Biographical note on Friedrich Nietzsche

Nietzsche’s method in philosophy (Text 1; also Text 3, the anti-dogmatism)
What is distinctive of N’s way of writing? → Is there a line of argument, underlying the aphoristic style, figurative language, use of apparently free association, of poetry, of parody, etc.? → I understand N’s method as: pathos-based methodological scepticism → Methodological scepticism: the view of philosophy as enquiry rooted in radical aporiai → By pathos-based I mean that N. is against suspension of judgement (which methodological sceptics are commonly committed to); on the contrary, he thinks the radical aporiai at the root of philosophical enquiry are an expression of passionate commitments and engagements → Compare Socrates, who denied that he knows any important truth, asserted that all he is doing is searching (for himself and with others) for such truths, and yet firmly held such commitments as ‘It is better to suffer injustice than to commit injustice’ (see Plato’s Gorgias, esp. 468f and 509)

Nietzsche on ‘the death of God’ – atheism (Text 2)
How, for N., is this account (as in Text 2) of our current condition a source of radical aporia – radical loss of compass, orientation? → How does N’s atheism, or apparent atheism, compare to the current-day atheism of the likes of Dennett, Dawkins etc.? → Have we, a century later, overcome this aporia? Is the death of God still our problem, in our secular times? Was the problem as radical as N. thought, in his time? → Is N an atheist? Is his belief that we can, and must, transform ourselves into something higher, something over-human (übermenschlich), compatible with simple-minded atheism?

Nietzsche’s critique of absolute values (Texts 3, 4 and 5)
What in Plato does N. consider the root of Christianity, and generally of our thinking ever since? → ‘pure spirit and the good in itself’ → What, for N., is it to believe that value opposites, like good and evil, or love and hate, are pure, absolute? To believe that there are absolute, pure values? → What, for N., is it to deny this? → What modern moral philosophy, without being theological, is committed to this way of thinking? → Kantianism, deontology → How does N. respond to those philosophers
(e.g. Hobbes, Hume, Mill … ) who think we have overcome, put behind us, the belief in absolute values? → Has current day liberalism, committed to value pluralism but also to the idea of human rights, got rid of this belief? → How are we to understand N’s claim that only through the battle with (not just against) Platonism can we search for new aims ‘with a taught bow’ and ‘without going asleep’?

Nietzsche’s account of love as a model for how to overcome the belief that value opposites are absolute (Texts 6 and 7)

I understand N’s account of love as aimed both at understanding love and as a way of illustrating and explicating how we can overcome the belief in good and evil as absolutes → What does ‘overcome’ mean here (‘überwinden’; compare the term ‘beyond’, ‘jenseits’, in the phrase ‘beyond good and evil’, ‘jenseits von Gut und Böse’) → Does it simply mean ‘to abandon’? → How can there be something higher than the opposition between good and evil? → What does N. mean by the claim that what is done out of love takes place beyond good and evil? → How can love, at its best, take us to a supremely good place, but not a place of pure or absolute goodness?

Nietzsche on transforming ourselves into something higher – something super-human, übermenschlich (Text 8)

How is N.’s conception of self-transformation like Plato’s (or Christianity’s)? → See Plato’s reference, in the Theaetetus, to our task being to become godlike → How is it unlike Plato’s (or Christianity’s)? → Is it possible to aspire to self-transformation without the commitment to absolute values? → What would this self-transformation look like? Does N. spell this out? → Is it a political task? Or a personal, existential task? → What in us can we draw on to aspire to self-transformation without absolute values? → Nietzsche points to: love; philosophy; and … suffering

How does Nietzsche respond to the reaction ‘This does not speak to me’ (Texts 9-11)

What is N’s distinction between the noble mindset and the slavish mindset? → Is it a political distinction? A psychological distinction? Both? → Does the distinction divide people into two exclusive sets? → Why does N. associate the slavish mindset with what he calls ‘herd-morality’ and the democratic ethos? → Is self-transformation the ultimate aim of the noble mindset?

I end with a poem by Cavafy, which strikes me as thoroughly Nietzschean:

For some people there comes a day
when they must pronounce the great Yes
or the great No. It is revealed at once who has the Yes
ready within him, and speaking it loud and clear,
he goes forward in the esteem and assurance that is his.
No change of mind for the denier: if asked again,
he would say no once more. Yet that No—the right one—
oppresses him throughout his life.

(C.P. Cavafy, Che fece … il gran rifiuto; translated by me. The poem was written in 1901)
Text 1
We [philosophers of my sort] are no thinking frogs, no objective and fact-finding apparatus with its intestines put on ice – we must incessantly give birth to our thoughts from out of our pain and, like a mother, provide them with all we have in us of blood, heart, fire, pleasure, passion, suffering, conscience, destiny, fate. (The Gay Science 3[1887], my translation)

Text 2
The madman. - Haven't you heard of that madman who in the bright morning lit a lantern and ran around the marketplace crying incessantly, 'I'm looking for God! I'm looking for God!' Since many of those who did not believe in God were standing around together just then, he caused great laughter. Has he been lost, then? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone to sea? Emigrated? - Thus they shouted and laughed, one interrupting the other. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. 'Where is God?' he cried; 'I'll tell you! We have killed him - you and I! We are all his murderers. But how did we do this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we un chained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sidewards, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren't we straying as though through an infinite nothing? Isn't empty space breathing at us? Hasn't it got colder? Isn't night and more night coming again and again? Don't lanterns have to be lit in the morning? Do we still hear nothing of the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we still smell nothing of the divine decomposition? - Gods, too, decompose! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers! The holiest and the mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood from us? With what water could we clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves? Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it? There was never a greater deed - and whoever is born after us will on account of this deed belong to a higher history than all history up to now!' Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; they too were silent and looked at him disconcertedly. Finally he threw his lantern on the ground so that it broke into pieces and went out. 'I come too early', he then said; 'my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder need time; the light of the stars needs time; deeds need time, even after they are done, in order to be seen and heard. This deed is still more remote to them than the remotest stars - and yet they have done it themselves!' It is still recounted how on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there started singing his requiem aeternam deo. Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but, 'What then are these churches now if not the tombs and sepulchres of God?' (The Gay Science 125, translated by Josefine Nauckhoff)
SUPPOSING that Truth is a woman—what then? Is there not ground for suspecting that all philosophers, in so far as they have been dogmatists, have failed to understand women—that the terrible seriousness and clumsy importunity with which they have usually paid their addresses to Truth, have been unskilled and unseemly methods for winning a woman? Certainly she has never allowed herself to be won; and at present every kind of dogma stands with sad and discouraged mien—IF, indeed, it stands at all! For there are scoffers who maintain that it has fallen, that all dogma lies on the ground—nay more, that it is at its last gasp. But to speak seriously, there are good grounds for hoping that all dogmatizing in philosophy, whatever solemn, whatever conclusive and decided airs it has assumed, may have been only a noble puerilism and tyronism; and probably the time is at hand when it will be once and again understood WHAT has actually sufficed for the basis of such imposing and absolute philosophical edifices as the dogmatists have hitherto reared: perhaps some popular superstition of immemorial time (such as the soul-superstition, which, in the form of subject- and ego-superstition, has not yet ceased doing mischief): perhaps some play upon words, a deception on the part of grammar, or an audacious generalization of very restricted, very personal, very human—all-too-human facts. The philosophy of the dogmatists, it is to be hoped, was only a promise for thousands of years afterwards, as was astrology in still earlier times, in the service of which probably more labour, gold, acuteness, and patience have been spent than on any actual science hitherto: we owe to it, and to its "super-terrestrial" pretensions in Asia and Egypt, the grand style of architecture. It seems that in order to inscribe themselves upon the heart of humanity with everlasting claims, all great things have first to wander about the earth as enormous and awe-inspiring caricatures: dogmatic philosophy has been a caricature of this kind—for instance, the Vedanta doctrine in Asia, and Platonism in Europe. Let us not be ungrateful to it, although it must certainly be confessed that the worst, the most tiresome, and the most dangerous of errors hitherto has been a dogmatist error—namely, Plato's invention of Pure Spirit and the Good in Itself. But now when it has been surmounted, when Europe, rid of this nightmare, can again draw breath freely and at least enjoy a healthier—sleep, we, WHOSE DUTY IS WAKEFULNESS ITSELF, are the heirs of all the strength which the struggle against this error has fostered. It amounted to the very inversion of truth, and the denial of the PERSPECTIVE—the fundamental condition—of life, to speak of Spirit and the Good as Plato spoke of them; indeed one might ask, as a physician: "How did such a malady attack that finest product of antiquity, Plato? Had the wicked Socrates really corrupted him? Was Socrates after all a corrupter of youths, and deserved his hemlock?" But the struggle against Plato, or—to speak plainer, and for the "people"—the struggle against the ecclesiastical oppression of millenniums of Christianity (FOR CHRISTIANITY IS PLATONISM FOR THE "PEOPLE"), produced in Europe a magnificent tension of soul, such as had not existed anywhere previously; with such a tensely strained bow one can now aim at the furthest goals. As a matter of fact, the European feels this tension as a state of distress, and twice attempts have been made in grand style to unbend the bow: once by means of Jesuitism, and the second time by means of democratic enlightenment—which, with the aid of liberty of the press and newspaper-reading, might, in fact, bring it about that the spirit would not so easily find itself in "distress"! (The Germans invented gunpowder—all credit to them! but they again made things square—they invented printing.) But we, who are neither Jesuits, nor democrats, nor even sufficiently Germans, we GOOD EUROPEANS, and free, VERY free spirits—we have it still, all the distress of spirit and all the tension of its bow! And perhaps also the arrow, the duty, and, who knows? THE GOAL TO AIM AT.... (Preface to Beyond Good and Evil [1886]; translation Helen Zimmern; underlining added)
Text 4

The fundamental belief of metaphysicians is the belief in the opposition of values ['an die Gegensätze der Werte']. It did not occur even to the most careful of them to entertain doubts already here, at the threshold <of their investigations>, where indeed it would be most needful to do so: and this even when they had praised themselves “de omnibus dubitandum” [“everything it to be doubted”]. ...

It would even be possible that that which constitutes the value of those good and honoured things should consist precisely in this: in their being, in the most insidious way, cognate, combined, interwoven, perhaps even essentially alike ['wesensgleich'] to those bad and seemingly opposed things. Perhaps! But who is willing to take up the concern with such a dangerous ‘perhaps’. (Beyond Good and Evil 2; translation Hollingdale, adapted by me)

Text 5

Even a theory of the mutual dependence of the ‘good’ and the ‘wicked’ impulses causes, as a more refined immorality, pain and weariness in a conscience still strong and hearty—and even more a theory of the derivation of all good impulses from wicked ones. Supposing, however, that someone goes as far as to regard the emotions of hatred, envy, covetousness and lust for domination as life-conditioning emotions, as something which must fundamentally and essentially be present in the total economy of life, consequently must be heightened further if life is to be heightened further—he suffers from such an orientation of his judgement as from seasickness. (trans. Hollingdale, adapted)

Text 6

That which is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil. (Beyond Good and Evil 153)

Texts 7 (all from Beyond Good and Evil)

Love of one is a piece of barbarism: for it is practised at the expense of all others. Love of God likewise. (section 67)

The degree and kind of a person’s sexuality reaches up into the topmost summit of his spirit. (section 75)

Heavy, melancholy people grow lighter through precisely that which makes others heavy, through hatred and love, and for a while they rise to the surface. (section 90)

One ought to depart from life as Odysseus departed from Nausicaa—blessing it rather than in love with it. (section 96)

The tremendous expectation in regard to sexual love and the shame involved in this expectation, distorts all a woman’s perspectives from the start. (section 114)

Where neither love nor hate is in the game a woman is a mediocre player. (section 115)
Sensuality often makes love grow too quickly, so that the root remains weak and is easy to pull out. (section 120)

In revenge and in love woman is more barbarous than man. (section 139)

The chastest [or, ‘most chastening’] expression I have ever heard: “Dans la veritable amount c’est l’âme, qui envoie le corps [‘in true love it is the soul that embraces the body’].” (section 142)

Love brings to light the exalted and concealed qualities of a lover—what is rare and exceptional in one: to that extent it can easily deceive as to what is normal in one. (section 163)

Jesus said to his Jews: “The law was made for slaves—love God as I love him, as his son! What have we sons of God to do with morality!” (section 164)

Christianity gave Eros poison to drink: — he did not die of it, to be sure, but degenerated into vice. (section 168)

This also provides a hint towards the elucidation [or, ‘explanation’] of that paradox: why it was precisely during Europe’s Christian period and only under the influence of Christian value judgements that the sexual drive sublimated into love (amour passion). (189)

If love and hatred are demanded of him [the objective person, the scientific person], I mean love and hatred as God, woman and animals understand them—: he will do what he can and give what he can. But one ought not to be surprised if it is not very much—if he proves inauthentic, brittle, questionable and soft. His love and his hatred are artificial and more of a tour de force, a small piece of vanity and an exaggeration. (207)

Text 8

When Zarathustra came into the nearest town lying on the edge of the forest, he found many people gathered in the market place, for it had been promised that a tightrope walker would perform. And Zarathustra spoke thus to the people: “I teach you the overman. Human being is something that must be overcome. What have you done to overcome him? All creatures so far created something beyond themselves; and you want to be the ebb of this great flood and would even rather go back to animals than overcome humans? What is the ape to a human? A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. And that is precisely what the human shall be to the overman: a laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. You have made your way from worm to human, and much in you is still worm. Once you were apes, and even now a human is still more ape than any ape. But whoever is wisest among you is also just a conflict and a cross between plant and ghost. But do I implore you to become ghosts or plants? Behold, I teach you the overman! The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman shall be the meaning of the earth! I beseech you, my brothers, remain faithful to the earth and do not believe those who speak to you of extraterrestrial hopes! They are mixers of poisons whether they know it or not. They are despisers of life, dying off and self-poisoned, of whom the earth is weary: so let them fade away! Once the sacrilege against God was the greatest sacrilege, but God died, and then all these desecrators died. Now to desecrate the earth is the most terrible thing, and to esteem the bowels of the unfathomable higher than the meaning of the earth! Once the soul gazed contemptuously at the body, and then such contempt was the highest thing: it wanted the body gaunt, ghastly, starved. Thus it intended to escape the body and the earth. Oh this soul was gaunt, ghastly and starved, and cruelty was the lust of this soul! But you, too, my brothers, tell me: what does your body proclaim about your soul? Is your soul not poverty
and filth and a pitiful contentment? Truly, mankind is a polluted stream. One has to be a sea to take in a polluted stream without becoming unclean. Behold, I teach you the overman: he is this sea, in him your great contempt can go under. What is the greatest thing that you can experience? It is the hour of your great contempt. The hour in which even your happiness turns to nausea and likewise your reason and your virtue. (*Thus spoke Zarathustra* 3 [1883-85])

**Text 9**

On my peregrinations [or, ‘walks’, ‘hikes’: ‘Wanderungen’] through the many finer and coarser morals which have ruled and still rule on earth, I found that certain traits ['Züge'] regularly recur together and are bound up with one another: until at length two basic types ['Grundtypen'] became apparent to me and a basic distinction ['ein Grundunterschied'] emerged. There is master-morals and slave-morals. — I add at once that in all higher and mixed cultures attempts at mediation between the two can be observed, while more frequently they are mixed together in confusion and there is a mutual misunderstanding between them, and yet again at times they stand side by side in hard ('hart') juxtaposition—even in the same human being and within a single soul. (*Beyond Good and Evil* 260, opening; translation Hollingdale, adapted)

**Text 10**

The moral value distinctions have arisen either among a ruling order which was pleasurably conscious of its distinction from the ruled—or among the ruled, the slaves and dependants of every degree. In the former case, when it is the rulers who determine the concept “good”, it is the exalted, proud states of the soul which are considered as that which marks something as outstanding ['das Auszeichnende'] and as determining of the hierarchies. The noble human being separates from himself those natures in which the opposite of such exalted proud states finds expression: he despises them. It should be noted at once that in this first type of morals the opposition “good” and “bad” means as much as “noble” and “despicable”—the opposition “good” and “evil” has a different origin [Nietzsche will turn to this origin later in the same section]. (*Beyond Good and Evil*, section 260; trans. Hollingdale, adapted)

**Text 11**

It is otherwise with the second type of morals, slave-morals. Suppose those moralizing are: the abused, oppressed, suffering, unfree, those uncertain of themselves and weary. What will be the common element in moral evaluations? Probably a pessimistic mistrust of the entire situation of humanity will find expression, perhaps a condemnation of humanity together with its situation. The slave’s glance is suspicious of the virtues of the powerful: he is sceptical and mistrustful, *keenly* mistrustful, of anything “good” that is honoured among them—he would like to convince himself that happiness itself is not genuine among them. Conversely, those qualities are emphasized and put into the spotlights that serve to make easier the existence of those who are suffering: here it is that pity, the kind and helping hand, the warm heart, patience, industry, humility, friendliness come into their own—for these are the most useful qualities and virtually the only means of enduring the burden of existence. Slave-morals is essentially utility-morals. (*Beyond Good and Evil*, section 260; trans. Hollingdale, adapted)