

*Europa im Geisterkrieg. Studien zu  
Nietzsche—Werner Stegmaier*

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For those familiar with the German-speaking academic world, Werner Stegmaier is one of the most eminent Nietzsche scholars. Throughout his many articles and books, he has developed a unique approach that combines what at first glance may seem disparate ways of reading Nietzsche. On the one hand, Stegmaier takes Nietzsche seriously as a philosopher and interprets him in a “nüchtern”, that is, sober and argument-based way (41, footnote). On the other hand, he pays crucial attention to the literary and contextual character of Nietzsche’s work. The results of this approach are as rich in detail as Nietzsche’s own texts and yet remain able to delineate significant philosophical insights. As a recent example, Stegmaier has provided an over 600-page long interpretation of Book Five of *Beyond Good and Evil*, which undoubtedly sets as a high standard for all analyses that want to follow the context in which Nietzsche’s thoughts are articulated.<sup>1</sup>

An equally voluminous collection of Stegmaier’s articles is now available in an online book edited by Andrea C. Bertino: “Europa im Geisterkrieg. Studien zu Nietzsche” (Open Book Publishers, 2018). The texts gathered in this volume cover three decades of Stegmaier’s work, ranging from 1985 to 2016. As the editor rightly points out, from the 21 articles gathered in the volume emerges no less than an interpretation of Nietzsche’s thought as a whole (VII). The collection is a valuable resource for Nietzsche scholars. It was made possible by an EU-funded project to create open access monographies.

The title of the collection elides an easy translation. “Europe During the War of Spirits” may be one way to render it in English. According to Stegmaier, the title refers to the “dramatic” conditions under which Nietzsche has to be interpreted (4). Modernity is for Stegmaier a time of “fluctuance” in which all certainties and all substantial values, especially those values grounded in reason,

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<sup>1</sup> Stegmaier, Werner. *Nietzsches Befreiung der Philosophie. Kontextuelle Interpretation des V. Buchs der Fröhlichen Wissenschaft*. De Gruyter, 2012. See the review by Dirk R. Johnson, *The Agonist*, Volume IX, Issue 1, Fall 2017.

have been lost (2). Humans now need to provide anew an “orientation of the world” (8).<sup>2</sup> An ‘orientation’ is an always-fragile direction of thought and practice that has to be found when there are precisely no more established ways that can be followed (cf. 12).<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, in his reflection on modern nihilism and the crumbling foundations of culture, has undoubtedly contributed to this “war of spirits.” The results of his thinking, however, are not only negative. Stegmaier wants to show “how Nietzsche’s thinking can liberate the present time to develop uninhibited and productive approaches to nihilism.” (2) The title of the collection, however, is “risky” (4), he admits, and one has to agree. Not only does it evoke the often ambiguous fascination with war in Nietzsche’s later works (the term *Geisterkrieg* can be found in *Ecce Homo*, *Why I Am a Fatality*, 1). It also limits the scope of his thinking to the European context, despite Nietzsche’s own intention to concern “humanity as a whole” (ibid.). Nihilism has certainly a global dimension, but the title of the collection seems to point rather backwards, to a time when the main focus of a European thinker was in fact Europe alone. It does not indicate the importance of Nietzsche’s thought for the future. Stegmaier’s claim that “Europe was mostly open for other cultures” seems strangely oblivious of the dynamics of cultural colonialism (ibid.). Perhaps it is his intention to show Nietzsche’s philosophy as an antidote to the vicious political nihilism that currently plagues the European sub-continent. But even Europe’s problems seem to require a global perspective in order to be properly understood, or so one could argue.

The volume is divided into six parts. Part 1 combines articles on “Truth and Philosophy,” part 2 texts on “Time, Evolution, and the Temporalization of Thinking,” part 3 is devoted to the “Renouncing ‘Reason’ in the Definition of the Human Being, part 4 explains “Zarathustra’s Anti-Doctrines,” part 5 an “Ethics for Good Europeans,” part 6 reflects on “Nietzsche’s Future,” and the volume closes with an epilogue on “Nietzsche’s Jests.”

In the temporalization of philosophy, Stegmaier sees a crucial characteristic not only of Nietzsche’s work, but of modern philosophy as a whole. He develops Nietzsche’s philosophical argument systematically and shows that they belong to a broader tradition, despite Nietzsche’s own tendency to describe himself as an isolated figure, disconnected from the previous history of philosophy. Stegmaier argues convincingly that Nietzsche is part of the development of German

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<sup>2</sup> All translations of the German original by M.S.

<sup>3</sup> Fluctuance and orientation are key notions in Stegmaier’s work. See his *Philosophie der Fluktuanz. Diltbey und Nietzsche*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, and *Orientierung im Nihilismus. Luhmann meets Nietzsche*. De Gruyter, 2016.

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philosophy and can be discussed in conjunction with Hegel (78-9) and Dilthey (66). But he also takes the seemingly poetic aspects of Nietzsche's work seriously, especially *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Speaking about Zarathustra's anti-doctrines does not mean that the work is without philosophical content. Insofar as the anti-doctrines do not lead to general or generally applicable statement, they force the reader to consider the singularity of temporal experience. In addition, Stegmaier provides an analysis of Nietzsche's philosophy of emotions and addresses the difficult topic of his relationships to the Jews. Despite his "anti-antisemitism" (422), Nietzsche sees the Jews as strangers in Europe and cannot appreciate their own perspective (446). Other articles appear of lesser systematic interest, especially those related to 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideas of culture. Nietzsche's use of notions like greatness and measuredness (*Maß*) have not aged as well as Stegmaier seems to believe and can hardly be of relevance beyond the context of his work.

Stegmaier provides a careful account of Nietzsche's idea of perspectivism. He develops this account based on the relation between generality and individuality. The point is not simply to replace generality with individuality, because there is no purely individual perspective on the world that is not at the same time determined in a generalizable way (66). True individuality rather emerges at the intersection of the general and individual; it emerges through the opening of new insights and the overcoming of oneself, which has to be understood in the twofold sense of overpowering and passing beyond one's own perspectives (68). Individual life must remain a mystery to itself, otherwise it is no individual life. This tension in the very notion of the individual makes it necessary to "temporalize" truth and untruth in individual life. (298) Humans progress from one to the other and back. This also means that philosophy still has to be seen as desire for truth, even if it has to deny itself the achievement of definite truths (70). Stegmaier shows that perspectivism can only be understood as a paradox, not as doctrine, and is ultimately based in a movement of thought which cannot lead to stable, universalizable insights.

One can see in this interpretation an elegant solution to the notorious problem of self-application. If perspectivism is accused of being self-refuting, one only conceives of it as logical problem. The real problem, for Nietzsche, lies in the restraint from, or the ironic distance toward insights that are found. How does one experience, how does one live with the renunciation of truth, while desiring it at the same time? Stegmaier's analysis of *Zarathustra* further illuminates this point. For him, the overhuman is no general notion, which would point at another kind of human beings, but rather the expression of the overcoming of the very notion of a human being (287). Likewise, Stegmaier shows the idea of eternal recurrence fails and that its meaning lies precisely in this failure (120). The idea

fails because the overcoming of all goals and representations, which in itself would be a-temporal (everything returns and therefore everything always stays the same), can only be pictured through the succession of time. The idea also refutes itself, because if everything comes back, then one cannot know it, otherwise a different state would come back every time (293). Stegmaier's emphasis on the paradoxical meaning of Nietzsche's ideas is opposed to more systematizing approaches. In contrast to Günter Abel, for example, Stegmaier avoids the abstract terminology of Nietzsche's late notebooks and relies on the more literary published works. As he urges the reader to consider the individual experience of becoming, he also urges her to consider the individual contexts in which such experiences are expressed. Renouncing the temptation to extract another formalistic 'theory' from Nietzsche's works is a major contribution of his study.

Zarathustra shows that perspectivism is closely linked to the temporalization of philosophy. For Stegmaier, temporalization does not mean that philosophy thinks *about* time but that it considers the *inherent* temporality of thoughts and ideas (94). For Nietzsche, time is as fundamental as it is for Heidegger, Stegmaier claims (121). The inherent temporality of thoughts can be captured in tropes like the noon. Tropes like this entail "no calculating of what always stays the same, repeats itself regularly, or is finally completed, but the acceptance of incalculable things, life with surprising things, the affirmation of right times and times that may not be right, including situations in which things appear 'at a bad time'" (102-3). This way, time has its own measure of what is appropriate for human life. The idea of an event occurring at the "right time," for example, refers to "the incommensurable time of individuals and their worlds" (120). This means, again, that genuine individuality cannot be captured through yet another general notion but depends on an uncontrollable temporal experience. In the English-speaking literature, one can only think of Nehamas as a Nietzsche scholar who has taken the problem of individuality seriously to the same degree.

Stegmaier has also done important work on Nietzsche's relation to Darwinism. There, he looks past Nietzsche's own polemic. His detailed interpretation shows that Nietzsche is eventually more in line with Darwin than he himself assumed (136). Insofar as evolution entails only a probabilistic account of causality, it understands life based on individual processes. Nietzsche conceives of the will to power as embedded in deeply individual processes, which "like the selective processes of evolutionary biology follow only their own necessity, which in turn results from the respective circumstances and cannot be captured in general terms" (151). For Stegmaier, this understanding of biological life is "the final thought of Darwin's theory of evolution" of which "Nietzsche's philosophy is the deepest interpretation" (*ibid.*). Darwin gave up the idea of fixed species,

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which then implies that organic beings are nothing but an ever-changing realm of individual beings (181). In other words, Darwin's account of evolution also allows for a radically temporal conception of the organic world (182). The difference between this interpretation of Darwin and Nietzsche's own polemic can then perhaps be explained by a certain misunderstanding of natural selection as a mechanical, purely utilitarian process. As Stegmaier has it, Nietzsche did not realize that it constitutes an open and indeterminate development.

Stegmaier's contributions to Nietzsche's ethics seem less pertinent than his reflections on the impact of time on philosophical thought. He defines ethics as freedom from particular moralities (388). Morality, for Stegmaier, provides orientation through specific norms, while ethics requires us to renounce the reliance on any leading norm. This way, the distinction between master and slave morality made by Nietzsche is interpreted without his violent anti-egalitarianism, as expressing a rather tolerant and pluralistic attitude toward the variety of possible moralities. In his own ethics, Nietzsche avoids the attribution of guilt to others (412) and recommends nobility as an attitude of generosity and hospitality (413). Nietzsche also allows for a distinction between power and violence, Stegmaier points out (416, footnote).

Highlighting the elements of moral pluralism in Nietzsche is no doubt important. One can, however, suspect this pluralistic interpretation of being too harmonious at the end. It seems to neglect the more dramatic truth-finding that Nietzsche describes, among others, as a process of illness and healing. For example, the nobility of the "sovereign individual" is one that is found in solitude alone, far from the consideration of the validity of the opinions of others, and with the constant risk of losing it again. Pluralism, in other words, is based less on the coexistence than on the antagonism of value systems in Nietzsche, and this aspect seems to be undervalued in Stegmaier's work. A similar conclusion can be drawn from his emphasis on orientation as a means to deal with the openness of modern society: "Orientation nowhere has something firm to hold on to, it doesn't know anything firm, but it also doesn't need anything to hold on to. Quite to the contrary, it functions based on reference points, which lead to further reference points. Orientation turns everything into signs that refer to other signs" (175). The philosophy of orientation, at the end, seems to take the painful contradictions out of modern life, which is as much characterized by one's being without any orientation than by the ability to find a reliable one. Often times, the "reference points" that are found are but traces of what has been lost.<sup>4</sup> This means that if we use Nietzsche in order to cope with nihilism, as Stegmaier

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<sup>4</sup> A similar point is made in Johnson's review, see above.

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suggests, we risk losing sight of the very impact of nihilism on life. Stegmaier's interpretation seems to have had its own "right time" in the Germany of the 80s and 90s, which could be seen as a time of peaceful democratic achievements and productive pluralism. How would an interpretation of Nietzsche in the current age of unexpected and spiteful social fractures look like?