



# THE TERMINAL PHASE OF MODERNITY

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Friedrich Nietzsche provided a thorough-going critique of modernity, because he saw that it had veered into a terminal phase. Whether Nietzsche's analysis is correct or not is not as essential as the direction towards values which transform action that he provided as a method of analysis.

Patrick Wotling is Professor at the University of Reims and director of the Groupe international de recherches sur Nietzsche (GIRN). He has extensively translated and commented on the German philosopher. His most recent book is *Nietzsche. La conquête d'une pensée* [Nietzsche. *The Conquest of a Philosophy*], which seeks to show that Nietzschean thought is not marked by disjointedness and fragmentation but by the constant pursuit of trying to conquer a refined method of thinking. Professor Wotling is here in conversation with *PHILITT*, through whose kind courtesy we are able to bring you this interview.

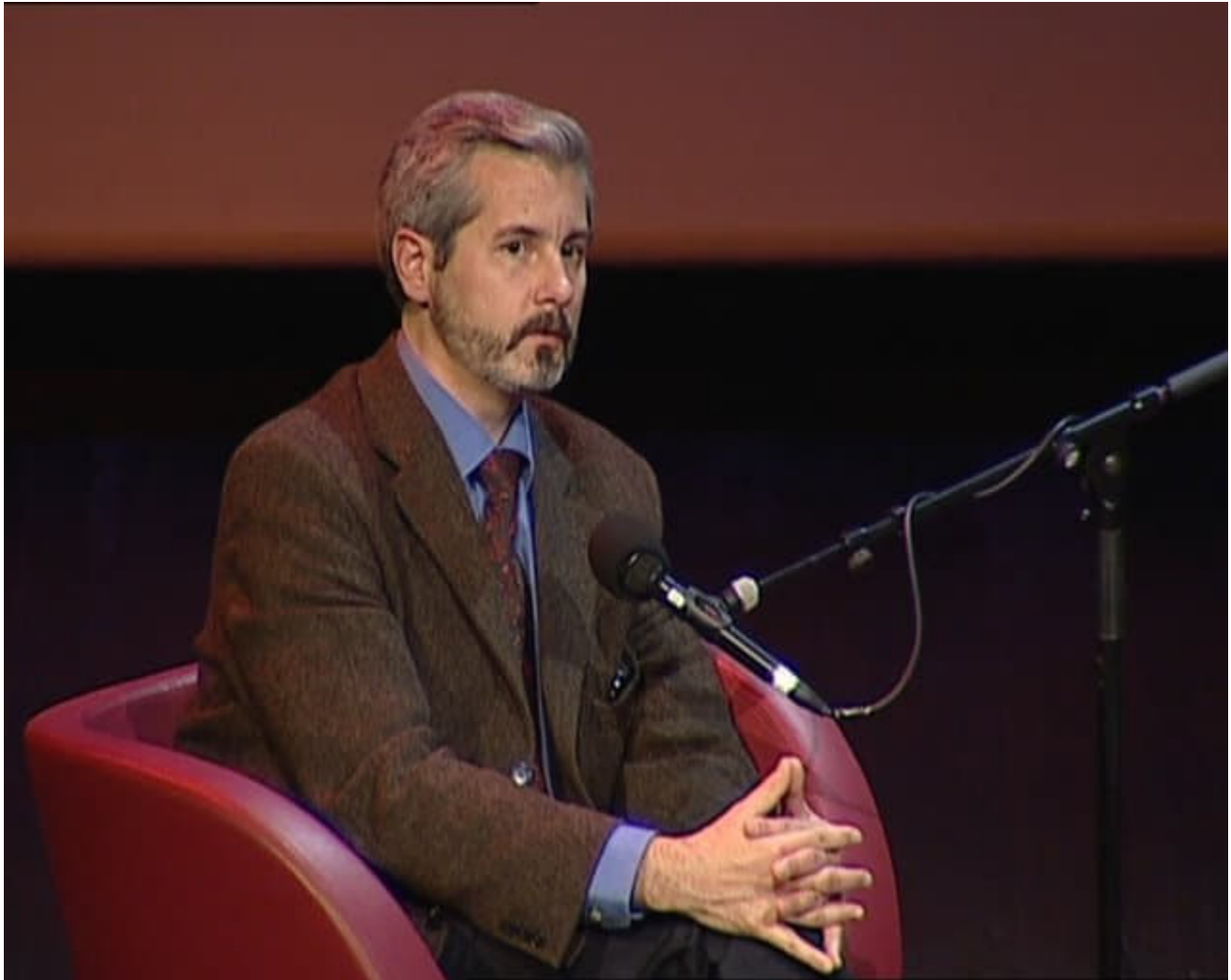
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**PHILITT (PL):** In your work, you highlight the synchronic coherence of Nietzsche's work, which has nevertheless evolved considerably over time. Can we speak of a Nietzschean "system?"

**Patrick Wotling (PW):** A careful examination shows the invariance of the Nietzschean problem, which was posed from the start. But it would be wrong to think that the coherence of his thinking forms a system. Certain interpretations of commentary are not tenable, in particular those that take up the belief in three periods, marked by radical changes that supposedly took place during the construction of this work, and that distinguish a first period when the young Nietzsche was the full and faithful disciple of Wagner and Schopenhauer, a second rationalist and "positivist" period, valuing science to the detriment of art, and finally a third period called the period of maturity, where finally appeared his great philosophies.

This indeed blinds us to the displacement of the problem from the outset carried out by Nietzsche in philosophy, which substitutes the questioning of values to the search for truth, which is only conditioned and not primary. Such is the initial gesture. If Nietzsche never fixed a system, if he always privileged on the contrary the way of research and exploration, his incessant investigation certainly allowed him to find continuations in relation to his starting analyses; but these are never reversals or ruptures. As an example, we see appearing in outline from his first work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, a series of schemes of analysis which will constitute invariants of a new way of thinking, notably the

conditioning role of infra-conscious processes (drives, affects), the oppositional structure (here of the Dionysian and the Apollonian) inhabiting reality, or the recognition of this last one as constituted by a set of interpretative processes, in rupture with the traditional ontology.



*Patrick Wotling.* [Source: [BNF](#)]

**PL:** Nietzsche's authority is claimed by political authors of the right and the left. Does Nietzsche justify a political orientation?

**PW:** Philosophy does not have to be of the right or of the left, even less that of a Nietzsche who is not a philosopher of politics, and criticizes the totality of the political currents of his time, of the right as well

as the left. Whatever the political sides that claim his thought, to draw applications from it, moderate or harmful, they are always recuperations that deliver incomplete, limited and deforming representations of a thought with claimed apoliticism. Nietzsche goes against the tradition of political philosophy, for example the Aristotelian heritage, insofar as he considers politics as a superficial field of action, itself conditioned by a much deeper stratum, that of culture, or in other words that of values. This is precisely the reason why Nietzsche situates himself on the field of axiology, the one that really gives shape to the organization of human life and ways of thinking, and not on the one of opinions or ideologies, which is unfit to exert such a deep influence: the field of values therefore belongs to a much more radical philosophical approach because it really conditions.

The political space puts in competition only various theoretical constructions, operating at the superficial level of the consciousness, which, behind their apparent divergences, can perfectly well, in the end, rest on similar values. Nietzsche goes back to the beginning of politics to ask the question of the founding values of a culture and of the ways of structuring the very existence that are deployed in it—and above all the question of the impact, beneficial or harmful, of the different values, on the evolution of human life.

**PL:** If Nietzsche does not intend to use institutional or political means, by what means of reproduction does he intend to promote the emergence of the Superhuman?

**PW:** The question of these techniques of transformation of the forms of organization of human life in Nietzsche is complex. In order to avoid misunderstandings, we must first specify that the objective is above all to pull humanity out of the spiral of nihilism that henceforth threatens it, making non-existence more desirable than existence; and then that, in this general framework, the superior type, embodying the supreme form of affirmation, that Nietzsche designates by the imagined term of "superhuman," does not concern a universal ideal, but a type of possible human life that it is a question of making happen among others, which have always existed and will always exist.

It is certainly not a question for Nietzsche of transforming humanity into superhumanity, by denying the intrinsically necessary variety of human types (artist, contemplative man, scientist, warrior, etc.) for the benefit of a supposedly invariant "new man," as totalitarian political ideologies do. In this respect, Nietzsche takes the opposite view of the Western tradition which, in its great moral systems, and its religious ideals, in particular Christianity, or political, always tried to impose a univocal form of life, having to apply to all indifferently. Nietzsche opposes this authoritarian standardization, taking Indian

Brahmanism as a point of comparison in *The Antichrist*. The problematic of values leads to a reflection on the hierarchy of the types of life open to man, but constantly underlines that human life, because of its nature, within a given culture, must necessarily present itself according to highly diversified variants, and that there is no worse danger than wanting to deny this diversity in the name of a supposed ideal of perfection.

**PL:** Isn't the apoliticism that you attribute to Nietzsche a blatant point in common with the other anti-modern thoughts of a Péguy, a Bloy or a Bernanos, reputedly "unclassifiable?"

**PW:** Nietzsche is not only unclassifiable as is the thought of a Péguy, whose finesse and freedom of spirit made him take, in the course of his life and his work, political positions frankly divergent from the point of view of ordinary categorizations. His singularity is to have taken no political position at all. He is not only unclassifiable: he is apolitical, out of respect for philosophical radicality. It is right, on the other hand, to notice the important place that the criticism of modernity takes in his work, even if it is unique and is not his only concern. This criticism takes place within the framework of his comparative analysis (the genealogy) of the various cultures, which rest each one on an axiological base, a base of determined values.

Modernity is thus a type of cultural organization among others—that of contemporary Europe, which is distinguished, like any culture, by its dominant values. One should not thus misunderstand the use of this word of "modernity" in Nietzsche—whether its conventional use makes some go back to the classical age or to the end of the 16th century, in Nietzsche, "modernity" designates the contemporary time, the type of culture which reigned in Europe at the 19th century.

**PL:** What does Nietzsche mean by "modernity?"

**PW:** For Nietzsche, modernity is constituted by the values of Platonism in the final phase of evolution. Modernity designates the moment when the values inherited from Platonism, which founded the European culture, lose their authority, disappearing to give place to a life governed from then on by anxiety, distrust and generalized pessimism.

These Platonic values, later relayed in a simplified form by Christianity, are fundamentally ascetic values, based on the negation of the sensible, the postulation of a beyond and the preference for it

over the here below. Philosophically, the notion of truth is a privileged expression of this, insofar as it teaches the condemnation of the changeable, assimilated to the illusory and to the false, whereas it structures reality itself. The sign of such a decline is, philosophically, the growing detachment of thinkers from this norm, which is now questioned, considered as suspicious, and called into question. What was once perceived as intrinsically legitimate by Plato, ceases to be so in the cultural framework of the ultimate phase of nihilism. One must keep in mind that not all values are equal for Nietzsche; some lead to illness, despair, and finally, turn against themselves. This is the case with ascetic values, which our modernity discovers that one cannot live with them in the long run.

**PL:** How is the nihilism of European modernity explained?

**PW:** For Nietzsche, who situates his analyses in the very long time of history, the values carried by Platonism and Christianity, as well as the other ascetic ideals, are not viable in the long term. Insofar as they practically contradict the conditions of life, these values were condemned in advance to collapse one day. In Europe, therefore, Platonism and Christianity are both victims and responsible for the disappearance of their own values. However, their decline, if it opens the possibility of an action of deep axiological reform, which the philosopher will have to exploit, makes Europe enter an extremely dangerous phase. Indeed, insofar as contemporary Europe does not offer, or not yet, substitute values, and where the axiological displacements are extremely slow movements, the advent of nihilism, the collapse of the values until then in force, that is to say the disappearance of the constitutive preferences which organized life until now, comes to threaten European humanity with disappearance.

It is in this nihilistic context that the numerous contemporaries, pessimists, feel a certain fear in regards to the future. They are disoriented; they realize that life is not worth what they thought it was worth. Hence the importance of the philosophy of the future elaborated by Nietzsche—nihilism will end only when the cultural conditions are met for the emergence of new values favorable to life. Art, in particular, must play a role of primary importance here, being the "greatest stimulant of life" (*Posthumous Fragments* XIV, 14 [20]); it constitutes the true "counter-power" (*Gay Science*, §107) towards modern values.

**PL:** By explaining that Christianity conveys values hostile to life, does Nietzsche not essentialize this doctrine? Is this not paradoxical for a philosopher who criticizes essences? Isn't a Christianity favorable to life, interpretable from the Nietzschean point of view, as is the philosophy of the flesh of a Michel Henry, immanentist?

**PW:** I am not competent to answer you about the possibilities or the intrinsic limits of Christianity, not being a theologian. On the other hand, it is necessary to understand that Nietzsche does not conceive Christianity as a simple theoretical doctrine, but much more deeply as a particular axiology, establishing a specific structuring of the organization of human life. A Christianity favorable to life would thus be a Christianity without values hostile to the fundamental conditions of reality; a Christianity without a kingdom of heaven, without a supra-sensible divinity, without a dualistic opposition of good and evil.

The immanentism of certain thinkers is, measured by this yardstick, most timid; it is always by a reversal of the values in force, by nature slow and difficult, that a form of culture is modified. This is what human history is made of. It is for example what happened, according to Nietzsche, for the particularly pessimistic archaic Greek wisdom, even more than Platonism, which taught that the greatest of the goods was not to exist. It is by the establishment of the values of the ancient tragedy, studied in the *Birth of the Tragedy*, that the Greeks succeeded in creating an exceptional culture of intensification of power, the attachment to the life.

Certain values carry the seeds of their own final reversal. Nietzsche thus recognizes in the Platonic and then Christian ideal of the search and the respect of the truth to have ended up producing, in the modern Europeans, a kind of hyper-development, never observed before, of the impulse of probity, of intellectual honesty, which he explicitly values. Nietzsche fights against Platonism and Christianity, but is simultaneously grateful to them for having brought together the conditions favorable to the emergence of this education in probity, by which the "free spirit" of the philosopher can question and perhaps in the future can free itself from the old values in order to establish a new axiological legislation.

Thus, not everything is negative for Nietzsche, for whom one must be grateful to one's adversaries when it is legitimate to be so, without locking oneself into a fundamental hostility towards them. "The Church has always wanted the annihilation of its enemies: we, the immoralists and anti-Christians, see our advantage in the fact that the Church exists," he summarizes in *Twilight of the Idols* ("Morality as Unnatural," §3).

**PL:** At a time when the majority of French people are expressing their opposition to the pension reform proposed by President Emmanuel Macron, isn't it legitimate to think that the way out of modernity could consist of an exit from the work society?

**PW:** In contemporary society, the individual is indeed subjected to work, which occupies every aspect of human existence, leaving very little room for leisure, for idleness, which is nevertheless a condition for reflection. In *Human, All Too Human I*, Nietzsche states that "he who does not have two thirds of his day for himself is a slave, whether he be what he wants: politician, merchant, civil servant, scholar." Who, today, in Western societies, has two-thirds of his day to himself? Under these conditions, for Nietzsche, modern humanity lives in a generalized situation of quasi-slavery. One should not hope to get out of this situation by technical progress alone, nor conversely by being satisfied with an opposition to technical development.

The problem, once again, is more profound—by virtue of the values which founded our modernity, democratic society is organized according to an economic model of this nature, imposing the generalization of work as a condition of survival, and turning its back on the recognition of the variety of human forms of life. The idleness, of which the ancient thought makes the very condition of the philosophy, or the artistic life, which privileges the play on the forms and, in a general way, the manners of living escaping the hyper-activity and the productivism, are thus discredited even associated with bad conscience.

**PL:** In reaction to contemporary nihilism, readers of Nietzsche may be tempted to embody his ideal of man. Can one be a Nietzschean?

**PW:** Nietzsche does not want Nietzscheans. He insisted many times on the fact that he did not want disciples: "I would still rather be considered a satyr than a saint," he wrote in his preface to *Ecce Homo*, or similarly, in a joking manner, in *Twilight of the Idols*: "What? Are you looking to multiply yourself by ten, by a hundred? Are you looking for disciples? Then look for zeros!" Nietzschean disciples would indeed be that: individuals without any particular personality. To be Nietzschean is meaningless.

On the other hand, it can be enlightening for the contemporary reader to look at Nietzsche's life and, for the thinker, to be inspired by it; this philosopher confided that he was pushed by his illness to realize what he wanted to do, to take the time to build his reflection, to question authentically, freeing himself from the prejudices and fashions of his time.

He thus chose to live quite modestly on the small pension paid by the University of Basel, in order to avoid, as much as possible, the constraints and obligations that would have prevented him from thinking and writing freely, despite the heavy constraints brought on by his illness.



However, Nietzsche does not preach his own choice of life as an ideal; each person has to examine his conscience in this respect according to what he aspires to, and as each type of human life is different, the exit from the economic game cannot in any case be recommended by Nietzsche as a general rule. When reading Nietzsche, one should never forget the importance he gave to the necessary variety of life forms.

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Featured: *Friedrich Nietzsche*, by Curt Stoeving; painted in 1894.

