



Philosophical Pathos and Spirituality

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Abstract: *The Flame of Eternity* by Krzysztof Michalski is first and foremost an attempt to think Nietzsche's philosophy further. On the basis of existential aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy of the eternal return, Michalski elaborates his own concept of eternity as existential discontinuity. Eternity manifests itself in ruptures caused by death and love that allow us to begin a new. Eternity is thus a spiritual, philosophical pathos that enables to question and challenge every form of humanity. Michalski embeds eternity in embodied life, but fails to account for relational implications of embodiment, rendering this interesting idea of the philosophical pathos onesidedly solipsistic.

Keywords: Eternity; philosophical pathos; existential spirituality; embodiment; love, death; discontinuity; flame.

A title like the *Flame of Eternity* containing *An Interpretation of Nietzsche's Thought*, as the subtitle has it, sounds at first over the top. The metaphor of flame connected to eternity evokes a religious sentiment that does not seem to be in line with Nietzsche as a philosopher proclaiming the death of God. Yet within Nietzsche scholarship, his death-of-god-philosophy has been interpreted in a multitude of ways, ranging from atheist and agnostic to Christian and other religious positions. Krzysztof Michalski does not address systematically such history of interpretations related to Nietzsche's philosophical critique of the Christian religion. His work cannot be situated within the type of Nietzsche scholarship that consists in a dialogue with different interpretations of the relevant concepts in Nietzsche's philosophy of religion. Nonetheless, Michalski's book does belong to religious interpretations of Nietzsche's philosophy. He takes issue with major Christian doctrines in an attempt to make space for God within the framework

of Nietzsche's philosophy and the roots of his theory of the eternal return in ancient Greek thought and Pre-Socratic philosophy. The discourse of the flame of eternity resonates with Christian ideas of the spirit. The metaphorical language of fire is predominantly rooted in the Heraclitean legacy within Nietzsche's thought. It is this thread that Michalski takes up and elaborates on the basis of a theory of a philosophical, existential pathos with spiritual dimensions.

The language of existential passion may at first sight seem to belong to an earlier phase of philosophy, connecting Michalski's thought with different theories of the pathos of authentic existence, ranging from Kierkegaard to Heidegger, Camus, and Sartre. Such philosophical invitations to *Hotel Abgrund*, to living in face of the abyss, seem not to fit the *Zeitgeist* of Western contemporary times. Even though Western lifestyles are characterized by consumerism and private comfort of the "last men" as Nietzsche had already described, human existence is risky enough in light

of external factors (economical, financial, ecological, political crises, etc.), making a theory of the internal state of living dangerously nearly redundant. So why would Michalski still endeavor to write a book on the flame of eternity as the force that ignites the passion to philosophize and live intensely? There seem to be two motives at the very least. Firstly, to make sense of spirituality as a driving force in human life that is not confined by institutional religion but can be inspired by it. Here Michalski pays heed to the fact that man is a spiritual being just like Kierkegaard argues, and that spirituality survives any death of gods and ideals. Secondly, to question, risk, and challenge every form of humanity through such spiritual disposition that is a kind of a revolutionary fire within a person.¹ Nietzsche called this the passion of knowledge that drives one to experiment with one's life in the pursuit of wisdom.

Michalski is driven by a similar urgency as found in Nietzsche's texts. Nihilism is the state of mind we have to overcome at each and every moment. Nihilism is the groundlessness or abyss of existence we are confronted with. Attempts in name of reason, morality, religion, and foremost in the name of science to overcome nihilism are for Michalski limited if not futile for they all consist in filling a gap that is unavoidable. The urgency of an existential stand is thus just as relevant as ever. Earlier theories of existential pathos have often demanded a decisionistic, voluntaristic, or even heroic disposition, making one feel that one has to be decisive in general, but without clarity about the content of such decisiveness. Michalski's existential pathos does not have this open-ended decisionist ring to it; it is rather an "effort to begin anew" when there is a rupture and discontinuity in our lives. As other existential philosophers before him, Michalski views death as a moment that spurs the existential pathos, but he also adds love as such a decisive factor that puts love on pair with death. Thus he asks, "like death, love demolishes everything it had seemed we understood and interrupts the course of the life we have lived till now?" (*FE viii*). Death and love are decisive factors because they reveal the fundamental discontinuity of our lives as embodied beings. So the existential pathos is ignited in moments when there is parting and the possibility of the new with all the risks involved arises.

It is on the basis of this idea of love and death that Michalski develops his understanding of the notion of eternity. Eternity is traditionally a concept associated with religious ideas about immortality. Like Nietzsche, Michalski does not view eternity as immortality but rather places eternity in corporeal, material life. While Nietzsche elaborated a complex idea of the eternal return with his cosmological, (post)metaphysical, and physicalistic ontological theory, Michalski restricts his interpretation of it to the existential imperative that can be derived from it. He disregards interpretations of the eternal return as a counter model to eschatological doctrines of the return of Christ. The political implications of the theory as a criticism of democratic culture of mediocrity and the possible elitist or other results of that view are also not discussed. Michalski's focus is solely on the notion of eternity as a personal, existential project, and his interpretation is in line with philosophies of difference. Eternity refers to the internal diversification within life and the discontinuities that result from that. The concept is thus rooted in the pluralistic ontology that Nietzsche expounds with his theory of the eternal return of will constellations that have become a point of departure for theories of difference. Michalski also sides with interpretations of this theory that reject it as a nihilistic, bleak view of an eternal return of the same. Like Gilles Deleuze in 2006² and Günter Abel in 1984,³ Michalski emphasizes that the eternal return of the same is not to be understood as the return of the same as the identical, but rather as the return of the same as alike, that is as the return of difference.

In opposition to interpretations of Nietzsche's philosophy of Christianity that underscore the atheistic implications of his thought, Michalski takes up Nietzsche's idea that the "death of God" is liberating in that it opens up possibilities of an understanding of religion convincing to the contemporary world of diversity of cultures and incompatible meanings. Quoting Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz' words about "God, that little bee" that calls from somewhere within recalls Socrates' depiction of himself as the gadfly that makes one wonder, think, and see things in a new light (*FE 208*). The flame of eternity is that passion inside with some divine origin that gets us thinking, that keeps humans going. Michalski also quotes Augustin's prayer

¹ Krzysztof Michalski, *The Flame of Eternity. An Interpretation of Nietzsche's Thought*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012, p. 119. [Henceforth cited as *FE*]

² Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

³ Günter Abel, *Nietzsche. Die Dynamik der Willen zur Macht und die ewige Wiederkehr*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1984.

on "the light which shines right through me," and "fills me with terror and burning love" (FE 86). This is in line with Nietzsche's idea that life is a Dionysian process of creation and destruction. So in fact, the Dionysian and Christian are brought together, and their differences put aside. Christ's presence in life is seen by Michalski as the touch of God that "undermines everything I have been, and thus it brings to every instant of my life the hope of a new beginning" (FE 207).

The notion of love expounded here is not the one of *caritas* as neighborly love, but rather one of a deep kind of spiritual eroticism or the flame that keeps the individual courageous in his or her existence. With this idea of love, the one-sidedly individualistic approach of Michalski's theory becomes apparent. His theory suffers from the solipsistic tendencies that theories of existential pathos have so often been criticized for. It is always the individual confronted with one's self that is at the center of such theories. Those theories within the existential philosophical tradition that take account of embodiment, and thus of how individuals stand in deep relations to one another, are more likely to yield a richer idea of the relational conditions and contextual embeddedness of the individual. Michalski's theory definitely stands in this tradition with its emphasis on temporal embodiment, but nevertheless he does not elaborate these preconditions of the individual as relational and contextual. In fact, due to this focus on the individual self, he ends up depicting love solely in its extreme forms as sacrifice or abandonment. While he praises Heloise's love for Abelard by sacrificing everything as being "utter self-evacuation" (FE 136), Michalski also talks about how the absolute freedom inherent to the flame of eternity allows one to "depart immediately and abandon my property, my wife, and my child" (FE 161). This tearing oneself away or separating oneself is likened to the workings of God.

The word of God is a force, dynamite that blasts apart life as it is. This is the very basis of God's love for man, a love that has little to do with pity, with sympathy that accepts the world as we find it. [FE 176]

This is indeed a philosophy about extreme states, marginal and perilous conditions, and about standing by oneself in one's effort to be an authentic and true person. It would however have yielded a richer account of the eternal flame if Michalski would have focused not solely on extreme forms of belonging to and parting from, but also on those in-between and messy states of standing by oneself in intricate and complicated

relations with others that affect one in modern life. Such absence of the relational and contextual aspects of individuality may be grounded in Michalski's view that the philosophical disposition is fiercely independent as one that doesn't want to belong to clubs or cliques. Perhaps he chooses to oversee that such reluctance may be negatively relational and contextual. The pathos of distance is for Nietzsche the hallmark of the philosopher, the perspective that allows one to understand better. In order for it to be knowledgeable, the pathos of distance does not mean transcending situations but rather an internal distancing that gives a new perspective.

The focus on the solitary existence becomes especially apparent in the interpretation of Nietzsche's metaphor of Zarathustra as a volcano. Such an existence is like a volcano, bursting from within. Zarathustra is seen as a symbol for a life that generates a power of continuous transformation in the spirit of transvaluating values. Such imagery caught the attention of Luce Irigaray. It would have been fruitful for Michalski to open a dialogue about her interpretation because Irigaray does point at the incompleteness of the volcano image in *Thus spoke Zarathustra*.⁴ This volcano relies on surrounding glaciers that help the volcano to keep its burden intact. The ice, according to Irigaray's reading, is the female other and the maternal origin that Nietzsche cannot acknowledge. While the volcano is an image of the philosopher that gives birth to himself and so recreates and transforms himself. The idea of the volcano resonates with the concept of the flame central to Michalski's idea of eternity. The fire is supposed to symbolize destruction as a precondition of a new beginning. Such destruction lacks the precondition for a new beginning if there is (metaphorically speaking) no element like water that gives the erupting lava form, and transforms ashes into a fertile ground.

Irigaray's uncovering of this solipsistic rendering of Zarathustra has been inspirational for recent feminist interpretations of Nietzsche that detect and uncover relational features in his thought to show that he does not only focus on the solitary philosopher.⁵ It is apparent that Michalski avoids

⁴ Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

⁵ See Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir, "Nietzsche's Philosophy of Birth," in Robin May Schott (ed.) et al., *Birth, Death, and Femininity: Philosophies of Embodiment*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2010, 157-200.

displaying Nietzsche's overman in the fashion of an isolated, robust, and brutal hero. Such person would not persevere in real life conditions for a lack of the glacier that keeps the burden of the volcano intact, be the glacier a female or any significant other. This does not have to be a current other, but all the others in past and future significant relationships, be it in an empowering or disempowering manner. Michalski's idea of the philosopher of the eternal flame is intended to be a general description of a specific human condition and philosophical outlook and is not intended to be about a specific philosopher or human being (such as himself). The book is a good testimony to how philosophical thinking involves partnership as it is thinking with Nietzsche as a companion. It is a dialogue with Nietzsche's philosophy. The strength of the author lies in his ability to live up to Nietzsche's demand of

not thinking like the teacher, but to think for himself by developing a productive pathos of distance toward Nietzsche's philosophy. Michalski explores supportive thought experiments in Nietzsche's philosophy that suit his interpretation, but omits experiments that would counter it. For that reason this book is an independent, creative, and bold attempt to think spirituality in present day terms on the basis of contemporary philosophical thought. The book also resonates with a philosophical space disclosed by post-Christian theologies or Christianity after religion. Michalski's sense of spirituality is both theistic and also post-theistic in conveying an understanding of philosophy as a passion for knowledge and wisdom. *The Flame of Eternity* is certainly situated in territory suitable for philosophical practice, a territory that has been neglected in recent decades.