

**A clarification of Nietzsche's position on
the death of God and truth and a defence of
his relevance for political theory**

Jamie Roberts

**School of Social Sciences and International
Relations**

University of New South Wales

**A clarification of Nietzsche's position on the death of God and truth and
a defence of his relevance for political theory**

Abstract

This paper argues that several of the interpretations of Nietzsche's ideas about the death of God and truth need to be reconsidered. Specifically, there is a tendency amongst some critics to place too much weight on Nietzsche's claim that God is dead, and upon the idea that there are no absolute truths, and to insufficiently acknowledge that the practical value of such claims and ideas is greatly circumscribed by several other important Nietzschean ideas. The central argument of this paper is that while Nietzsche often makes the point that God is dead, he also argues that God's shadow remains and will likely be with us for some time yet. With respect to truth, the similar point will be made that while Nietzsche argues that there are no absolute truths, he also implies that many of us, if not all of us, are still bound to general truths. These arguments will lead to a refutation of Strong's claim that '[t]here can ... be no appropriation of Nietzsche for political theory' (1997, 142).

The purpose of this paper is to critique some recent interpretations of Nietzsche's philosophy that relate to his ideas about the death of God and truth. In order to do this it will first discuss Nietzsche's own at times inconsistent position on these issues. The central argument of this paper is that although Nietzsche argues that God is dead, he also makes the point that his death has not brought any liberation – nor any disaster – because humanity continues to be bound to a centre, albeit a secular one. And with respect to truth, although Nietzsche may claim that there are no absolute truths, it can be demonstrated that for him we nonetheless continue to be bound to certain truths. My concern with the interpretations that will be discussed is that they do not sufficiently take into account the second part of each of these propositions; that is, they overlook humanity's continued

attachment to a secular centre and to certain truths. This paper culminates with a discussion of Strong's claim that '[t]here can ... be no appropriation of Nietzsche for political theory' (1997, 142); a claim made in the context of Nietzsche's attacks on truth. I will argue that while Strong's claim is correct in this context, in the context of Nietzsche's remarks about our enduring secular faith it can be demonstrated that Nietzsche has great relevance for political theory.

Nietzsche's position on the death of God is not consistent. It is possible, in fact, to locate his numerous remarks about God's death on a continuum bounded by two opposing poles. At one pole is the famous and simple remark that God is dead. This remark, especially when it is associated with a positive affect, such as in the *The Gay Science* when 'the news that "the old god is dead"' causes philosophical hearts to overflow 'with gratitude, amazement, premonitions, expectations' (1974, 280), seems to indicate that many humans have now been freed from the fetters of faith.

Next in the series is the slightly more moderate idea, voiced in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, that:

Since Copernicus man seems to have stumbled onto an inclined plane
- he is now rolling faster and faster away from the center - whither?
into nothingness? into the "*penetrating* feeling of his nothingness?"
(1998, 112)

This idea is more moderate because the guillotine of death is replaced by an inclined plane. Rather than God's being dead, we have the sense of humanity inexorably rolling farther and farther away from God.

More moderate still is the treatment of the death of God in 'The madman' aphorism in book three of *The Gay Science*. This aphorism begins with an echo of Nietzsche's remarks about the inclined plane, when the troubled madman asks a Godless crowd: "What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns?" (1974, 181). However, unlike the madman, the crowd is not concerned about God's being dead. This causes the madman to say: "This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars - *and yet they have done it themselves*" (182). This aphorism is more moderate than Nietzsche's remarks in the previous quotation because it makes the point that even if we are on an inclined plane and are moving away from the centre it will be an eternity before we begin to feel the effects of this distancing (the madman, of course, may be an exception to this rule, and perhaps we could locate him closer to the pole already discussed).

In the Aphorism 'New struggles' in *The Gay Science* Nietzsche adopts a similar position when he writes:

After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave - a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. - And we - we still have to vanquish his shadow, too. (1974, 167)

God may be dead, but his shadow remains, and will likely be with us for thousands of years.

This brings us to the midpoint in the series of Nietzsche's statements

about the death of God. All the previous quotations have described a movement away from a centre, albeit at different rates. The following quotations generally imply that no movement is occurring in terms of our position with respect to the centre. And indeed, it could even be argued that some make the point that the death of God has facilitated a movement towards the centre.

First, in *Beyond Good and Evil* we read:

Indeed, with the help of a religion which indulged and flattered the most sublime herd-animal desires, we have reached the point where we find even in political and social institutions an ever more visible expression of this morality: the *democratic* movement is the heir of the Christian movement. (1989, 116)

The important point here is that, borrowing Salaquarda's words, following the death of God people 'retain the underlying morality of which Christianity is but one historical expression' (1997, 102). In other words, God may be dead, but the moral infrastructure which he presided over remains. We frequently encounter similar ideas in Nietzsche's *oeuvre*. For example, discussing the state in *Zarathustra* Nietzsche writes:

I call it the state where everyone, good and bad, is a poison drinker:
the state where everyone, good and bad, loses himself: the state
where universal slow suicide is called - life. (1969, 77)

The implication here is that within the state both the good and the bad are dependent upon and simultaneously suffer from morality. Also worthy of attention is Nietzsche's remark in *The Will to Power*:

Now suppose that belief in God has vanished: the question presents itself anew: "who speaks?" - My answer, taken not from metaphysics but from animal physiology: *the herd instinct speaks*. It wants to be master: hence its "thou shalt!" - it will allow value to the individual only from the point of view of the whole, for the sake of the whole, it hates those who detach themselves - it turns the hatred of all individuals against them. (1968, 157)

Again, God may have vanished, but his infrastructure remains. This quotation is also valuable because it encourages us to think about the familiar, although important question of what counts as being detached from the infrastructure of morality.

Finally, in a somewhat obscure note from *The Will to Power* we catch a glimpse of the new secular God:

The former means for obtaining homogeneous, enduring characters for long generations: unalienable landed property, honoring the old (origin of the belief in gods and heroes as ancestors).

Now the breaking up of landed property belongs to the opposite tendency: newspapers (in place of daily prayers), railway, telegraph. Centralization of a tremendous number of different interests

in a single soul, which for that reason must be very strong and protean. (1968, 44)

Here Nietzsche makes the point that our modern secular world is far from faithless. Not only does he argue that newspapers replace daily prayers, he alludes to a centre - a 'single soul' that is not only 'very strong', but most importantly: 'protean'. This idea of a protean centre is extremely important as it enables us to think that a centre can exist without dogma. This point is related both to the idea that in the state both *the good* and *the bad* are poison drinkers, and to the question of what counts as detachment from the herd. Specifically, we could suggest that it is possible for individuals with ostensibly conflicting interests and beliefs to be bound to the same (now secular) centre. This point is of course extremely important for political theory.

I will now discuss Nietzsche's position on truth. As we will see, this discussion will quickly return us, via the will to power, to the question of the status of God (or more generally, *faith*) and morality in Nietzsche's thinking.

Although Nietzsche uses the word 'truth' in several different ways in his *oeuvre*, we can nonetheless identify a dominant meaning. As Hollingdale puts it in his introduction to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: 'truth is will to power' (1969, 26). This is confirmed by Nietzsche in *The Will to Power* when he explains what is meant by both terms:

"Truth" is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered - but something that must be created and that gives a name to a process, or rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no

end - introducing truth, as a *processus in infinitum*, an active
determining - not a becoming conscious of something that is in itself
firm and determined. It is a word for the "will to power." (1968, 298)

Here 'truth' and the 'will to power' both refer to a process of continual overcoming, a central theme in Nietzsche's writing. We encounter this theme again in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in the chapter 'Of Self-Overcoming' when life personified says: "Whatever I create and however much I love it - soon I have to oppose it and my love: thus will my will have it" (1969, 138). Clearly for Nietzsche there are no absolute or enduring truths. Truth is fleeting. And even that which we create, which may attain the status of truth, must in time be destroyed.

But why is this the case? What is it that renders truth untruthful? This question engages with the tensions that are at the heart of Nietzsche's thinking.

I would argue that if truth can continually be rendered untruthful then there must be some element that is responsible for this rendering; some element against which the will to power constantly battles. And indeed, such an element at times exists explicitly in Nietzsche's thinking, although it is important to emphasise that its status is not clear. Specifically, on the one hand it sometimes appears that Nietzsche is a dialectician; that he sees life as being a constant negotiation between the creative will and the element which renders obsolete that which has been created. However, on the other hand, this dialectic is often replaced by a hierarchy in which the strong will in fact stands above this element in such a way that it is unaffected by it; such that this element is nothing more than an instance of weak will. We therefore encounter in Nietzsche's writing a tension between what we could call his

dialecticality and his *unidimensionality*.

A brief discussion of Nietzsche's unidimensionality is necessary before we return to the problem of truth. As anyone who is familiar with Nietzsche's writing knows, it is faith itself – whether it be invested in a sacred or secular object - that the strong willed stand above. As we read in the fifth book of *The Gay Science*:

How much one needs a *faith* in order to flourish, how much that is “firm” and that one does not wish to be shaken because one *clings* to it, that is a measure of the degree of one's strength (or, to put the point more clearly, of one's weakness). (1974, 287)

For unidimensional Nietzsche there is a simple inverse relationship between strength and faith: the stronger one is, the less faith one has and vice versa. We should also note that as has already been intimated, in much of Nietzsche's writing faith is synonymous with morality. Therefore we can also say that for unidimensional Nietzsche the strong have little to do with morality. We see this point clearly made at the conclusion of the second book of *The Gay Science*:

We should be *able* also to stand *above* morality - and not only to *stand* with the anxious stiffness of a man who is afraid of slipping and falling any moment, but also to *float* above it and *play*. (1974, 164)

Finally, that Nietzsche's thinking is at least at times unidimensional - in other

words, that faith (or morality) can be wholly expressed in terms of the will to power - is born out in such statements by Nietzsche as: 'A living thing seeks above all to *discharge* its strength - life itself is *will to power*' (1989, 21), and his ecstatic pronouncement in the last note of *The Will to Power* that: '*This world is the will to power - and nothing besides!* And you yourselves are also this will to power - and nothing besides!' (1968, 550).

It is no easy matter deciding whether we should privilege dialectical or unidimensional Nietzsche, and importantly, the distinction between the two is not always clear. While I tend to side with the former, defending this position is beyond the scope of this paper. Fortunately, such a defence is not necessary; all that is necessary is that I demonstrate that a dialectical Nietzsche exists who should be taken seriously. With this caveat out of the way, let us return to the problem of truth.

We now ought to ask: why is it that truth is continually rendered untruthful; that is, why is it that, for dialectical Nietzsche, the truth - or the will to power - never triumphs once and for all? The answer to this question lies in the nature of our relationship to the element which renders truth untruthful - what, in the light of the above discussions, can be referred to as faith/morality. In the following quotation from *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche (dialectical Nietzsche) clearly indicates the consequences of remaining faithful to will-to-power-truth:

Something might be true while being harmful and dangerous in the highest degree. Indeed, it might be a basic characteristic of existence that those who would know it completely would perish, in which case the strength of a spirit should be measured according to how much of the "truth" one could still barely endure - or to put it more clearly, to what degree one would *require* it to be thinned down, shrouded,

sweetened, blunted, falsified. (1989, 49)

Here we see a clear relationship between truth, the strength of one's will (spirit) and suffering - although it is important to note that here the truth is not seamlessly synonymous with the will to power; rather, it is a limit which the strongest wills approach. For Nietzsche, the point at which one knows the truth is an impossible state: at the point where the truth is known one perishes. Yet the truth nonetheless makes itself felt, and the stronger can be distinguished from the weaker by how much of it they can endure. It is important to note that this point is closely related to Nietzsche's previously discussed claim that the stronger can be distinguished from the weaker by how much they can resist faith. The idea that the strongest are the best pursuers of truth (will-to-power-truth) and are also the best at resisting faith/morality is stated succinctly in the following quotation from *The Gay Science*: 'Continually, precisely the most select spirits bristle at this universal binding force - the explorers of *truth* above all' (1974, 130-1)). Finally, considering these ideas in the light of the above remarks about self-overcoming, we could argue that for dialectical Nietzsche at least, the strong willed continually experience an oscillation between the truth as will to power and the faith/morality element which renders the former untruthful. In other words, for the strong, the truth is continually rendered untruthful by their faith/morality, however, they nonetheless continue to pursue the truth despite their faith/morality (that is, despite the suffering caused by this pursuit).

I will now summarise what has been said about the death of God and truth. Nietzsche's various arguments about the enduring nature of God's shadow - for example, the democratic movement's and the herd instinct's being the latest incarnations of Christianity - dovetail with dialectical Nietzsche's position on truth. Specifically, the democratic movement and the

herd instinct are two different incarnations of the 'universal binding force' which the strong willed 'bristle at'; that is, which the truth as will to power stands against. Furthermore, saying that God's shadow endures is simply another way of making the point that the truth can never be known; that is, that the will to power can never exist in isolation.

Now, before the central argument of this paper can be stated it is critical that we identify that faith/morality itself is a kind of truth - at least a purported truth. This is not an argument so much as nomenclature-related housekeeping. This point is necessary because it is to this truth that people generally refer when they say that Nietzsche argues that there is no truth; for example, when Rorty argues that for Nietzsche 'Plato's "true world" was just a fable' (1989, 27). Put generally, Nietzsche's numerous attacks on religion and morality - phenomena which he often traces back to Plato - are also attacks on truth. In saying this, the 'self-overcoming' described by dialectical Nietzsche must therefore be thought of as a struggle between two different truths: faith/morality-truth and will-to-power-truth, where, for dialectical Nietzsche, the former is not true and the latter, while being true, can never be experienced in any sustainable sense because of the former.

The central argument of this paper can now be stated; namely: even though Nietzsche argues that there is no truth in, say, Christianity or the will of the mass, it does not follow that he is arguing that we do not remain bound to such forces and therefore to their purported truths; bound to such an extent that were we somehow to be faithful to the other truth (will-to-power-truth) we would perish. In other words, the death of God has not brought any liberation and knowing that purported truths are not true has almost no practical value.

Finally, as an addendum, we could argue that this dialectical argument in fact holds for most people in the universe of *unidimensional* Nietzsche. For unidimensional Nietzsche only a very small amount of people are able to rise

above faith/morality. And indeed, perhaps the only ones are the *Übermenschen* who, as Danto (1965: 199) pointed out some years ago, have in all likelihood never existed. This point is important as it reminds us that even if we wish to disregard the opinions of dialectical Nietzsche and see faith/morality as unsubstantial, it is not clear that unidimensional Nietzsche provides us with a better chance than his dialectical alter-ego of transcending faith/morality. Much more detail is needed on all of these points, however, I hope that I have at least provided a legible sketch of the problem with which I am interested.

I will now discuss several of Nietzsche's commentators' remarks about the death of God and truth. As I will argue, those that I discuss do not appear to attend to dialectical Nietzsche, and even pay little respect to unidimensional Nietzsche.

First, Schrift argues that in Nietzsche's universe:

God's death left empty the transcendent world beyond, the world in terms of which humanity had given the earth what little value it had. As a consequence, God's absence now leaves the earth meaningless.

(2001, 53-4)

In response, I would reiterate that Nietzsche argues that while God may have died his shadow remains and will likely be with us for some time yet. And so long as his shadow remains, the earth must still be meaningful whether we like it or not!

Later in the same essay Schrift writes: 'We can only speak of the becoming-*Übermensch* of human beings - of the process of accumulating

strength and exerting mastery outside the limits of external authoritarian impositions' (58). The first problem here is that Schrift assumes that what must be overcome are 'external authoritarian impositions'. To be sure, there is always some external component in all faiths/moralities, be they sacred or secular, however, the central conflict with which Nietzsche is concerned, as discussed above, takes place within the individual. The second problem is Schrift's assumption that an 'outside the limits' exists. No such outside exists for dialectical Nietzsche, and as I have argued, it is, practically speaking, unlikely that such an outside exists even for unidimensional Nietzsche insofar as even if faith/morality is simply indicative of a weakness of will it is not clear that anyone is strong enough to rise above it. Ultimately Schrift does not sufficiently attend to the ubiquity and durability of faith/morality.

A similar critique can be made of Nehamas' statement that:

Such an aesthetic and philosophical predicament - the sense that secure foundations are still required but can no longer be found - is not at all opposed to the social and political optimism of Modernity.

(1997, 224)

Nietzsche may convincingly challenge the veracity of the foundations of our society (our society's faith/morality), however, it does not follow from such a challenge that the foundations vanish; that they cease to influence, or indeed *support* society. Furthermore, if society's foundations are these days harder to find, then it is only because we cannot simply point to a God and say: there lie my foundations. Is it not possible that God has been replaced - even usurped - by some 'protean' secular *Other* (by '*Other*' I mean to invoke Lacan's use of the term)? Finally, what should we make of 'the sense that secure foundations

are still required'? I cannot, after all, deny that such a sense exists. I would suggest, instead, that it is possible that the feeling that foundations are lacking could be little more than a dissatisfaction with the foundations that exist. Perhaps this negative affect could simply be the suffering that comes when one pursues will-to-power-truth? Of course this is for the most part groundless speculation. However, such points of view should at least be considered so long as we are attempting to remain faithful to Nietzsche's ideas.

Perhaps the best example of what I consider to be an elision of dialectical Nietzsche's ideas about the death of God and truth can be found in Rorty's writing:

It was Nietzsche who first explicitly suggested that we drop the whole idea of "knowing the truth." His definition of truth as a "mobile army of metaphors" amounted to saying that the whole idea of "representing reality" by means of language, and thus the idea of finding a single context for all human lives, should be abandoned.... He hoped that, once we realized that Plato's "true world" was just a fable, we would seek consolation, at the moment of death, not in having transcended the animal condition but in being that peculiar sort of dying animal who, by describing himself in his own terms, had created himself.

(1989, 27)

I agree that attempting to *find* 'a single context for all human lives' is a dubious - although not entirely foolish - activity insofar as this single context is thought of as an absolute truth; that is, as some human characteristic that will always

be with us, or as some kind of dogma. However, it does not follow from this that such a single context does not currently exist - even if it is not true. As I have argued, Nietzsche might demonstrate that there are no absolute truths, however, he also makes the point that the majority of us remain bound to a general faith/morality. Therefore I believe Rorty is incorrect to use Nietzsche to argue that it is possible for us to gain consolation from the idea that we have created ourselves.

Rorty continues what I consider to be a problematic interpretation of Nietzsche when he argues that 'the world and the self have been de-divinised', and that the consequence of this is that people now have available to them 'an expanding repertoire of alternative descriptions rather than the One Right Description', and that this leads to a 'playfulness' (39-40). I consider 'playfulness' to be a particularly insidious term. When people use it in the context of discussions of the death of God, contingency, fragmentation, difference, etcetera, they seem to be saying: *how could we be complicit with anything bad? we are only playing!* In short: they are claiming *Übermensch* status. Although Rorty does go on to soften his position by arguing that: 'It is as hard to imagine a culture dominated by exuberant Nietzschean playfulness as to imagine the reign of the philosopher-kings, or the withering away of the state' (40), his reason for this softening is the relatively benign argument that there exist 'no lives which are not largely parasitical on an un-re-described past and dependent on the charity of as yet unborn generations' (42); that is, his grounds for this softening lie in the claim that we cannot escape the fact that meaning is necessarily relatively stable. This point sidesteps any consideration of what Nietzsche refers to as the 'universal binding force'; a force which can be both sacred and secular, dogmatic and protean.

In some remarks by Magnus and Higgins we encounter a slightly different, but, I believe, nonetheless problematic interpretation of Nietzsche's position. Specifically, while Magnus and Higgins do not elide faith/morality, they do circumscribe its ambit in a way that is suspect. We read:

What Nietzsche has abandoned is the quest for absolute truth, universal values, and complete liberation. For this reason, Nehamas characterises Nietzsche as a postmodernist. Nevertheless, Nietzsche urges us to attend to goals and truth in local contexts, and to make choices on aesthetic grounds, taking artistic decisions as a model for all choice. (1997, 12-3)

Again, I would argue that although Nietzsche may have abandoned the quest for absolute truth (we should think of this truth as being closely related to faith/morality-truth), it does not follow from this that he believes us to be freed from the fetters of general truths. Therefore, it is problematic to say that 'Nietzsche urges us to attend to goals and truth in local contexts' without acknowledging that much of Nietzsche's writing indicates that such a circumscription of one's allegiance is impossible.

Speaking more generally, one of my central concerns with postmodernist discourses is that they tend to blur the distinction between goal and reality. That is, it may well be a good thing if the ambit of our faith/morality extended only as far as our immediate community, however, it is far from clear that this circumscription has occurred or indeed is even possible. The problem with believing that it has occurred when it has not is that we may be tempted to overlook the ways in which the local is complicit with general problems; the

way in which the local remains subject to what Nietzsche refers to as the 'universal binding force'.

These arguments bring us now to the question of the value of Nietzsche for political theory. As with much of this paper the following points could be presented in greater detail. However, the purpose of this paper is not to definitively map a set of problems but to highlight an important aspect of Nietzsche's thinking that is at times overlooked, and to indicate how this overlooking can be related to more general issues. I enter this brief discussion of Nietzsche and political theory via some remarks made by Strong in his Chapter 'Nietzsche's political misappropriation' in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*:

There can then be no appropriation of Nietzsche for political theory. All that one can learn is to let uncertainty and ambiguity enter one's world, to let go the need to have the last word, to let go the need that there be a last word. In politics, Nietzsche can give us only the first word - but that may be more than we have now. (1997, 142)

Earlier in the chapter we find the reason why Nietzsche cannot be appropriated for political theory; namely, it is because of his position on the dogmatic variety of truth. As Strong argues: because Nietzsche denies that there exist any true 'foundational statements (or "meta-narratives")' (132), then from the Habermasian perspective 'he appears to make political action impossible, or pointless, or without standards' (133). However, as we read in the previous quotation, political processes can apparently still benefit from one's embracing the 'uncertainty and ambiguity' that follow from one's

acceptance of Nietzsche's belief that there are no true dogmatic truths.

My first concern with Strong's argument is that he makes the now familiar assumption that Nietzsche endorses the idea that if there are no true dogmatic truths then one will be able 'to let uncertainty and ambiguity enter one's world'. As I have now repeatedly argued: although one may be able to point out the arbitrary way in which this world assigns values to things, it does not follow from this that we are able to stop believing in such values and acting in accordance with them. We might think that we are done with the truth (or faith, or morality) but is the truth (or faith, or morality) done with us?

I am also concerned with Strong's claim that Nietzsche can not be reconciled with the Habermasian perspective. In saying this he misses the straightforward point that the standard that we all share is our allegiance to the 'protean' 'single soul' that has replaced God: God's shadow or the herd instinct or the 'universal binding force'. In other words, from Nietzsche's perspective, underneath our apparent disparate political beliefs lies an unexpected common ground: the now secular realm of faith/morality. This may not be a standard in the sense of a universally accepted ideal, however, it is a standard nonetheless.

What is the importance of this standard for politics? In one respect it is for the most part irrelevant. This is because very few people are willing to admit its existence insofar as many no doubt believe that their professed political convictions lie at the core of their being. However, in a more important respect this standard is invaluable for politics insofar as it underpins everything we do in our lives. And if we fail to acknowledge our attachment to this realm then it is possible that all of our political theorising and prescribing is and will be redundant. This point may sound obscure, however, it becomes clearer once we slightly tilt the lens. I will introduce three more quotations to clarify my position: one more from Nietzsche, then one each from Lacan and the writer Hugo. I introduce the last two quotations to indicate that the problem

with which I am concerned, and with which I believe Nietzsche is also concerned, is a variation of a classic problem.

In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche evokes an image of a world that can accommodate and perhaps even depends upon contrary positions when he writes:

I no longer know whether you, my dear fellow man and neighbor, are at all *capable* of living in a way that would damage the species; in other words, “unreasonably” and “badly.” Pursue your best or your worst desires, and above all perish! In both cases you are probably still in some way a promoter and benefactor of humanity and therefore entitled to your eulogists - but also your detractors. (1974, 73)

This remark implies that regardless of our political inclinations, whatever we do will redound to the glory of ‘the species’, which, judging by Nietzsche’s tone, is a synonym for the mass, the herd, Europe, etcetera; in any case, for some kind of monad that is greater than political parties and nations. Therefore, if we want our politics to have any value at all we must substantially engage with our belonging to this monad, to this universal binding force.

Lacan invokes the same theme in his seminar *On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge* when he writes:

Of course it is now obvious that the sun is not a center either, and that it is strolling through a space whose status is ever more precariously

established. What remains at the center is the fine routine that is such that the signified always retains the same meaning ... in the final analysis. That meaning is provided by the sense each of us has of being part of his world, that is, of his little family and of everything that revolves around it. Each of you - I am speaking even for the leftists - you are more attached to it than you care to know and would do well to sound the depths of your attachment. A certain number of biases are your daily fare and limit the import of your insurrections to the shortest term, to the term, quite precisely, that gives you no discomfort - they certainly don't change your world view, for that remains perfectly spherical... (1998, 42)

This reminds us of the earlier quotation from Nietzsche which makes the point that as we approach the truth (will-to-power-truth) we experience higher and higher levels of suffering (again, because of our growing distance from faith/morality). Lacan, like Nietzsche, evaluates political action not primarily by analysing the value of particular ideals, but by examining an individual's experience of articulating and acting in accordance with such ideals. That is, for Lacan and Nietzsche, it is this experience that is the best litmus test for the value of our politics. To reiterate: if, in our political activities, we are not substantially concerned with our own relationship to the realm of faith/morality, then we cannot be confident that such activities can substantially alter the status quo.

I will finish this discussion with a quotation from Hugo's *Les Misérables* which will provide us with a clear example of what I have been talking about.

While this quotation is concerned with the ambition of priests, the point that it makes is generalisable:

So there is no greater hothouse of ambition than a seminary. Who shall say how ... often ambition wears the guise of vocation, perhaps in all good faith? The impossibility of rising under Monseigneur Bienvenu was so apparent that the young priests he ordained secured introductions to the Archbishops of Aix or Auch and made off as soon as possible [h]ence the isolation of Monseigneur Bienvenu. We live in a squalid society. Success: that is the message seeping, drop by drop, down from the overriding corruption. (1987, 63-4)

The priests whom Hugo discusses would no doubt claim that all that they do is for the glory of God (such claims are their politics), however, the reality is that their professed faith is simply the means by which they achieve a secular success - the same success which is no doubt desired by other people whose faiths are ostensibly different.

In conclusion, for me, a central characteristic of our secular age is that the claims that there are no absolute truths and that one has no faith are in fact indicative of our secular faith. I would even suggest that such claims are themselves acts of faith reaffirmation. With these points in mind, I would argue that it is all too easy for us to use Nietzsche to obscure our dependence upon the very force that Nietzsche was battling against; a battle which, I believe, ought to be at the front of all political engagements. For if we do not at least admit the possibility that beneath the varied topography of our politics lies a

bedrock of common ground, then our political engagements, while ostensibly bringing about change, may ultimately be fated to reproduce the same old problems in new guises.

References

Danto, A. C. 1965. *Nietzsche as Philosopher*. New York: The Macmillian Company.

Hollingdale, R. J. 1969. 'Introduction.' *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, F. Nietzsche.
London: Penguin Books.

Hugo, V. [1862] 1987. *Les Miserables*. trans. N. Denny. London: Penguin.

Lacan, J. 1998. *On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Book XX. Encore 1972-1973*. trans. B. Fink. New York: W. W. Norton and Co.

Magnus, B. and Higgins, K. M. 1997. 'Introduction to the Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche.' In *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, eds. B. Magnus and K. M.

Higgins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nehamas, A. 1997. 'Nietzsche, modernity, aestheticism.' In *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, eds. B. Magnus and K. M. Higgins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nietzsche, F. 1968. *The Will to Power*. trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books.

Nietzsche, F. [1885] 1969. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. trans. R. J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books.

Nietzsche, F. [1882] 1974. *The Gay Science*. trans. W. Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books.

Nietzsche, F. [1886] 1989. *Beyond Good and Evil*. trans. W. Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books.

Nietzsche, F. [1887] 1998. *On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic*. trans. A. J. Swensen and M. Clark. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.

Rorty, R. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Salaquarda, Jörg. 1997. 'Nietzsche and the Judaeo-Christian Tradition.' In *The*

Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche, eds. B. Magnus and K. M. Higgins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schrift, A. D. 2001. 'Rethinking the Subject: Or, How One Becomes-Other Than What One is.' In *Nietzsche's Postmoralism: Essays on Nietzsche's Prelude to Philosophy's Future*, ed. R. Schacht. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Strong, T. B. 1997. 'Nietzsche's political misappropriation.' In *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, eds. B. Magnus and K. M. Higgins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.