

Winter 12-21-2016

# Nietzsche's Spiritual Exercises

Babette Babich

*Fordham University*, [babich@fordham.edu](mailto:babich@fordham.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://fordham.bepress.com/phil\\_babich](https://fordham.bepress.com/phil_babich)

Part of the [Continental Philosophy Commons](#), [History of Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Babich, Babette, "Nietzsche's Spiritual Exercises" (2016). *Articles and Chapters in Academic Book Collections*. 74.  
[https://fordham.bepress.com/phil\\_babich/74](https://fordham.bepress.com/phil_babich/74)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at DigitalResearch@Fordham. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles and Chapters in Academic Book Collections by an authorized administrator of DigitalResearch@Fordham. For more information, please contact [considine@fordham.edu](mailto:considine@fordham.edu).

# N

In: Michael A. Peters, ed., *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*.  
Frankfurt am Main: Springer, 2016.

## Nietzsche's Spiritual Exercises

Babette Babich  
Fordham University, New York, USA

### Spiritual Exercises

Nietzsche's third *Untimely Meditation*, composed in 1874, *Schopenhauer as Educator* (Nietzsche 1983a), reflects upon and describes a "spiritual exercise" not unlike the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, detailing tactics and including practical advice. Thus Nietzsche's "spiritual exercises" correspond to the traditional practice of self-cultivation, self-education, characteristic of the Stoic philosophers but also influential for the Hellenistic neo-Platonic tradition, the church fathers, and St. Augustine, author of *De Magistro* and the *Confessions*. Beyond antiquity, spiritual exercises refer to a theological practice of self-cultivation and self-discipline. As a classist by training, Nietzsche notably offered a series of reflections on self-cultivation usually associated with the phrase he adopted as his own from the 7<sup>th</sup> Century BCE lyric poet, Pindar: "Become the one you are!" emphasizing that one only assumes but does not know oneself and must undertake to seek to come to know and then and on this basis to perfect oneself. In this same spirit, Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* reflect on a project of self-discovery and discipline. In particular, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, illustrates the project of finding

the ideal educator *for oneself*: inasmuch as and ultimately, so Nietzsche writes, education can only be "self-education" and for the sake of, like the Stoics, attaining liberation: "your true educators can only be your liberators." Here, it is well worth reviewing Ignatius of Loyola's (1986) own *Spiritual Exercises*. (For a philosophical discussion, in addition to Patrick Aidan Heelan, S. J. 1986, see Antonio de Nicolás's, articulation of spiritual technique (1986a). A former Jesuit, with all the training of the same, de Nicolás' highly programmatic rules for the direction of sainthood, as it were, are detailed in the second and third chapters of the first part of his book, *Powers of Imagining*, entitled, respectively, *Imagining: Primary Text, Primary Technology* (1986b) and *A Text for Reading, A Text for Deciding* (1986c)).

Such spiritual exercises or practices as we may speak of these following Pierre Hadot or Michel Foucault, correspond to is "the secret" of education in Nietzsche's essay, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, the third of his *Untimely Meditations*, the first three of which were published, seriatim, from 1873 through 1874. (The fourth essay of the *Untimely Meditations*, *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* would not appear until 1876.) If the second essay, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, has rightly commanded attention, the first essay is especially significant if only rarely discussed in its own right: a diatribe on the theologian and popularizer David Strauss, concerned with the same theme that occupies Nietzsche in his second essay, that is, concerning the use of

historical philology (Strauss popularized the so-called 'historical' Jesus) along with the challenges of popular reception and not less with the question of an author's style.

Here in *David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer* (Nietzsche 1983b), Nietzsche begins by examining the "appeal" of popular appeals as such, starting with Strauss's theological philological (or classical) scholarship, as Nietzsche criticizes this, along with his 'use' of history, for the sake of the convention of an historical Jesus, thus articulating a putatively 'scientific' but in fact conventionally rather than critically historical account, drawing on Darwin and Hegel in addition to Schleiermacher and the mechanics of cosmology, including a "philistine" relation to historical context as indeed to then-contemporary politics and war.

By contrast with such broadly philological concerns, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, offers an intimate address to the reader, beginning very nearly as Descartes begins his own *Meditations on First Philosophy*, including – recall Hadot's references to Pierre Courcelle on Augustine (Hadot 1995, 50–52) – the trappings of the genre of "meditation," talking about travel and distant lands, as of different peoples, space, and time—all the ingredients of personal communication.

Thus, we begin with an overall impression confided by an experienced traveler who confesses to us that most people in most lands share the following common traits: they are lazy, fearful, and herdlike. The herd quality is already familiar to the reader of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* not only after the first meditation's emphasis on popular edification and the second meditation's bucolic reference to the ahistoricity and forgetfulness of the herd animal at the start of *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, contrasting the animal with the human condition to praise the human being's distinguishing excellence and capacity for memory, defining as "true men, those who are no longer animal, philosophers, artists and saints" (Nietzsche 1983a, 159).

From this perspective, at once conspiratorial and sympathetic, Nietzsche's first line epitomizes the famously misanthropic Schopenhauer:

When the great thinker despises mankind, he despises their laziness; for it is on account of their laziness that men seem like factory products, things of no consequence and unworthy to be associated with or instructed. (Nietzsche 1983a, 127)

Nietzsche's familiar tone invites the reader to suppose himself both like and unlike the "great thinker." Thus a more complicated reflection on this essay might highlight a certain contradiction, Nietzsche seems to take the reader's side, seeming to advocate on behalf of anyone who does not wish to be lumped in with "the herd" Schopenhauer seems to "despise." "Be yourself!" is the invitation, with the complicated explanation that "All you are now thinking, doing, desiring, is not you yourself" (Ibid).

In what follows Nietzsche invites the "youthful soul" (and almost every reader is able to respond to such an invitation, the young and the young at heart alike) to reflect along with him. The scope of the invitation to the soul is irresistible, promising "a happiness allotted it from all eternity," a "happiness," available to anyone who can break free of "the chains of fear and convention" (Ibid).

Of all of Nietzsche's writings, *Schopenhauer as Educator* exemplifies and justifies David B. Allison's striking and beautiful reflection in his preface to *Reading the New Nietzsche*:

Perhaps more than any other philosopher who readily comes to mind, Nietzsche writes exclusively for you. Not at you, but for you. For you, the reader, only you. (Allison 2000, vii)

Note that the titular reference to the 'New' echoes Allison's own earlier book collection (Allison, ed. 1985). Such a "New Nietzsche" is a properly "continental" Nietzsche, read together with, and through, Heidegger, Deleuze, Granier, Derrida, Birault but also Lingis and one can say, Allison as well (for a discussion, see: Babich (2005–2006)). As Allison's point here suggests, Nietzsche, as author, gives *everything* away, including the reader's convictions: telling the reader that everything he or she is or has done or had lived through, gone through, *is not* what he or she is, *not really*. Instead, the reader's real or true self corresponds to his or her "higher" self. Not only that but Nietzsche tells us that the experience of *true education* is and "can only be" *liberation*.

This is very exhilarating language.

And Nietzsche does more as he goes on to offer techniques, real ones, very accurate, very traditional techniques, for what he promises us here: in search of an educator. Instructively, to do this Nietzsche describes a memory palace: telling the reader of his day how to make one and explaining to the reader the purposes of such a palace, given the very contemporary, then and now, modern, all-too-modern project of “finding oneself.” As always, if we mean to understand Nietzsche’s meaning, we cannot dispense with Nietzsche’s discipline of ancient philology (Classics) but we also need, more generally, a method of hermeneutic reading, including situating a text in its own and not less in our own historical context (cf. on Nietzsche and hermeneutics, Babich 2014).

Thus with explicit reference to the classical study of education, Nietzsche’s description of the construction of a memory palace in his *Schopenhauer as Educator* should be taken together with Aristotle’s practical philosophy of self-perfection. The method in each case involves self-examination, meditation, and reflection:

Let the youthful soul look back on life with the question: what have you truly loved up to now, what has elevated your soul, what has mastered it and at the same time delighted it? Place these venerated objects before you in a row, and perhaps they will yield for you, through their nature and their sequence, a law, the fundamental law of your true self. Compare these objects, see how one complements, expands, surpasses, transfigures another, how they form a stepladder upon which you have climbed up to yourself as you are now; for your true nature lies, not hidden deep within you, but immeasurably high above you, or at least above that which you normally take to be yourself. (Nietzsche 1983a, 129)

As with any comparison of different aspects, bracketing prejudices and societal convictions, the point is to find a common aspect that does not change: this is what mathematicians, physicists, and phenomenologists call *the invariant*.

The project is classically archaic, the heart of philosophy, in utter accord with the wisdom of the Delphic oracle – *gnothi seauton* (know thyself). Nietzsche adds to this what he took from Pindar’s poetic challenge to hold faith with and to be true to yourself, having learned, both as students *begin to*

*learn* and as educators *have learned*, who you are, that is, to say *in potentia*: what you are capable of. (I discuss the complexities of Nietzsche’s motto, as indeed of translating Pindar’s phrase: Babich 2009.)

## Nietzsche’s Ladder

The project in Nietzsche’s meditation is that of discovery. The treasure chest of the heart is less to be memorized than sounded out, discovered in its compass and depth, and a scaffolding to be constructed not for a descent into the depths of this treasure chest but for an ascent as we shall see. Nietzsche’s project in *Schopenhauer as Educator* allows the reader to construct a *studiosum*, a study chamber of the heart. The result is a guide not to the arts as such but the self; again, we recall the method: “Place these venerated objects before you in a row, and perhaps they will yield for you, through their nature and their sequence, a law, the fundamental law of your true self” (Nietzsche 1983a, 129).

Using the things you love to descry yourself, you, the reader, are invited to study their relation to one another. Once again:

Compare these objects, see how one complements, expands, surpasses, transfigures another, how they form a stepladder upon which you have climbed up to yourself as you are now; for your true nature lies, not hidden deep within you, but immeasurably high above you, or at least above that which you normally take to be yourself. (Ibid)

Education is a triumph of emancipation or liberation. Thus Nietzsche’s comparative phenomenology of the heart reveals not only an inner ideal but a progress, inasmuch as the self-searching “youthful soul” already stands and leans on them in order to have attained the vantage point already attained.

Here there is a turn around, a reversal. For what one discovers is just and only that one cannot be educated. This means that the point of seeking an educator brings one face-to-face with this same ineducability. In consequence, one does not need educators for the sake of education as much as one needs them to “free one” from education:

Your true educators and formative teachers reveal to you what the real raw material of your being is, something quite ineducable, yet in any case accessible only with difficulty, bound, paralyzed: your educators can be only your liberators. (Ibid)

This ideal echoes Nietzsche's great sympathy for both Baruch Spinoza and Blaise Pascal, and it hints at what he ultimately believes will be the grace or "light of art":

it is the perfecting of nature when it prevents her cruel and merciless attacks and turns them to good, when it draws a veil over the expressions of nature's stepmotherly disposition and her sad lack of understanding. (Ibid)

In this way Nietzsche discovers or "finds" himself as he reads, as he writes, *Schopenhauer as Educator*.

Telling his own story to himself in this way, Nietzsche suggests that before finding Schopenhauer, he engaged in a kind of educational "cruising," as Tracy B. Strong is calculatedly fond of this risqué and deliberately erotic language. (Tracy Strong varies Nietzsche's sampling selection of different philosophical offerings – "I tried this one and that one" (Nietzsche 1983a, 133) – in (Strong 2000, xxx).) By contrast, with this more modern invocation, Nietzsche's exemplar is deliberately antique: it is Pindar's *you are to, you ought to, you should* become the one you are. (For a discussion, see Pindar (and Alexander Nehamas) in Babich 2009.)

In connection with Augustine's own *Confessions* and Pierre Courcelle's hermeneutic re-reading of those confessions as related in Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life* which reflects on the same charms and the same dangers (see, again, the first chapter of Hadot 1995), the seductiveness of Nietzsche's confessional expression obscures the urgency of the task Nietzsche sets for himself at the start of his call to teach at the University of Basel in Switzerland. Owing to this urgency, Nietzsche titled his meditations *Untimely*. Thus Nietzsche challenged his own educational institutions much as Ivan Illich likewise challenged education in his book, *Deschooling Society*. Illich's parallel is a complex one, but his point (which Illich also argues to illustrate the role school plays as an instrument

of globalization) is offered on the backdrop of cooption and cultural imperialism especially as this is evident in underdeveloped countries but which can also be seen at any level in society, especially in the contrast between high and low. As Illich notes in his own context which focuses on the former: "With very rare exceptions, the university graduate from a poor country feels more comfortable with his North American and European colleagues than with his non-schooled compatriots, and all students are academically processed to be happy only in the company of fellow consumers of the products of the educational machine" (Illich 2000, 34.)

Nietzsche outlines the disparity of the scholar's vocation in pedagogic practice as opposed to the ideal which he takes to a reflection on the differences between one scholarly expert and another, not unlike the reflections Max Weber will later offer with respect to both science (*Wissenschaft*) and politics as vocation.

Nietzsche argued in his *Untimely Meditations* and overall that the great majority of scholars could be compared to machines churning automatically, eager to toe the latest trend and unwilling to question much less to offer a critique, anxious to avoid rocking the boat and so to risk being disturbed in their path to conventional security. Thus Nietzsche reflected on the scholar in terms of the dryness of his element, the dust of books, the "grayness" of their thinking.

In his inaugural lecture, Nietzsche had argued that claims to expertise were founded on nothing other than scholarly taste, in other words, sheer personal judgment or mere convention. As Nietzsche went on to argue in a related passage in *Schopenhauer as Educator*, such conventions offer a hiding place for both the narrowly competent and the incompetent in addition to the malformed, adding that once decadence begins in our educational institutions, it can only grow.

The parallel instantiation Nietzsche draws upon varies Augustine's voice of the friend, angel, or messenger: *tolle lege*, take and read. To this extent the account that we have from Nietzsche of his discovery of Schopenhauer's books in a bookshop gives us a similarly parallel Augustinian atmosphere. No fig tree, to be sure (thus the

relevance of Courcelle's challenge to the literality of Augustine's related facts of Augustine's life in his *Confessions*), no word from a nearby angel, Nietzsche was very literally surrounded by books, trying this one and that.

For Nietzsche, as for Allison who tells us how to read Nietzsche, what is telling is a spiritual, affective, and intimate connection with an author, Schopenhauer, who wrote as if what he wrote were directly addressed, in this case, to Nietzsche himself as reader. It was, Nietzsche tells us, seemingly embarrassed by the audacity of the claim, however "foolish and immodest a way of putting it, *as though* it were for me he had written" (1983a, 133).

The personal affinity worked only because by contrast with David Strauss, "confessor" and "writer," Schopenhauer's style was exactly not *popular*. Schopenhauer's style is not that of the Strunk and White variety or the sort of style US writing clinics might counsel for today's undergraduates, "writing across the curriculum," or the sort of journalistic inoffensiveness that might permit one to write a novel or a screenplay for the next television miniseries. In other words, Schopenhauer, who took extraordinary care with his writing, did not write in a way that would have guaranteed literary or scholarly fame, and accordingly Schopenhauer never attained market success as a classic. Thus what Nietzsche found exemplary was less Schopenhauer's writerly success or fame, much less his timeliness, than that Schopenhauer wrote for himself. Nietzsche could thus characterize Schopenhauer's specifically nonstylized stylization or *artless artfulness*, saying that "Schopenhauer never wants to cut a [rhetorical] figure: for he writes for himself..." (Nietzsche 1983a). The intimate vocative address, as Nietzsche writes on the educator he found for himself, in his own encounter not with the man but with his writings, calls to the reader *as if, as though*, no one else were intended apart from the reader.

I mentioned the contrast with Strauss, but note again that the point can easily be overlooked if one has not first read Nietzsche's *David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer*, the first of the *Untimely Meditations*. We recall that Nietzsche

criticizes Strauss in terms of his philology and owing to his conspicuously writerly his style, that is, "as a *writer* recognized as a classic" (Nietzsche 1983b, 37). This assessment provokes Nietzsche's ire, but what is instructive is that Nietzsche makes the point with reference to German education and not less to the public confidence in its enduring value. This confidence:

seriously convinced of the superiority of all German educational institutions, especially the grammar schools and universities, never ceases to recommend them to foreigners as models, and does not doubt for a moment that they have made the German people into the most educated and judicious nation in the world. (Ibid)

The focus here is on what Nietzsche calls the philistine and the philistine's ideal, by contrast with Strauss' Schopenhauer. As Nietzsche writes in his essay on Schopenhauer, the difference between them is far from neutral: "Of all the offence Schopenhauer has given to numerous scholars, nothing has offended them more than the unfortunate fact that he does not resemble them" (Nietzsche 1983a, 182).

Here Nietzsche is quite conspicuously challenging extant university education, reflecting first on the oddity of paying people to practice an ancient tradition, philosophy, which was defined precisely in its opposition to payment. Historically, Nietzsche recalls, "the sages of ancient Greece were not paid by the state but at most were, like Zeno, honored with a gold crown and a monument in the Ceramicus" (Ibid 184). As Nietzsche argued in his reflections on the forces that drive what he called *misemployed and appropriated culture, the greed of the money-makers* (Ibid 164) inevitably leads to the institutionalization of education as a commercial industry:

as much knowledge and education as possible, therefore as much demand as possible, therefore as much production as possible – that is the seductive formula. (Ibid, 164)

Indeed nothing could be more timely in our own time's than Nietzsche's reflection, the growing acceleration of education:

A speedy education so that one may quickly money-earning being, yet at the same time an education sufficiently thorough to enable one to earn a

very great deal of money. A man is allowed only as much as it is in the interest of general money-making and world commerce he should possess, but this amount is also demanded of him. (Ibid, 165)

Nietzsche adds a note on the implausibility of a professor as a civil servant, of in fact realizing “to the full the whole gamut of duties and limitations imposed upon him” (185), but also the sheer improbability of making appointments of excellence to such salaried posts to begin with. Nietzsche argues that this presupposes the real competence or at least “the appearance of being able to distinguish between good philosophers and bad ones and, even worse, it presupposes that there must always be a sufficiency of good philosophers to fill all its academic chairs” (185). Here the point is not only about assessing value, good and bad quality, but the role of any given authority, in this case the state, to make just distinctions. Nietzsche continues his reading of the role of university philosophy and concludes that it is as if the goal were to require instruction in philosophy, and Nietzsche uses language that echoes in Illich’s *Deschooling Society* (2000), to the point that one might wonder about Nietzsche’s likely influence on Illich, as Nietzsche observes that university schooling compels the educators as much as the educated:

to reside in a certain place, to live among certain people, to undertake a certain activity: they are obliged to instruct every academic youth who desires instruction, and to do so daily at certain fixed hours. (1983a, 186)

For Nietzsche the project cannot succeed because it assigns the imparting of wisdom on demand, and supposes that one have, just at those hours, wisdom to impart, never mind that it also assumes interest on the part of the student just then, just when. For Nietzsche:

the only critique of a philosophy that is possible and that proves something, namely trying to see whether one can live in accordance with it, has never been taught at universities: all that has been taught is a critique of words by means of other words. (1983a, 187)

Nietzsche considered the effect of this, magnified in a curriculum, on “a youthful head, not very experienced in living” and concludes “what a

desert, what a return to barbarism, what a mockery of an education in philosophy” (Ibid). Here Nietzsche cannot refrain from concluding that maybe this result is exactly desired: “education in philosophy only a means of deterring from philosophy” (Ibid). And so on.

Thus *written by* our own educator: this is Nietzsche as we encounter him not as a contemporary but, and just, through his writings. In this way, it can make all the difference that we tend to skip Nietzsche’s original educators; thus we miss the second century AD Lucian who wrote the satirical dialogues *Philosophies for Sale* and *The Dead Come to Life or the Fisherman*. And we tend to forget Pindar and Archilochus in addition to, as both Thomas Brobjer and Jonathan Barnes have written, on the relevance of the same likewise second century, Diogenes Laertius in whose writings Nietzsche specialized, telling us that he prefers reading such ancient commentators to contemporary philosophical commentary, ergo choosing Diogenes Laertius above the Tübingen historian, Eduard Zeller, “because the former at least breathes the spirit of the philosophers of antiquity, while the latter breathes neither than nor any other spirit” (1983a, 186).

We always also need to raise questions about Nietzsche’s first book and his investigation of the presumptions and presuppositions of his own discipline of classics with respect to the “Homer question” and even more with respect to his concern with ancient Greek music drama or tragedy and lyric poetry.

If we “knowers” do not know ourselves, as Nietzsche suggests, it is first of all because we do not seek ourselves. (The term in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche’s polemical follow-up to *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, is *wir Erkennenden*. Cf. Nietzsche 1967, 15.) It is for this reason that we need genealogical, philological, historical hermeneutic thinking.

Reflecting on acquiring an educator, reflecting on the pursuit of education or what the French call formation (the German term is *Bildung*), Nietzsche details an array of difficulties involved in coming to know ourselves. Thus we began by emphasizing his mnemonic art as a practical

hermeneutic phenomenology of the self; a spiritual exercise that must animate all learning and therewith any chance of finding ourselves. We turned to a reflection on our choice of exemplar in order to climb Nietzsche's "ladder" to ascend our "own true selves," always highly personal, but always also in the context of a culture that has always already taken over education as an institution and a prescription, as Nietzsche invites us to recall at least a modicum of that condition of liberty in which Greek philosophy developed: "freedom: that wonderful and perilous element in which the Greek philosophers were able to grow up" (1983a, 182). At the end of his essay, Nietzsche invokes the signal characteristic of the philosopher in his capacity to "unhinge" us, to disturb us. This is, and can only be, liberation.

## References

- Allison, D. B. (2000). *Reading the new Nietzsche*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Babich, B. (2005–2006). Reading David B. Allison. *New Nietzsche Studies*, 6(3/4) & 7(1/2), 241–254.
- Babich, B. (2009). Become the one you are: On commandments and praise – Among friends. In T. Hart (Ed.), *Nietzsche, culture, and education* (pp. 13–38). London: Ashgate.
- Babich, B. (2014). Nietzsche and the ubiquity of hermeneutics. In J. Malpas & H.-H. Gander (Eds.), *The routledge companion to hermeneutics* (pp. 85–97). Abingdon: Routledge.
- de Loyola, I. (1986). Spiritual exercises. In A. de Nicolas, *Powers of imagining* (pp. 97).
- de Nicolás, A. (1986a). *Powers of imagining. Ignatius de Loyola: A philosophical hermeneutic of imagining through the collected works of ignatius de Loyola*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- de Nicolás, A. (1986b). Imagining: Primary text, primary technology. In A. de Nicolás (Ed.), *Powers of imagining* (pp. 31–46).
- de Nicolás, A. (1986c). A text for reading, a text for deciding. In A. de Nicolás (Ed.), *Powers of imagining* (pp. 47–60).
- Hadot, P. (1995). *Philosophy as a way of life: Spiritual exercises from socrates to foucault*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Heelan, P. A. (1986). Foreword. In A. de Nicolas (Ed.), *Powers of imagining* (pp. ix–xiv).
- Illich, I. (2000 [1971]). *Deschooling society*. London: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd.
- Nietzsche, F. (1967). *Genealogy of morals* (trans: Kaufmann, W. & Hollingdale, R. J.). New York: Random House.
- Nietzsche, F. (1983a). Schopenhauer as education. In F. Nietzsche (Ed.), *Untimely meditations* (trans: Hollingdale, R. J., pp. 125–194). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (1983b). David Strauss, the confessor and the writer. In F. Nietzsche (Ed.), *Untimely meditations* (trans: Hollingdale, R. J., pp. 3–55). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strong, T. B. (2000). Introduction. In *Friedrich Nietzsche and the politics of transfiguration* (2nd ed.). Bloomington: University of Indiana Press. 1st edition 1975.