

Thus Spoke Zarathustra: Widening the Bounds of Philosophy

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Abstract

This essay shows that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra's* literary nature does not disqualify it as philosophy, but rather makes it literary philosophy. Through reading Nietzsche as a pragmatic truth theorist, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra's* literary devices and narrative become a radical but plausible form of philosophical inquiry. In a world where the philosophy paper is often seen as the only way to write academic philosophy, I argue that Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* uncovers and bucks the underlying epistemological assumptions behind this trend. For pragmatic truth theorists such as Nietzsche, literary philosophy is just as viable for philosophy, if not superior, to the treatise or paper.

1. Introduction

In 1869, when Friedrich Nietzsche was just twenty-five, Friedrich Wilhelm Ritschl exclaimed that his pupil “can make his scientific discourses as palpitatingly interesting as a French novelist his novels.”¹ This was no coincidence on the side of Nietzsche, who considered himself not just a philosopher but an artist. Idolizing the composer Richard Wagner, Nietzsche lamented that his *The Birth of Tragedy*, “should have *sung*, this “new soul”—and not spoken!”² Given Nietzsche’s love for the arts, his career represents a struggle to reconcile the philosophical and the artistic through writing. Near the end of his career this struggle produced *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, his only novel and a work Nietzsche believed brought “the German language to its acme of perfection.”³ The book retells the story of the historical prophet Zarathustra, who goes on a journey to spread the word of Nietzsche’s philosophy. Zarathustra’s observations and sermons act as layered metaphors for Nietzsche’s philosophy. The layered and often contradictory nature of the metaphors themselves in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* also acts as a philosophical rejection of conventional truth theories during Nietzsche’s time. Thus, I argue that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* can be defined as literary philosophy, works with merit as both literature and philosophy. Indeed, a truth-based reading of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* will show that literature has a necessary place in philosophy as medium for those with radical truth beliefs.

Explicitly argumentative and non-literary philosophy papers dominate contemporary (Anglophone) philosophy, mimicking the sciences. These papers allow for a newfound clarity in philosophy, leading many to believe that works of philosophy must be in paper form to have merit.^{4,5,6} By contrast, the metaphors and plots of literature require readers to interpret them, inviting an inherent ambiguity. Amy Kleppner argues that this reveals a fundamental tension between literature and philosophy.⁷ Philosophy requires systematic reasoning and clarity, while literature requires imagination and subtlety.⁸ Thus, the standard contemporary philosophical view is that for a work to have merit in literature, it must sacrifice its merit as philosophy, and vice versa. But, the excessive focus on the paper needlessly pushes out other mediums, such as literature, from the scope of philosophical discussion.

¹Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. William A. Haussmann, ed. Oscar Levy (Project Gutenberg, 2016), 15, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52915/52915-h/52915-h.htm>.

² Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 5.

³ Nietzsche to Rhode, February 22, 1884, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Trans. Anthony M.

⁴ Robert Gooding-Williams, “Literary Fiction as Philosophy: The Case of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 11 (1986), 668.

⁵ Arthur C. Danto, “Philosophy As/And/of Literature,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 58, no. 1 (1984), 5.

⁶ Amy M. Kleppner, “Philosophy and the Literary Medium: The Existentialist Predicament,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 23, no. 2 (1964), 217.

⁷ Kleppner, “Philosophy and the Literary Medium,” 214.

⁸ Kleppner, “Philosophy and the Literary Medium,” 214.

I contend that works of literary philosophy are proper philosophy, differentiating itself from merely *philosophical* fiction, a term coined by Lewis White Beck.^{9,10} While in philosophical fiction, the author represents philosophical themes in literature, literary philosophy is a proper work of philosophy itself, the same way a philosophy paper is. In other words, raising philosophical ideas or questions is different from maintaining a philosophical argument. Thus, I argue that literary philosophy does not sacrifice philosophical merit for literary merit or vice versa. Instead, works of literary philosophy such as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* make proper philosophical assertions through their literary nature—in both form and content—simultaneously being works of philosophy and literature.

2. Truth and Language

Many contemporary philosophers believe that truth is largely stable and the primary goal of philosophy. For such philosophers, systematic, logic-based inquiry would make sense as the only form of philosophy—hence the academic paper. Literary philosophy cannot exist if philosophy is solely understood as such. However, this current understanding of philosophical methodology is not the *only* one. As Arthur Danto notes, it is possible that “philosophers with really new thoughts have simply had to invent new forms to convey them with.”¹¹ I contend that Nietzsche is one such philosopher.

Nietzsche’s motivation for writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* begins with his rejection of what he calls the will to truth, or the pursuit of objective knowledge. Nietzsche argues instead that there is no truth for its own sake, independent from our desires.¹² There is no universal, mind-independent truth because any truth reflects the individual who believes in it. For Nietzsche, the fault lies within language, which cannot describe reality *as it is*. Adopting a sort of nominalism, Nietzsche argues that when humans assign a word (or category) to something, they “[overlook] individuals and reality.”¹³ The word “marriage” overlooks the intricacies of each marriage, and the word “leaf” overlooks the unique details of each leaf. Language is a metaphor for reality, yet Nietzsche asserts that humans have forgotten this over time and take concepts to truly represent (or substitute for) it.

Thus, reading Nietzsche with an epistemological lens suggests that he defines truth in a pragmatic and contextual fashion, specifically that truth is only *meaningful* when it promotes an

⁹ Gooding-Williams, “Literary Fiction as Philosophy,” 671.

¹⁰ Plenty of science fiction books are philosophical in theme but not works of philosophy. For instance, Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, while philosophically thought-provoking, is not considered philosophy in the same way an academic paper is, and thus does not qualify as literary philosophy.

¹¹ Arthur C. Danto, “Philosophy As/And/of Literature,” 8.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, ed. Oscar Levy (Project Gutenberg, 2016), §481. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52915/52915-h/52915-h.htm>.

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-moral Sense*, trans. A. K. M. Adam (Oxford, 2019), 6.

individual's passion in life.¹⁴ Nietzsche writes that philosophers who pursue the will to (objective) truth do not eliminate their personal, subjective presence, but instead always present an "unconscious autobiography."¹⁵ Philosophers, by virtue of being human, cannot help but insert their own biases into their theories. And, if truth is active and can only be given meaning in individual contexts, it follows that it is not necessarily found through the detached reasoning of a contemporary academic paper.¹⁶ By revising truth as pragmatic (and personal), philosophy thus requires a subjective medium. Since *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is literature and thus has a main character with a subjective worldview, I claim it *embodies* philosophy under a pragmatic truth system in the same way a traditional paper embodies a truth system where truth can be found through reasoning.¹⁷

Under this pragmatic interpretation of Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra's* goal is clear. It is not merely an alternative medium for his theories on morality or truth; literature is the most coherent medium for (his) philosophy. Nietzsche uses the literary aspect to make the book about both his philosophy and himself, "and behind almost every word there stands a personal experience." Literary philosophy becomes *conscious* autobiography, the continuation, and solution to his claim that all previous works of philosophy were unconscious autobiographies. The philosophical messages in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* are presented pragmatically because they are presented under the context of Zarathustra's and Nietzsche's lives.

3. Reading *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

For instance, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra's* beginning marks Nietzsche's departure from the will to truth in his writing. Zarathustra leaves the mountain in which he has confined himself for ten years. He has accumulated much philosophical knowledge but has become "weary of [his] wisdom" and seeks to descend and share his knowledge with others.¹⁸ Here, metaphor is already imperative to understanding Nietzsche's message: he describes Zarathustra's knowledge-sharing as emptying a cup full of honey. This usage of honey continues the metaphor Nietzsche uses for scientists. However, unlike the scientists (or other philosophers), who view the pursuit of

¹⁴ Pragmatism, under an epistemological context, refers to the belief that truth is inseparable from the processes of inquiry and assertion. For instance, a pragmatist about truth may believe that a truth assertion is defined by how useful the assertion is to believe. Nietzsche does not believe that truth is inseparable from its usefulness, but that people should act like it was inseparable, nonetheless. This deviates from the traditional view that Nietzsche was a perspectivist. See Capps, John. "The Pragmatic Theory of Truth." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2023)*, edited by Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman. Stanford University, 2023. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-pragmatic/>.

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (Project Gutenberg, 2009), §6, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4363/4363-h/4363-h.htm>.

¹⁶ Note that due to Nietzsche's ambiguous writing style, there are people who argue that Nietzsche believed otherwise, and this assertion is a part of the argument. For an overview of this debate, see Remhof, Justin. "Nietzsche's Conception of Truth: Correspondence, Coherence, or Pragmatist?" *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 46, no. 2 (2015): 229–38.

¹⁷ Note that multiple epistemological theories justify the systematic, logic-bound paper structure. All forms of rationalism fall under this category, and most forms of empiricism believe that logic plays a role.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Zarathustra's Prologue" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. "Wisdom" is used in the text but is equivalent to knowledge. Zarathustra goes down to share his wisdom of the world, pertaining to metaphysical concepts like eternal recurrence, or the concept of the Superman.

knowledge as a never-ending pursuit, Zarathustra is “weary of his wisdom” and wants others to take knowledge from him so he may become a man once more.¹⁹ Zarathustra’s cleansing is not for the sake of wisdom, like a scientist cleansing himself of biases, but of wisdom itself. This cleansing of wisdom signals a departure from the futile pursuit of the will to truth.

Thus Spoke Zarathustra’s first message is thus in favoring individual virtue judgments over following a religion or the will to truth. This is done through Zarathustra’s journey as a teacher, which reflects Nietzsche’s own role as a teacher of his philosophy. Zarathustra’s sermons seek not to force the people Zarathustra’s own position, but rather to give them clarity to decide for themselves. By rejecting the will to truth, as Zarathustra does in the opening scene, anyone can choose what is valuable or virtuous for himself based on their own passion. And since every person is different, every virtue is “thine own virtue, thou hast it in common with no one.”²⁰ Nietzsche acknowledges that the reader’s sense of virtue may be different from Zarathustra’s, and the interpretive aspect of literature plays into Nietzsche’s goal for the reader to decide for themselves what is virtuous. Nietzsche simply warns against blindly accepting virtues based on our environment.

As a work of literary philosophy, Zarathustra’s character development plays a key role in the book’s message of individualism. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche addresses Zarathustra: “No fanatic speaks to you here; this is not a ‘sermon’; no faith is demanded in these pages.”²¹ While Nietzsche insists that Zarathustra does not preach, he writes him as a preacher at the beginning of the story. This is a common criticism of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; Zarathustra’s religious tone is grating, especially since the book is supposed to reject religion in favor of individual decisions on virtue.

However, Zarathustra’s tone is an intentional utilization of irony meant to set up his development as a teacher. In Zarathustra’s first sermon, he says: “Lo, I teach you the Superman! The Superman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: The Superman SHALL BE the meaning of the earth!”²² Zarathustra speaks with passion and authority, expecting the audience to be moved by his words. Instead, because Zarathustra spoke at a marketplace, the people mistook him for a clown and laughed. Here, Nietzsche acknowledges that not all people will understand Zarathustra’s teachings. However, part of the fault lies within Zarathustra as well. Zarathustra reflects that “I far from them, and my sense speaketh not unto their sense. To men I am still something between a fool and a corpse.”²³ He is hopelessly out of touch with community life, and his

¹⁹ Nietzsche, “Zarathustra’s Prologue” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

²⁰ Nietzsche, “Joys and Passions” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

²¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Ecce Homo*, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (Project Gutenberg), 4.

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, “Zarathustra’s Prologue” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In Nietzsche’s philosophy, the superman is the ideal being that humanity strives for. What this exactly entails and the purpose of the superman in Nietzsche’s philosophy are a subject of debate. I will make my own interpretation in a later section. Generally, the superman would live dangerously, embrace suffering, and strive for greatness.

²³ Nietzsche, “Zarathustra’s Prologue” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

attempt fails because he fails to connect to the individual. While Zarathustra's message is Nietzsche's, Nietzsche is simultaneously criticizing the dogmatic tone Zarathustra uses to spread it.

In part two, Zarathustra recognizes that most people are unwilling to live Nietzsche's philosophy and instead chooses a few disciples who are the closest to understanding him. However, Zarathustra still maintains his authoritative and religious tone. Most previous sections are composed of Zarathustra preaching on a variety of topics, ending with "Thus Spake Zarathustra!" Zarathustra always has the right words for any group of people, and Zarathustra always speaks with absolute authority. This authoritative mask crumbles at the end of part two, when Zarathustra realizes he has not fully grasped his own teachings. In chapter forty-two, Zarathustra gives a speech on redemption when one disciple asks a question he cannot answer. In an uncharacteristic moment of silence, Zarathustra is overcome by terror. Despite quickly returning to his usual persona, Zarathustra is clearly disturbed. Chapter forty-two does not end with "Thus Spake Zarathustra," but rather self-doubt: "But why doth Zarathustra speak otherwise unto his pupils— than unto himself?"²⁴

Zarathustra's struggle with his own ideology and his authoritative status ends with his decision to return to solitude in the mountains. To his disciples, he says: "Now do I bid you lose me and find yourselves; and only when ye have all denied me, will I return unto you." This marks the end of Zarathustra's character development as a teacher, as he and Nietzsche finally align. Zarathustra understands that the correct way to teach is to encourage his disciples to become independent of his teachings. For a teacher of Nietzsche's philosophy, success means overcoming and rejecting the teacher.

For a philosopher who believes truth is fixed, the message of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* would be relayed through an argument of why individual choices about virtue are superior. However, if *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* were written as a philosophy paper, the book's advocacy for individualism would collapse. Such a detached and 'impersonal' paper conceals personal biases to attempt to convince the reader of a claim based on logic. As a pragmatist, truth must be presented in the context of an individual's belief in it. Thus, Nietzsche's method of literary philosophy becomes the only sustainable method. After all, if virtues should be individually decided, decisive arguments for specific virtues or virtue systems are futile.

Nietzsche does this through Zarathustra, who has to overcome his authoritative nature in order to truly grasp what individualism means. Rather than arguments, pragmatic truth essentially operates in *stories*. The reader, rather than be decidedly convinced, is meant to be inspired by Zarathustra's self-overcoming and undergo their own journey towards moral individualism. However, with individualism comes loneliness, which is the second philosophical message of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Zarathustra's return to the mountains finishes his development as a teacher but only marks the halfway point of Zarathustra as a person dealing with loneliness.

²⁴ Nietzsche, "Redemption" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

4. Loneliness, subjectivity, and eternal recurrence

With the idea of loneliness, and not will to truth in mind, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra's* opening scene reveals a second meaning. Perhaps Nietzsche is tired of being isolated by his knowledge, and he wishes to share his wisdom through *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, as Zarathustra does in descending from the mountains. Nietzsche's personal letters support this. Just when he finished the first three acts of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he exclaims to a friend: "How is it possible that we should have so little in common now, and that we should be living as if in different worlds!"²⁵ However, since truth is subject to change under the pragmatic framework, the opening scene does not reflect all Nietzsche has to say on the topic.

As a result, when Zarathustra returns to the caves once again in part two, he learns to enjoy his solitude once more. He cherishes his walks in solitude, and the endless time he has to think uninterrupted. Although loneliness pervades the book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is no remedy for loneliness, but rather a bold embrace of it. In a later letter, he writes: "It is absolutely necessary that I should be misunderstood; nay, I would go even further and say that I must succeed in being understood in the worst possible way and despised."²⁶ Nietzsche's final statement on loneliness is not contained within an event Zarathustra witnesses but in the very style of the book itself. In a contradictory way typical of Nietzsche, the often-incomprehensible metaphors and double meanings in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* are Nietzsche's way of embracing the loneliness and isolation his philosophy brings.²⁷ Once again, the philosophical message, in this case, the embrace of solitude, is presented in a pragmatic fashion. Instead of using the context of Zarathustra, Nietzsche decides to use the implications *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* has on himself.

Zarathustra's return to the cave symbolizes both Nietzsche's growth as a teacher and his embrace of solitude. These two elements combine in part three to represent eternal recurrence, the theory that every moment in time will eternally repeat itself that Nietzsche claims it to be "the fundamental idea of the work."²⁸ However, while Zarathustra constantly preaches it, it is never clear whether eternal recurrence was meant to be taken literally. After all, it seems to be the very sort of objective metaphysical truth that Nietzsche despises. Some philosophers dismiss the concept as too bizarre and detached from the rest of Nietzsche's philosophy.²⁹ A reading *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as literary philosophy resolves this mystery surrounding Nietzsche's philosophy.

²⁵ Nietzsche to Rhode, February 22, 1884, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, <https://archive.org/details/selectedletterso00nietuoft/page/174>.

²⁶ Nietzsche to Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, August 1883, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Trans. Anthony M. Ludovici, <https://archive.org/details/selectedletterso00nietuoft/page/164>.

²⁷ Nietzsche was a talented philologist during his time and could have lived the comfortable life of a professor. However, his philosophical works lost him respect in the academic circle at the time, largely isolating him.

²⁸ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 97.

²⁹ Timothy J. Freeman, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra Notes," University of Hawaii Website, October 19, 2010, 1. <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~freeman/courses/phil360/12.%20Zarathustra%20notes.pdf>. The extent to which Nietzsche believed in the existence of eternal recurrence, and its place in Nietzsche's philosophy is heavily debated. See chapter 7 of *Nietzsche's Zarathustra* by Kathleen Marie Higgins.

Zarathustra's return to the caves in part two is Nietzsche's way of acknowledging the philosophical immaturity of eternal recurrence. In chapter forty-four, a voiceless clock speaks to Zarathustra about his refusal to teach eternal recurrence, and Zarathustra responds with whispers: "Then was there once more spoken unto me without voice: 'Thou knowest it, Zarathustra, but thou dost not speak it!' And at last I answered, like one defiant: 'Yea, I know it, but I will not speak it!'"³⁰ The silence of this conversation marks Zarathustra's most vulnerable moment when he is furthest from his preacher persona. Zarathustra gives various excuses for not speaking about eternal recurrence but eventually returns to his original excuse. Zarathustra simply does not want to speak of eternal recurrence because he will crumble under its weight. Recognizing that he is not mature enough for his message on eternal recurrence, Zarathustra plans to return to the caves one final time.

Subtly, the beginning and end of *Zarathustra* form a narrative representation of eternal recurrence that situates the concept with the rest of his philosophy. At the beginning of the book, Zarathustra descends from the mountains, like "[the sun] doest in the evening," to disperse his wisdom.³¹ The end of the book mirrors the beginning. In the final chapter, Zarathustra acknowledges his failures, and embraces his work as a teacher, despite knowing that it does not give him happiness, for no one truly understands him. In this moment Zarathustra affirms his identity as both a teacher and solitary man. Feeling elated, Zarathustra walks out of his cave like "like a morning sun coming out of gloomy mountains," preparing his descent once again.³² Zarathustra embodies eternal recurrence, repeating the cycle of going down the mountain, dispersing his wisdom, failing, and returning up the mountain again.

Unlike most, who would lament that their suffering is eternal, Zarathustra feels elated by his descent since it symbolizes his growth as a teacher and person. Eternal recurrence is a thought experiment to be overcome, a symbol of the goal of humanity: to love one's own fate profoundly and wish to live one's life eternally, with no changes. In the final scene of the book, instead of teaching eternal recurrence through preaching, which would go against the pragmatic theory of truth, Zarathustra chooses to teach it through living it. When Nietzsche says that eternal recurrence is the central theme of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he is not talking about the concept as a metaphysical truth where life really does repeat itself forever. Eternal recurrence is instead an analogy for Zarathustra choosing to live even if it means repeating his suffering.

His conversations with his friends support this interpretation. When a friend tells Nietzsche that he could not understand *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche responded that most people wouldn't. For Nietzsche, "to have understood six sentences in that book—that is to say, to have lived them—raises a man to a higher level among mortals than 'modern' men can attain." The

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Stillest Hour" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Zarathustra's Prologue" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

³² Friedrich Nietzsche, "LXXX. The Sign" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

key here is that Nietzsche equates understanding his philosophy to living it. This supports reading Nietzsche as a pragmatist who believed in the individual and subjective nature of truth.

5. Conclusion

The end of Zarathustra's journey finishes the overall theme of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Zarathustra begins his journey knowing most of Nietzsche's philosophy, yet not living it. He teaches because he fears solitude, yet his sermons are never fully understood. At the end of the book, in choosing to descend from the mountains a second time, he affirms his life in all its struggles. He creates meaning for himself in teaching, despite knowing his teachings will never be understood. In doing so, Zarathustra lives Nietzsche's philosophy, embracing life with all its sufferings through creating individual meaning.

Because the narrative and literary devices in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* are necessary for its philosophical message, it provides a strong example of why philosophers should consider widening the bounds of what is considered philosophy. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is not only a work of both literature and philosophy; it uses the literary aspects to present its philosophy, proving that literature is a viable philosophical medium. The backbone of literary philosophy is a radical truth belief. By revisioning truth to require subjectivity, literature becomes the superior medium for philosophical truths. Many contemporary philosophical stances, such as pragmatism or radical skepticism, contain the prerequisites for literary philosophy. By changing the structure of philosophy itself, literary philosophy is a viable or even superior method of writing radical philosophy that promotes innovation within the field.

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