

Philosophy in Review



John Sallis, "Nietzsche's Voices"

Kyle Pooley 

Volume 43, Number 4, November 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1108425ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1108425ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Pooley, K. (2023). Review of [John Sallis, "Nietzsche's Voices"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 43(4), 34–36. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1108425ar>

© Kyle Pooley, 2023



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

The logo for Érudit, featuring the word 'érudit' in a red, lowercase, sans-serif font.

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

John Sallis. *Nietzsche's Voices*. Indiana University Press 2023. 183 pp. \$75.00 USD (Hardcover 9780253063595); \$35.00 USD (Paperback 9780253063601).

Nietzsche's Voices is the latest addition to the growing collection of writings of John Sallis, which presents the notes of his two-semester lecture course between 1971-72. In such a brief time, Sallis ambitiously and succinctly works through Nietzsche's corpus, dedicating himself to explicating core ideas and themes that run throughout. At the level of pedagogy, Sallis presents Nietzsche thematically rather than strictly chronologically, which has the advantage of, on the one hand, avoiding reading Nietzsche's ideas as a natural linear development and, on the other hand, reading Nietzsche the way Nietzsche read himself, that is cross-textually, weaving in-and-out between the early, middle, and late works.

What we are left with is a 'book' split into two halves. The first half, as mentioned, aims to concisely explicate the life, themes, and ideas of Nietzsche's work. This begins with a short biography that centres on the philosophical importance of assessing Nietzsche's life in relation to his thought and, more fundamentally, raises the question (with thanks to Nietzsche) of the philosopher's relation to truth. Sallis then progresses with this problem in mind—namely, that philosophy takes 'for granted that man is able more or less to become a mouthpiece for the truth'—as he discusses themes such as Nietzsche's youthful and academic interest in the ancient Greeks, tragedy and poetry, truth, history and temporality, nihilism, morality, will to power, and the death of God. Upon journeying through a plethora of thematics, we find that throughout, Sallis is primarily concerned with drawing out the consequences—raised by Nietzsche himself—of what it means to be in possession of truth, i.e., truth about morality, history, God, and truth itself, etc. After having worked through the core themes in Nietzsche's work, Sallis dedicates himself to a close reading of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a text which, as Nietzsche says, contains the essence of his philosophy.

In this undertaking, Sallis presents us with two fundamental ideas that endure throughout Nietzsche's work: the idea of self-overcoming and the question of style. Self-overcoming is the motor that undergirds every other idea; for this reason, we do not see Sallis dedicate a section of its own. Instead, Sallis shows us how self-overcoming acts as the motor for every other idea. Having identified the priority of self-overcoming in Nietzsche's thought, Sallis seems to have drawn out a definitive methodological strategy Nietzsche uses. Whether Nietzsche is providing a critique of history, science, life, art, Christianity, nihilism, or God, he does so by analyzing the contradictions within them which results in an immanent self-overcoming. This logic of self-overcoming shows itself in two ways. Either Nietzsche turns a critical methodology—artistic, scientific, historiographical—back onto itself (i.e., historiographical critique of historiography, scientific critique of science, etc.) or Nietzsche shows the logical development of the self-overcoming of an Ideal—nihilism, Christianity, morality, humanity, God. Sallis shows us a Nietzsche who provides an immanent critique rather than an external one since what Nietzsche tries to show is the 'logic of decadence' inherent in such ideals and analyses their contradictions, that is how they must necessarily culminate in self-negation.

Thus, Nietzsche cannot be said to merely affirm or deny this process from the outside since he



is convinced of the inevitable logic of nihilism, the motor of self-negating ideals. This is what is meant by Nietzsche's description of nihilism as the 'highest values devaluing themselves.' The conclusion of nihilism is a crisis, a moment of decision, of revaluation. One is left only to affirm such a position so that one can affirm a new beginning. Nietzsche does not critique Ideals—such as Christianity or God—from the outside but wants to affirm the self-negating quality internal to them. As Sallis remarks, the negating of an Ideal is contained within it. *'The Ideal contains the seeds of its own destruction.'* What Nietzsche seeks is the affirmation of the self-overcoming or, as Nietzsche puts it in his *Genealogy*: 'all great things perish through themselves, through an act of *selbstaufhebung*: thus, the law of life wills it, the law of necessary 'self-overcoming' in the essence of life' (Part III:27). God has killed Himself. We can note here the remarkable similarity with Hegel's dialectics, which Nietzsche's notes himself.

Sallis carries this theme of self-overcoming into his reading of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a tragedy that is nothing if not a tale about the self-overcoming of humanity. The figure for whom this self-overcoming is affirmed is the overman. How does humanity overcome itself? By overcoming 'the past within ourselves.' Because, for Nietzsche, we are fundamentally historical beings, we are therefore prone to repeating the mistakes that lead to our self-negation. 'The past has revealed itself as nihilistic.' In order to overcome the self-negating logic internal to humanity, one must affirm the overman. As Sallis puts it, the self-negating form history assumes discloses within itself the direction in which the task to overcome history is to be taken. The new relation man has to valuation is simultaneously a new relation to history. Nietzsche condemns history for its nihilistic outcome, but he does not want revenge on it since it is revenge against time that condemns humanity to nihilism. The overcoming of the need for revenge against history leads to the self-overcoming of both humanity and history. Nietzsche's notion of the eternal return of the same is a reference to the idea of affirming, rather than punishing, history, of converting the accidents of history into necessity. *Da Capo!*

As Sallis presents it, *Zarathustra* is a book not only *about* tragedy but *as* tragedy that narratively plays out Nietzsche's theoretical work, specifically the aftermath of the death of God and the inevitable onset of nihilism. This raises the related question of the importance of style for Nietzsche since it is not for nothing that he wanted to present his core teaching in a literary form. Thus, Sallis' primary strategy for reading *Zarathustra* is to treat it as a literary text and pay close attention to the wealth of imagery Nietzsche employs to express his more theoretical ideas, images such as home, homelessness, solitude, madness, metamorphoses, heights and depths, births and deaths, and many more. The question to ask is, why did Nietzsche decide to present his ideas not only stylistically but in the form of a story? There are many answers to this question, but Sallis draws upon the fact that Nietzsche makes a distinction between what Sallis refers to as a distinction between 'concept-language' and 'image-language.' Sallis tells us that Nietzsche intended to refrain, when possible, from using a concept-language to avoid its latent metaphysical and religious character. Whereas the use of imagery remains 'true to the earth,' concepts refer to other-worldly, super-sensible phenomena. Every concept harbours within it the need to go beyond this world and is, therefore, both self-negating and life-negating. Sallis correctly identifies the importance not only of *what* is said but

how it is said, raising again the question of the relation between the biography, philosophy, and truth. It is for this reason that Sallis prefaces his lectures with a note on how (not) to read Nietzsche. As he says, one must be careful of the seductiveness of ‘immediate intelligibility,’ the allure of certainty. One must take distance from Nietzsche. As Zarathustra warns his disciples, do not treat him as another idol.

Nietzsche’s Voices is a highly recommendable text to both general readers and scholars alike; it is an excellent introduction and contribution to a deeper understanding of the movement of Nietzsche’s thought, which raises the possibility of adequately identifying a Nietzschean method—
a Nietzscheanism.

Kyle Pooley, Kingston University