason = virtue = happiness” (TI, PS 4), which has for millennia dominated the main current of European philosophy.

Nietzsche underlays this thought with his theory of decadence and thus pushes his interpretation of Socrates even further to the extreme. In Nietzsche’s late writings, decadence oftentimes stands for nihilism: Socrates, according to him, brought nihilism into philosophy and the world, i.e. the denial of vital values, the values worth living for, for the sake of imagined values that were meant to suppress the former and which, for Nietzsche, were strongly amplified in Christianity. This nihilism, which conceals the “normal state” of nihilism, now collapses, with Nietzsche. This is how the line of argument comes full circle.

As a result, ‘the new’ comes, for Nietzsche, into the world not by means of logical reasons, but through the fascination that the greatly irritating Socrates exercises with them. The magic of the extreme is here the interplay of fascination and irritation. In Nietzsche’s time, the concept of irritation still had a pathological and that of fascination still a demonic connotation; today, both these meanings have attenuated and we can use the terms more freely, without the background of a theory of decadence. He or she who ‘fascinates’ others, ‘arrests’ and ‘captivates’ not only their attention but also ‘ties’ them to him or her so that they involuntarily follow him or her even on unknown and dangerous paths; he or she exercises a kind of power questionable for any enlightener. Socrates, however – and this is the clou – precisely fascinates by means of his enlightenment. Fascination, if it springs from a person’s charisma, which may greatly vary but which cannot be sufficiently explained, is in Nietzsche’s language not a *will* to power, which itself strives to mastering, but a *power without will*, just in the sense as Nietzsche tries to prove it in the case of his type of Jesus; it is thus a kind of power one can hardly resist. Here, we are very close to religion; and Nietzsche himself was all the more afraid that, with the fascination he expected for his own writings and which soon set in, he would be conceived of as the founder of a religion (EH, Destiny 1).

Conclusion

Nietzsche himself kept his distance from being fascinated. After he freed himself from his fascination for Richard Wagner, he was able to closely observe what fascination is, including the case of Socrates, who was able to control not only dialectics but also, with his entire existence, the “magic of the extreme.” However, if it is plausible that Socrates, by means of his extreme

irritation and fascination, paved the way for Western reason in such a way that people have without question believed in it for a long time, then one must further ask if something similar is also always the case for grand reorientations in philosophy as such – precisely Nietzsche himself would be an example for this. In fact, all philosophy more or less works with the magic of extremes: simply because philosophy *as philosophy* draws tremendously far-reaching conclusions; concepts – such as reason – are expanded to the extreme and equally ascribed to everyone; philosophy expects purity – such as pure reason – in a world where nothing is pure; it seeks to ground norms and values in this purity so that they are valid everywhere. This becomes plausible, one may conjecture, only by means of the magic of extremes – and someday seemingly self-evident.

But extremes – this could be the simple reason for their use – help to quickly orient oneself, which is crucial in the case of new orientations: they create conspicuous footholds and strong contrasts, which one can hold onto for a certain time. They may both startle and provoke one to form one's own more considerate opinion, and this also entails: to observe extremizations themselves and to assess them in a way as we did in this article. I think this is Nietzsche's aim: with his extreme problems and the solutions he proposes, he creates leeways for his readers so that they can make their own judgments.

However, it is clear that extremes alone do not already exercise a magic; in the case of fanatics, they appear repelling, in that of satirists and caricaturists comical. The insights and claims that one pushes to the philosophical extreme must themselves already be plausible – just as is the case with the problems that Nietzsche saw himself confronted with. The extreme lives on the plausibility of the non-extreme. But eventually, as we have tried to show in the last decades, all of Nietzsche's 'extremes' can be interpreted in a plausible way, even the more radical ones as he lastly presented them in the final chapter of his *Ecce Homo*, "Why I am a Destiny." With the magic of extremes, one of course deceives the world, as Nietzsche has his Zarathustra announce openly: "the poets lie too much. – But Zarathustra too is a poet" (ZA II, Poets). But without the magic of extremes, when using sober and calm plausibilities, one risks failing to come through, at least beyond academic circles.