Why Nietzsche?

Why is it important to read Nietzsche today? On the one hand it might seem strange to even ask this question since Nietzsche has had such a pervasive influence in late modern culture. Nietzsche is certainly one of the most well known philosophers of late modernity. More people have probably at least heard of Nietzsche than of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Sartre or any other philosopher since Nietzsche. But that, of course, could be said to be an indictment, ironically, of the very culture of modernity that Nietzsche criticized. Who knows anything of philosophy today, especially here in the “land of the free”? Americans already have their freedom and don’t need philosophy. One certainly doesn’t need philosophy to be successful in the world today. One certainly doesn’t need to have read any philosophy at all to make a lot of money, or to be a successful journalist, a religious leader, or radio talk show host, or, obviously, a politician today. One doesn’t even need to have read any philosophy to be considered highly educated today. Its possible to earn a Ph.D. in diverse fields of study, especially in the sciences, and never have taken a course in philosophy or even have read one single philosophical text. The reason for Nietzsche’s popularity among the masses, such as it is, the reason for example there are probably more of Nietzsche’s books than any other philosopher in Borders’ tiny Western Philosophy section, is surely Nietzsche’s brilliance at one-liners, such as the now familiar, so often quoted line: “Out of life’s school of war: What does not destroy me, makes me stronger” (Twilight of the Idols, Maxims and Arrows, §8). Some of these others might be as familiar even if not recognized as Nietzsche’s:

He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how. (Twilight of the Idols, Maxims and Arrows, §12)

Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies. (Human, All Too Human, §483)

For believe me: the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is—to live dangerously! Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius! (The Gay Science §283)

I say unto you: One must still have chaos in oneself to give birth to a dancing star. (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Prologue, §5)

Terrible it is to be alone with the judge and avenger of one's own law. Thus is a star thrown out into the void and into the icy breath of solitude... (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Pt. I, “On the Way of the Creator”)

One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil.... (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Pt. I, “On the Gift-Giving Virtue” §3)

Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you. (Beyond Good and Evil §146)

Which is it, is man one of God's blunders or is God one of man's? (Twilight of the Idols Maxims and Arrows, §7)

“Whoever praises him as a god of love does not have a high enough opinion of love.” (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Pt. IV, “Retired”)
Of course the most well-known line, the line that would be most immediately connected with Nietzsche if one had heard of him at all is the madman’s announcement of the death of God. Much less known is that Nietzsche’s madman not only says “God is dead” and that “God remains dead” but adds the decisive coda: “And we have killed him” (The Gay Science §125).

As a result of this madman’s announcement, along with a few other quips, and also a few notorious aspects of his biography and his reception in the 20th century—namely his own collapse into insanity only seven years after writing the famous madman passage, and the attempt by the Nazis to appropriate his philosophy for their own ends—Nietzsche has become very well known. Due in no small part to that misappropriation, as well as the fact that so few outside of Nietzsche scholars and some philosophy students ever really read his works, Nietzsche is, in a far more important sense, is very much unknown. From out of a few memorable one-liners and a few famous teachings, namely the three main teachings in Thus Spoke Zarathustra—the notion of a superman (or overman), the will to power, and the strange teaching of eternal recurrence—most of those who have ever heard of Nietzsche know only a gross caricature or a distorted mask of his philosophy.

Nietzsche certainly anticipated this, knowing he would be misunderstood, even grossly misunderstood—though some would say he even irresponsibly encouraged being misunderstood in the way that he wrote. In any case, especially in the last writings, one finds a constant preoccupation with the problem of being understood. In another memorable quip Nietzsche writes “some are born posthumously” found both in the Preface to The Antichrist and in the opening paragraph of the chapter titled “Why I Write Such Good Books” of Ecce Homo, Nietzsche’s strange autobiography written just before his collapse. Nietzsche’s sense of being posthumously born certainly came out of a sense of being so untimely, so misunderstood, so unknown in his lifetime. Forced to retire due to ill health from his professorship at the University of Basel at the age of 34, Nietzsche spent the last ten years of his creative life in almost total isolation, wandering back and forth between summers in the Upper Engadine and surrounding mountains in Switzerland and winters on the Italian Mediterranean, writing feverishly copious notes, voluminous letters, and the books through which he has become so well known. Though Nietzsche anticipated being discovered after his death, and thus being born posthumously, he also sensed, as indicated in this passage also from that last year of 1888, that he might never be understood, even posthumously:

Posthumous people—like me, for example—are less well understood than timely ones, but better heard. More strictly: we are never understood—and hence our authority . . . (Twilight of the Idols, Maxims and Arrows, §15)

Sometimes Nietzsche seems to even question the very possibility of being understood at all. This comes out perhaps most powerfully in his frequent playing with masks. On the one hand Nietzsche tells us “Everything profound loves a mask,” and then, a little further on, he will explain why: “Every profound spirit needs a mask: even more, around every profound spirit a mask is growing continually, owing to the constantly false, namely shallow, interpretation of every word, every step, every sign of life he gives” (Beyond Good and Evil §40). Here it seems he is warning the reader not to stay at the surface, but to plumb the depths if one wants to
understand anything at all profound. Such a stance might suggest that the mask is a result of misinterpretation, and thus, that interpretation aims at pulling away the mask and revealing the face, or the truth, beneath the appearance of the mask. Yet later on in the same text, in a passage in which Nietzsche reveals himself as the masked philosopher, he seems to call into question whether it is even possible to reveal what is behind the mask:

The hermit does not believe that any philosopher—assuming that every philosopher was first of all a hermit—ever expressed his real and ultimate opinions in books: does one not write books precisely to conceal what one harbors? Indeed, he will doubt whether a philosopher could possibly have "ultimate and real" opinions, whether behind every one of his caves there is not, must not be, another deeper cave—a more comprehensive, stranger, richer world beyond the surface, an abysmally deep ground behind every ground, under every attempt to furnish "grounds." Every philosophy is a foreground philosophy—that is a hermit's judgment: "There is something arbitrary in his stopping here to look back and look around, in his not digging deeper here but laying his spade aside; there is something suspicious about it." Every philosophy also conceals a philosophy; every opinion is also a hideout, every word also a mask. (Beyond Good and Evil §289)

Nietzsche’s masquerade presents a considerable challenge to the reader. If every word is only a mask concealing only another mask, and especially if the hermit philosopher writes precisely to conceal, then one wonders just how such a philosopher ever could be understood. One knows that perhaps one should never, even when he appears to be most in straight face, take what he has to say at face value. If there is only mask behind the mask, then one wonders how it is even possible to heed this warning at the outset of Ecce Homo:

Seeing that before long I must confront humanity with the most difficult demand ever made of it, it seems indispensable to me to say who I am. Really, one should know it, for I have not left myself "without testimony." But the disproportion between the greatness of my task and the smallness of my contemporaries has found expression in the fact that one has neither heard nor even seen me. I live on my own credit; it is perhaps a mere prejudice that I live.

I only need to speak with one of the "educated" who come to the Upper Engadine for the summer, and I am convinced that I do not live.

Under these circumstances I have a duty against which my habits, even more the pride of my instincts, revolt at bottom—namely, to say: Hear me! For I am such and such a person. Above all, do not mistake me for someone else! (Ecce Homo, Preface 1)

It is due largely to this dual capacity for opacity and audacity that Nietzsche is still mostly unknown today even among philosophers, at least in most English language philosophy in which it is clarity and logical rigor that count most. Nietzsche himself never actually held a position within academic philosophy. He came to Basel at the unheard of age of 24 to take a position not in philosophy but in philology, which broadly speaking is the study of languages, but in the Europe of Nietzsche’s day meant classical studies, i.e., Greek and Latin literature. As much as Nietzsche tried to get a position in philosophy, he remained outside the margins of philosophy, and after leaving Basel became only increasingly further isolated outside the margins of the academic world. Most English language philosophers, trained in the Analytic tradition, generally follows Bertrand Russell’s advice in leaving Nietzsche there. Russell famously spoke of him with contempt and considered Nietzsche a merely literary figure, and certainly not a philosopher to be taken seriously. In many philosophy departments in Great Britain or the United States one
might only encounter Nietzsche in an ethics class with a brief treatment of his critique of morality in On the Genealogy of Morals.

Of course, on the Continent of Europe things are altogether different, but this, of course, has always been the case in the history of modern philosophy. In Continental philosophy Nietzsche stands with perhaps only Marx as the most influential and important of philosophers. Martin Heidegger, perhaps the most important German philosopher of the 20th century, saw in Nietzsche the culmination of the entire tradition of Western philosophy, or “the history of metaphysics” as he put it. Heidegger devoted a crucial turning point of his career in the 1930's to an examination of Nietzsche’s thought, resulting in the massive four volume *Nietzsche*, surely the weightiest treatment of Nietzsche in more than one sense. Nietzsche was a seminally important figure in the movement of Existentialism, influencing not only Heidegger, often considered an Existentialist despite his avowed break with Existentialism, but also figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. In more recent years Nietzsche’s writings have continued to have a powerful impact in France, decisively influencing the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, progenitors of the movements of post-structuralism and deconstruction respectively. This Nietzschean influenced contemporary French philosophy, sometimes labeled post-modern philosophy, has been all the rage even in North America in some circles of contemporary culture, especially in literary and art theory, with Nietzsche being regarded as something of a postmodern prophet and his texts considered to be essential reading.

Another stream of European thought decisively impacted by Nietzsche is that of psychoanalysis, Nietzsche’s writings having strongly influenced both Freud and Jung. It was Nietzsche that first drew Freud’s attention to the hidden activity of the manifold drives that operate below the surface of consciousness, as well as to the importance of dreams in the exploration of the depths of the unconscious. The Preface to On the Genealogy of Morals begins with this startling recognition that the self, or psyche, rather than being grounded in the certainty of Cartesian self-consciousness, is instead unknown:

We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge—and with good reason. We have never sought ourselves—how could it happen that we should ever find ourselves.

In taking up this search Nietzsche in a sense opened up the very possibility of psychoanalysis. The fact that Nietzsche himself collapsed into madness and spent the last eleven years of his life hopelessly insane understandably became a celebrated case drawing considerable attention in the early psychoanalytic movement.

Nietzsche’s interest in psychology was not extraneous to his philosophy but rather an integral feature of his philosophy. He saw himself as a psychologist-philosopher, one whose task lie in psychoanalyzing the history of philosophy, examining the “hidden history of the philosophers, the psychology of the great names” as he puts it in Ecce Homo (Preface §3). For Nietzsche the question that seeks to know whether a particular theory or philosophy is true becomes displaced as the central focus in philosophy by the psychological or genealogical question that seeks to know who wants this view to be true. To answer that question it is necessary to bring to light the hidden drives that operate below the surface of consciousness. Epistemologically centered philosophy thus becomes displaced in favor of something like psychoanalysis. In this passage
from *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche suggests something of this psychoanalytic approach to philosophy:

Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; also that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy constituted the real germ of life from which the whole plant had grown.

Indeed, if one would explain how the abstrusest metaphysical claims of a philosopher really came about, it is always well (and wise) to ask first: at what morality does all this (does he) aim? Accordingly, I do not believe that a "drive to knowledge" (*Trieb zur Erkenntnis*) is the father of philosophy, but rather that another drive has, here as elsewhere, employed understanding (and misunderstanding) as a mere instrument. But anyone who considers the basic drives of man to see what extent they may have been at play just here as *inspiring spirits* (or demons or kobolds) will find that every single one of them have done philosophy at some time—and that every single one of them would like only too well to represent just *itself* as the ultimate purpose of existence and the legitimate master of all the other drives. (*Beyond Good and Evil*, On the Prejudices of Philosophers, §6)

*On the Genealogy of Morals* is an example of this approach applied specifically to the hidden history of Christian morality.

It would be hard to overstate Nietzsche’s influence on the culture of late modernity. His influence can be seen in the work of novelists such as Hermann Hesse, Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Henry Miller, André Gide, André Malraux, Maxim Gorky, and Nikos Kazantzakis; on the poets Rainer Maria Rilke, Stefan George, William Butler Yeats, and Paul Valéry; on the dramatists August Strindberg, George Bernard Shaw, and Eugene O'Neill; on the painters such as Henri Matisse, Max Ernst, Max Beckmann, Erich Heckel, Gustav Klimt, Edvard Munch, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Francis Bacon; on sculptors Auguste Rodin, Aristide Maillol, and Otto Dix; on the composers Bela Bartok, Alban Berg, Richard Strauss, Frederick Delius, Gustav Mahler, and Alexander Skriabin; and on both Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, the founders of Modern architecture. Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity even had an impact on Christian theology in the 20th century influencing the theologians Martin Buber and Paul Tillich.

Despite these strong Nietzschean currents in 20th century philosophy, psychology, theology, art and literature, Nietzsche still remains unknown to most Americans, obscured by the gross caricature that is the result of the Nazi attempt to appropriate his philosophy. It thus is necessary to say a bit more about his biography and how his name also became associated with the worst of the 20th century.

Friedrich Nietzsche was born on October 15, 1844 in the small village of Röcken in Prussian Saxony in what is now the eastern part of Germany. Nietzsche came in a long line of Lutheran pastors and he lived in his early childhood at the parsonage in Röcken. His sister, Elizabeth, was born when he was two and a younger brother followed two years later. Tragedy struck the Nietzsche family the next year, however, when first Nietzsche’s father and then his younger brother died. Nietzsche’s mother moved the family to the city of Naumburg where they lived with her mother-in-law and her daughters. Nietzsche was raised then in a house with his sister, his mother, his grandmother, and two aunts.
At the age of 14 Nietzsche was accepted into the prestigious school at Pforta, the most famous classical school in Germany where Novalis, Fichte and the Schlegel brothers has been educated. At the age of 20 he started studying theology at the University of Bonn but then gave up the plan to follow in the line of his fathers and the next year enrolled at Leipzig University to study philology. It was at Leipzig that Nietzsche first encountered Schopenhauer’s philosophy and also where he was able to meet the great composer Richard Wagner. Nietzsche excelled at Leipzig and on the basis of his professor’s recommendation was appointed in 1869 at the unheard of age of 24 to a chair in philology at the University of Basel in Switzerland. He was forced to resign his Prussian citizenship but this was more than made up for by being in proximity to Wagner who was living a short distance away at Tribschen on the shores of Lake Lucern. In the early years at Basel Nietzsche often traveled to Tribschen, becoming quite close to Wagner.

In July of 1870 the Franco-Prussian war broke out and Nietzsche, having relinquished his Prussian citizenship and thus prevented from joining the army, volunteered as an ambulance attendant. He served in that capacity the rest of that summer and returned to Basel in the fall with severe dysentery and diptheria. At the beginning of the war Nietzsche had been a patriotic enthusiast but by October after Prussia’s unexpected triumph, which would soon lead to the unification of the German empire and the fall of Napoleon III, Nietzsche would write to a friend “Confidentially, I consider the Prussia of today to be one of the powers most dangerous of all of culture.” This would be the beginning of Nietzsche’s reaction against German culture and the politics of Bismarck’s Reich. It also set Nietzsche on a course contra Wagner as the victory over the French and the consequent rise in German nationalism had led to Wagner’s increased popularity and eventual triumphal return to Germany.

In late 1871 The Birth of Tragedy was accepted for publication. The book offered a radically different look at classical Greek culture and a new theory about the origin and the worth of Greek tragedy. The high point of Greek culture was not the serene rationalism of Socrates and Plato, but rather occurred a century earlier in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The book can be divided into three main parts, the first recounts the strange birth of tragedy from out of the diametrically opposed Apollonian and Dionysian art drives, the second tells the story of the death of tragedy at the hands of Socrates, and the third celebrates a new birth of tragedy—in Wagner’s operas. The book endeared him to Wagner and the Wagner circle but by the mid 1870s Nietzsche’s doubts about Wagner and the direction of German culture began to grow stronger. For the rest of his career Nietzsche would become ever more critical of the militant nationalism as well as the antisemitism that flourished within the Wagner cult and more and more throughout Germany. In the summer of 1876 Wagner returned to Germany in triumph, establishing the opera festival at Bayreuth (still an annual event today). It was at this inaugural festival that the break with Wagner came, Nietzsche leaving in disgust with his Jewish friend, the psychologist Paul Rée.

These years that brought the break with Wagner also brought a sharp decline in Nietzsche’s health. In 1879, only ten years after beginning his academic career with such promise, Nietzsche is forced to resign from the university because of poor health. Nietzsche would spend the next ten years living on a modest pension, traveling mostly between the Engadine and the cities of Genoa, Nice, Rapallo, Venice, Rome and Turin, constantly in search of a climate and setting that would enable him to write. During this time, during which he rarely traveled to Germany, Nietzsche
further distanced himself from Wagner, Wagner’s music and German culture. This eventually brought a split with his sister, Elizabeth, who had very much enjoyed being at the center of the Wagner cult during Nietzsche’s early years in Basel. The final break came when she married a rabid anti-semite member of the Wagner cult, eventually moving with him to Paraguay to found a German colony there.

Nietzsche collapsed on the streets of Turin, Italy on January 4, 1889. It is said that he collapsed while tearfully putting his arms around the neck of a horse which had fallen in the street pulling a carriage after being beaten by the driver and slipping on the ice. Some townspeople carried him back to his apartment and when he came to he was raving mad. He spent the next few days banging away at the piano and writing mad letters to his friends, all signed “The Crucified” or “Dionysus.” One of the letters, written to Jacob Burckhardt, the famous professor at Basel whom Nietzsche respected, went like this:

Actually, I would much rather be a Basel professor than God, but I have not ventured to carry my private egoism so far as to desist from creating the world on his account. You see, one must make sacrifices, however one may be living, and wherever. . . . Since I am condemned to while away the next eternity with bad jokes, I have a writing business here which really leaves me nothing to be desired—very pleasant and not at all exhausting. The unpleasant thing, which offends my modesty, is that fundamentally I am every name in history.

After receiving these letters one of Nietzsche’s friends traveled to Turin and brought Nietzsche back to Basel for examination at a clinic. The doctor’s statement diagnosed ‘mental degeneration’ and reported that Nietzsche “claims he is a famous man and asks for women all the time.”

Nietzsche’s mother came soon after and brought him back to Germany, back to the home of his youth in Naumburg. At first his friends would visit and once, after hearing Nietzsche play the piano, Peter Gast expressed hope that he would recover but he never did. He lived the last eleven years completely insane, cared for first by his mother and then, after her death, by his sister who had returned from South America after the suicide of her husband. By the time Elizabeth came back and took over the care of Nietzsche, his books were selling wildly and his estate made her a wealthy woman. Against the efforts of his friends she managed to get control over his work, establishing a Nietzsche Archive, first in the house in Naumburg and then in a large villa in the city of Weimar. It was there where Nietzsche lived his last years, sometimes dressed by his sister in a white robe, a spectacle for the high society who had paid admission to see the famous philosopher. Elizabeth, who had never understood her brother’s break with Wagner, nor anything of his philosophy for that matter, worked for the rest of her life on bringing Nietzsche back to the fold by cultivating a Nietzsche myth. She lived on into the 1930s and saw her efforts rewarded in meeting Hitler and seeing a bust of her brother in the Führer’s office. It is thus that we have the idea of Nietzsche as the philosopher of the Nazis, the one who spoke of a superman to come, of the will to power as the essence of all life.

In Nietzsche’s very last published writing, at the beginning of each of the final three sections of the chapter titled “Why I am a Destiny” which brings Ecce Homo to a close, we find this question repeated thrice: “Have I been understood?,” “Have I been understood?,” “Have I been understood?” Is it important that we have an answer to this question? Is it important for those of...
us at the dawn of the 21st century to try and understand this seemingly inscrutable philosopher, this thinker who was obviously so concerned that he be understood, knowing full well that he would be misunderstood, understanding as he did the problem of being understood? Is it even possible to unmask the masked philosopher?

Perhaps it is wise in the case of Nietzsche to refrain from ever becoming too confident that we have unmasked him. Nevertheless, I think that it is very important that we do try an understand him. In Nietzsche’s case it is not because one thinks one might find a philosopher one might agree with that we should try to understand him. In 1888 Nietzsche writes this in a letter to a friend: “It is not at all necessary or even desirable to side with me; on the contrary, a dose of curiosity . . . and an ironic resistance would be an incomparably more intelligent position to adopt.” Whether he is regarded as a philosopher or not by philosophers, what Nietzsche did, perhaps more so than most who think of themselves as philosophers, was live the life of a lover of wisdom. What Nietzsche did was to question perhaps more seriously than anyone had before, to question the most unquestioned assumptions that underlie not only Christianity and Christian morality but also the very foundations of the Western philosophical tradition. In June of 1865 the 20 year old Nietzsche outlines the path he would take in a letter to his sister:

. . . As for your principle that truth is always on the side of the more difficult, I must admit this in part. However, it is difficult to believe that 2 times 2 is not 4; does that make it true? On the other hand, is it really so difficult simply to accept everything that one has been brought up on and that has gradually struck deep roots—what is considered truth in the circle of one’s relatives and of many good men, and what, moreover, really comforts and elevates man? Is that more difficult than to strike new paths, fighting the habitual, experiencing the insecurity of independence and the frequent wavering of one’s feelings and even one’s conscience, proceeding often without any consolation, but ever with the eternal goal of the true, the beautiful, and the good? Is it decisive after all that we arrive at that view of God, world, and reconciliation which makes us feel most comfortable? Rather, is not the result of his inquiries something wholly indifferent to the true inquirer? Do we after all seek rest, peace, and pleasure in our inquiries? No, only truth—even if it be the most abhorrent and ugly. Still one last question: if we had believed from childhood that all salvation issued from someone other than Jesus—say, from Mohammed—is it not certain that we should have experienced the same blessings? . . . Faith does not offer the least support for a proof of objective truth. Here the ways of men part: if you wish to strive for peace of soul and pleasure, then believe, if you wish to be a devotee of truth, then inquire. . . .

Nietzsche’s questioning would lead him eventually to question even the notion of truth and thus to become suspicious even of “the eternal goal of the true, the beautiful, and the good.” This questioning led Nietzsche to see a great crisis facing humankind in the future. In his unpublished notebooks from the last year, notes that were to be part of a book he projected would be his magnum opus, tentatively entitled The Revaluation of All Values, a work that he was never to finish, we find these introductory remarks:

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism. This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for this music of the future all ears are cocked even now. For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect. (The Will to Power, Preface, 2)
Of course, this crisis was nothing new to Nietzsche; it was what he had already warned of six years earlier in the madman’s announcement of the death of God. The “death of God” was really a metaphor for the crisis of nihilism, the crisis of modernity. The 20th century certainly unfolded as a great crisis, a series of catastrophes even. It was in no small measure the shock of the catastrophe of the first world war that lead so many artists and writers to read Nietzsche. Already a year before the start of the great war a different sort of crisis surfaced in the world of art with the famous Armory show in New York city, still considered by historians to be the most important art show in the United States in the 20th century. It was there that the works of Cézanne, van Gogh, Picasso, Kandinsky, and Duchamp were first introduced to the American public. Nietzsche had already anticipated the birth of modern art when he suggested in The Birth of Tragedy that art could be more than representation. This realization turned out to be something of a ‘death of God’ in the art world. The formerly unquestioned truth of art had been called into question and the resulting crisis, in which successive artists and theorists struggled with the question concerning the essence of art, played out through the rest of the century. A similar ‘death of God’ event occurred throughout modern culture with the undermining of the old, formerly unquestioned truths of not only the visual arts but of literature, music, dance, drama, architecture.

Of all the breakdowns and breakthroughs which shaped the culture of modernity in the 20th century, the most troubling ‘death of God,’ as Nietzsche so well understood, would be the moral crisis. Nietzsche pulled back the curtain on the depravity of humankind. The Christian morality that marked modern humanity Nietzsche tried to expose as a self-deception, a fig leaf covering over that depravity and thus providing a false sense of moral comfort. If human beings could not find the strength to face that depravity and then to somehow evolve and overcome what humankind has been so far then, as Nietzsche’s prophet warns in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, there will come the last man. There may be more than one sense to what he meant by the last man in Zarathustra, but the most chilling sense has certainly been brought home to us in the 20th century. The evolution of humanity’s technological mastery has led humankind to become capable of destroying itself. It should be obvious by now that without some accompanying further evolution of the human psyche, a spiritual (as long as one understands that for Nietzsche there is no split between the body and soul, spirit and nature) and moral evolution, then humanity may not survive the challenges of the 21st century.

It used to be just a few short years ago that American scholars could take the view that reading Nietzsche might be valuable for understanding his critique of the history of philosophy as well as the development of 20th century culture, but that Nietzsche offered nothing really valuable for American philosophers. Nietzsche’s shrill warnings of the crisis of European culture was just plain . . . well—too European. Good old American optimism, faith in both science and God along with the ingenuity of the free market would be enough. Now, however, after the lies and deceptions after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 which led to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the torture palace of Abu Grahib, the ‘extraordinary rendition’ in which the most basic human rights are violated (“Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster”), and the way all of this is covered up and either excused or denied by the majority of Americans who think of themselves as the most moral, God-fearing and righteous human beings,
it should be obvious that Nietzsche’s warnings to the world about the Germans of his day could apply just as easily to America today.

So, yes, I think reading Nietzsche is important. In closing let’s return to the last chapter of *Ecce Homo* again. The whole book, and especially this closing section, is often simply dismissed as merely displaying the symptoms of his imminent breakdown, the delusions of megalomania. Nietzsche begins with this seemingly preposterous declaration:

> I know my fate. One day my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous—a crisis without equal on earth, the most profound collision of conscience, a decision that was conjured up against everything that had been believed, demanded, hallowed so far. I am no man, I am dynamite.

Nietzsche warns the reader here that he must be handled carefully. He goes on to explicitly renounce the founding of any Nietzsche cult:

> Yet for all that, there is nothing in me of a founder of a religion—religions are affairs of the rabble; I find it necessary to wash my hands after I have come into contact with religious people.—I want no “believers”; I think I am too malicious to believe in myself; I never speak to masses.—I have a terrible fear that one day I will be pronounced holy; you will guess why I publish this book before; it shall prevent people from doing mischief with me.

Unfortunately as we know his warnings, as well as his pleading to be understood, to be carefully and slowly read, did not prevent great mischief from being done with him. The opening section of “Why I am a Destiny” closes with these words:

> I contradict as has never been contradicted before and am nevertheless the opposite of a No-saying spirit. I am a bringer of glad tidings like no one before me; I know tasks of such elevation that any notion of them has been lacking so far; only beginning with me are there hopes again. For all that, I am necessarily also the man of calamity. For when truth enters into a fight with the lies of millennia, we shall have upheavals, a convulsion of earthquakes, a moving of mountains and valleys, the like of which has never been dreamed of. The concept of politics will have merged entirely with a war of spirits; all power structures of the old society will have been exploded—all of them are based on lies: there will be wars the like of which have never yet been seen on earth. It is only beginning with me that the earth knows great politics.

The ominous predictions here, especially of the wars the like of which have never been seen before, must have seemed completely insane to those first readers. Now however it seems fair to ask whether Nietzsche was already insane or rather just lucid in those last days. Interestingly, Walter Kaufmann appends to the *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* this last note, which apparently Nietzsche considered concluding *Ecce Homo* with:

> If we could dispense with wars, so much the better. I can imagine more profitable uses for the twelve billion now paid annually for the armed peace we have in Europe; there are other means of winning respect for physiology than field hospitals.—Good, very good even; since the old God is abolished, I am prepared to rule the world.
this last note might be compared to this passage from Nietzsche’s earlier work:

And perhaps there will come a great day on which a nation distinguished for wars and victories and for the highest development of military discipline and thinking, and accustomed to making the heaviest sacrifices on behalf of these things, will cry of its own free will: ‘we shall shatter the sword’ – and demolish its entire military machine down to its last foundations. To disarm while being the best armed, out of an elevation of sensibility – that is the means to real peace, which must always rest on a disposition for peace: whereas the so-called armed peace such as now parades about in every country is a disposition to fractiousness which trusts neither itself nor its neighbor and fails to lay down its arms half out of hatred, half out of fear. Better to perish than to hate and fear, and twofold better to perish than to make oneself hated and feared – this must one day become the supreme maxim of every individual state!

Human, All Too Human, “The Wanderer and His Shadow” §284

The Raging Discordance between art and truth
There are many different approaches one might take in a course on Nietzsche. One might focus on a close reading of one or two texts, or focus on a few key Nietzschean ideas, his perspectivism, the overman or the will to power for example. We will do a broad survey, reading selections from each of his major works. One central theme of the course, other than reflections on comparisons to themes in Asian philosophies, will be a focus on Nietzsche’s thinking about art. The Nietzsche scholar Richard Schacht, in summing up his treatment of Nietzsche's thinking about art, comments that "of all the points he seeks to make none is of greater interest and importance than his contention that art is the clue and key to the possibility of discovering a way beyond nihilism." In particular, we will focus on the relationship between art and truth in Nietzsche’s thought, or what Heidegger referred to as a “raging discordance between art and truth.”

Heidegger finds this discordance in an unpublished note in which he finds the key to Nietzsche’s philosophy. It is a late note, from the period in 1888 in which Nietzsche is writing Twilight of the Idols and thinking through the "History of an Error," that extremely succinct synopsis of the history of Western metaphysics:

Very early in life I took the question of the relation of art to truth seriously: even now I stand in holy dread in the face of this discordance. My first book was devoted to it. The Birth of Tragedy believes in art on the background of another belief—that it is not possible to live with truth, that the "will to truth" is already a symptom of degeneration.

The discordance between art and truth is found in another note from the unpublished Nachlass: “art is worth more than truth” (WP 853); but it never rages more intensely, however, than in the

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2 Chapter 19 of Nietzsche: The Will to Power as Art bears the title “The Raging Discordance Between Art and Truth.” Heidegger, Nietzsche, I, p.142-150.

remark, another unpublished late note Heidegger calls attention to, and which Erich Heller has described as "at once crystalline and tumultuous, brilliant and violent":

“For a philosopher to say 'the good and the beautiful are one' is infamy; if he goes on to add, 'also the true', one ought to thrash him. Truth is ugly. We possess art lest we perish of the truth."\(^4\)

We shall try to see how the development of Nietzsche’s thought, from The Birth of Tragedy to the last writings, might be, as one scholar has put it, "a more and more radical meditation" on this thought that we have art lest we perish of the truth.\(^5\)

**Nietzsche and Asian Philosophy**

aim of comparative study

Nietzsche and Indian Philosophy

Nietzsche was familiar with Indian philosophy at least as early as his high school days at Pforta in Nietzsche’s German classes he compared the Indian epics the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata with Greek and German epics poems

Paul Duessen, one of Nietzsche’s friends from student days at Pforta became one of the leading Sanskrit scholars of the day

areas of comparative consideration:

A) polytheism vs monotheism vs atheism

India land of 330 million gods

Zarathustra’s joke about how there got to be one god:

>“For with the old Gods things came to an end long ago:—and verily, they had a good and joyful Gods’ end!

>They was no mere ‘twilight’ death—that is a lie! Rather, one day they—laughed themselves to death!

>This happened when the most godless words issued from a God himself—the words:

>‘There is one God! Thou shalt have no other God before me!’ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Pt. III “On Apostates”

Zarathustra’s

>“I would believe only in a god who could dance.” *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Pt. I “On Reading and Writing”

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unpublished note from 1888:

— And how many new gods are still possible!? As for myself, in whom the religious, that is to say god-forming, instinct occasionally becomes active at impossible times—how differently, how variously the divine has revealed itself to me each time!

So many strange things have passed before me in those timeless moments that fall into one's life as if from the moon, when one no longer has any idea how old one is or how young one will yet be. I should not doubt that there are many kinds of gods—there are some one cannot imagine without a certain halcyon and frivolous quality in their make-up. Perhaps light feet are even an integral part of the concept "god"— Is it necessary to elaborate that a god prefers to stay beyond everything bourgeois and rational? and, between ourselves, also beyond good and evil? His prospect is free—in Goethe's words. And to call upon the inestimable authority of Zarathustra in this instance: Zarathustra goes so far as to confess: "I would believe only in a God who could dance."

To repeat: how many new gods are still possible!—Zarathustra himself, to be sure, is merely an old atheist: he believes neither in old nor in new gods; Zarathustra says he would, but Zarathustra will not—do not misunderstand him.

The type of god after the type of creative spirits—of "great men." The Will to Power §1038

B) The Übermensch and Enlightenment in Asian thought

such a comparison has been made:

"Of special significance is the beautiful doctrine of the Superman—so like the Chinese concept of the Superior Man, and the Indian Maha Purusha, Bodhisattva and Jivan-mukta. . . .

The doctrine of the Superman whose virtue stands "beyond good and evil," who is at once the flower and the leader and saviour of men, has been put forward again and again in the world's history. A host of names for this ideal occur in Indian literature: he is the Arhat (adept), Buddha (enlightened), Jina (conqueror) Tirthankara (finder of the ford), the Bodhisattva (incarnation of the bestowing virtue), and above all Jivan-mukta (freed in this life), whose actions are no longer good or bad, but proceed from his freed nature."


There are obvious differences between Asian conceptions of the enlightened human being that are overlooked here; however, Coomaraswamy’s comment does raise a potentially interesting area for a comparative study.

C) Nietzsche and Chinese Philosophy

acceptance of change
relationship between spirit and nature, soul and body

the Sage (Sheng jen 亜人) and the Übermensch
Zhuangzi and the problem of language
the lucid dream

“He who dreams of drinking wine may weep when morning comes; he who dreams of weeping may in the morning go off to hunt. While he is dreaming he does not know it is a dream, and in his dream he may even try to interpret a dream. Only after he wakes does he know it was a dream. And someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream. Yet the stupid believe that they are awake, busily and brightly assuming they understand things, calling this man ruler, that one herdsman—how dense! Confucius and you are both dreaming! And when I say you are dreaming, I am dreaming, too. Words like these will be labeled the Supreme Swindle. Yet, after ten thousand generations, a great sage may appear who will know their meaning, and it will still be as though he appeared with astonishing speed.

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn’t know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly, he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuang Zhou. But he didn’t know if he was Zhuang Zhou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou. Between Zhuang Zhou and a butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things.


D) Nietzsche and Buddhism
problem of suffering
psychological depth
Nietzsche’s evaluation of Buddhism

Mahayana Buddhism

Mahāprajñāpāramitā Hridaya Sūtra
The Great Perfection of Wisdom Heart Sūtra

Thus did I hear at one time. The Transcendent Victor was sitting on Vulture Mountain on Rājagriha together with a great assembly of monks and a great assembly of Bodhisattvas. At that time the Transcendent Victor was absorbed in a samādhi on the enumerations of phenomena called “perception of the profound.” Also at that time, the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara was contemplating the meaning of the profound perfection of wisdom (prajñāpāramitā) and he saw that those five aggregates also are empty of inherent existence. Then by the power of the Buddha, the venerable Śāriputra said this to the Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara, “How should a son of good lineage train who wishes to practice the profound perfection of wisdom?

The Bodhisattva, the Mahāsattva, the Superior Avalokiteśvara said this to the venerable Śāriputra: “Śāriputra, a son of good lineage or a daughter of good lineage who wished to practice the perfection of wisdom should view [things] in this way: They should correctly view those five aggregates also as empty of inherent existence. Form (rūpa) is emptiness (śānyatā); emptiness is form.