Nietzsche famously referred to nihilism as “this uncanniest of all guests” (*dieser unheimlichste aller Gäste*). The figure of the guest, “standing at the door,” suggests that he is foreign, an outsider or alien from whom one can safely disassociate or differentiate oneself. The fact that nihilism is the “uncanniest of all guests,” however, suggests that he makes our home itself foreign and alien; his chill figure is not simply unwelcome, it renders us homeless (*heimatlos*). It was Nietzsche’s engagement with nihilism, his prescient experience of homelessness, that dominated the serious reaction to his work in the early part of the twentieth century. Nietzsche was regarded as the prophet of the death of God, the herald of the most profound spiritual crisis to convulse the Western world in centuries. There were of course exceptions, but for the most part the catastrophe Nietzsche had foretold and christened with the name “nihilism” was never far from the minds of his readers, living as they were in the midst of civilizational cataclysms every bit as terrifying as those Nietzsche had predicted.

At some point in the past 20 or 30 years this situation changed, at least in the English-speaking world. Nietzsche’s name is no longer associated primarily with nihilism, and in some cases the association does not seem to be made at all. Certainly this period has produced numerous excellent treatments of Nietzsche’s relation to nihilism (several by contributors to this volume), and many very good discussions in books not principally devoted to the subject. Overall, however, and given the explosion of academic work on Nietzsche over the past 20 years or so, it is surprising to see how little direct attention the subject of nihilism has received. The concentration on other topics in Nietzsche’s writings is obviously to be welcomed, and many important studies have appeared illuminating aspects of Nietzsche’s work that had been obscured or overlooked by the emphasis on Nietzsche’s cultural criticism and diagnoses. Despite this expansion of our field of vision, however, one cannot escape the sense that we have lost sight of something important, indeed vital, and that this loss is not necessary. The present collection of essays therefore aims to contribute to our understanding of Nietzsche by returning attention to his treatment of nihilism, the aspect of his thought that Nietzsche himself considered perhaps the most important and original. It does so by bringing together a series of distinct and at times discordant perspectives on Nietzsche, representing not only substantive, interpretive, methodological, and “disciplinary” differences but divergent
attitudes toward Nietzsche’s intentions and success in his confrontation with nihilism.

Stanley Rosen begins the collection with a powerful restatement of some of the major themes of his writings on Nietzsche. In particular, Rosen is concerned with two main topics: Nietzsche’s double rhetoric and the inevitability of nihilism in his thought. Nietzsche’s double rhetoric, his habit of both concealing the fact that fundamentally there is only chaos and shouting it from the rooftops, reflects his position as the final, self-destructive culmination of modern philosophy. There are, according to Rosen, two main streams of modern philosophy, one which conceals the artefactual—that is, the constructed and temporary—character of philosophical truth and one which insists on boldly announcing it, whatever the consequences. “The oddity of Nietzsche is that he accepts, or at least seems clearly to accept, both of these theoretical styles, often in the same context.” Ultimately, however, both styles collapse into the recognition that without stable criteria for truth there cannot be stable criteria for nobility; the result is not only that truth collapses into chaos, or that philosophy cannot finally be distinguished from art, but that nobility collapses into mere power. As Rosen puts it, speaking of Nietzsche’s distinction between active or noble nihilism and passive or base nihilism, “It is essential for Nietzsche’s entire program, both political and theoretical, that the distinction between the two main types of nihilism can be preserved. In other words, there must be an enduring distinction between the noble and the base that permits us to identify instances of each general type. As we have seen, there is no such definite or stable distinction of this or any other sort. Both the noble and the base deteriorate into chaos.” Of Nietzsche’s attempt to ground noble or active nihilism in the doctrine of the will to power, Rosen says more pointedly, “Nietzsche’s argument seems to be circular. The noble is the powerful and the powerful is the noble.”

Michael Allen Gillespie continues Rosen’s critical treatment of Nietzsche, but focuses more on the social and political aspects of Nietzsche’s thought, and particularly on his attempt to create a superhuman type through his writings. Gillespie’s essay begins with a discussion of the necessity of warriors for political life, and specifically the treatment of the warrior as a human type by Homer and Plato. Turning to Nietzsche, Gillespie begins with an insightful overview of Nietzsche’s treatment of the cultural implications and meaning of nihilism. The confrontation between Plato and Nietzsche that Gillespie reconstructs is therefore not the familiar story of Nietzsche as antimeetaphysician. Gillespie rather provides an illuminating discussion of the two thinkers’ differing cultural aims and particularly their contrasting goals for education—Plato seeks to tame and moderate the warrior, while Nietzsche seeks the hardening of the heart or the soul and therefore necessarily and in the first place the hardening of the body (for the soul is simply an outgrowth of the body). Gillespie acknowledges that Nietzsche had a more nuanced and respectful view of Plato than is
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often believed, and in particular that he did not actually mistake Plato, who believed warriors to be necessary and even the breeding ground for philosophers in his ideal city, for Christianity. Even so, however, Nietzsche does reject Plato’s attempt to moderate warriors.

According to Gillespie, this ultimately reveals the superiority of Plato to Nietzsche, for it shows that Plato better understood both the soul of the warrior and the necessities of political life. Most tellingly, Plato’s account of education is precisely what is missing in Nietzsche; although Nietzsche does not seek merely to produce a race of ferocious warriors, he gives no account of how the warriors he believes are necessary to move beyond bourgeois society will be educated and civilized into something higher than mere destroyers. As Gillespie writes, Nietzsche “was much more interested in convincing his contemporaries to choose the path that leads to such an aristocracy rather than with detailing how this aristocracy should be forged, trained, and ennobled.” Moreover, however inspiring Nietzsche’s rhetoric may be, without the necessary institutional and educational structures to promote his spiritual vision over successive generations, there is little reason to expect his writings to exercise the kind of formative influence he seemed to hope they would.

Stanley Corngold’s essay is also focused on Nietzsche’s attempts to create a new aristocracy, though Corngold approaches this question by identifying a Gnostic streak in Nietzsche’s writings, both published and unpublished, that will surely surprise many readers. Corngold begins with a long, unpublished essay-fragment titled “European Nihilism,” which provides a compressed narrative history of nihilism and its stages of development before culminating in a call for a new elect to emerge and rule Europe. This leads into the discussion of Gnosticism, in which Corngold shows that Nietzsche shares with Gnosticism not only a belief in “the ontological priority of an elect,” but also a desire for a more or less irrationalist form of transcendence, which in Nietzsche’s case centers on poetic or artistic creation and which he often illustrates with the figure of a self-igniting and self-consuming flame. In his moments of Gnostic élan, in other words, Nietzsche rejects not so much the transcendence as the moralized transcendence of Christianity, the world-weary longing for an escape from reality. But the image and imagination of a different, incandescent type of transcendence clearly exercised a fascination for Nietzsche throughout his life. Corngold isolates further significant elements of Nietzsche’s neo-Gnosticism, including his antinomian and iconoclastic repudiation of Pauline Christianity, and more generally of “the institutions constituting state and community,” and his belief, especially evident at the end of “European Nihilism,” that this repudiation will prepare the way for an almost miraculous transformation of the social order and the institution of the rule of the elect. Even this, however, is not an exhaustive list, and one of the strengths of Corngold’s study is his ability to discern this Gnostic strain both in Nietzsche’s poignant attempts to communicate his singular aesthetic experience and in his somewhat
more clamorous calls for the cataclysmic renovation of the political and cultural world.

The first three essays raise serious and probing questions about the success of Nietzsche’s confrontation with nihilism; Geoff Waite’s characteristically ambitious essay argues that Nietzsche has been all too successful in his attempt to spread “a great severe form of contagious nihilism.” Waite’s work is one of the most important challenges to the perennial attempts to normalize Nietzsche, to read him as a simple precursor to contemporary trends in philosophy, and he continues this challenge here with an analysis of Nietzsche’s claims to be every name in history and to write in every possible style. These claims, according to Waite, do not imply a nihilistic permissiveness, despair, or paralysis; on the contrary, Nietzsche’s writings are governed by a highly selective authorial intention. “This is why he can be ‘every name in history’ and yet prefer being ‘Prado’ and ‘Chambige,’ can deploy ‘every style,’ yet prefer exo/esotericism. Like Eternal Recurrence, ‘everything is permitted’ demands selectivity.” Waite is here referring to Nietzsche’s interest in the cases of Prado and Chambige, two murderers whom Nietzsche claims to be in his final letter to Jakob Burckhardt. Nietzsche’s interest in these murderers and the popular accounts of their trials, and his subsequent tremendous influence on popular as well as “high” culture, illustrate the Russian Formalists’ “law of the canonization of the junior branch,” according to which “popular culture—notably feuilleton journalism, vaudeville, and, in the case of Dostoevsky’s novels, detective fiction—must be periodically elevated into the ‘canon’ before being reciprocally returned to the ‘junior branch.’” This formalist law, according to Waite, implying as it does the necessary and inevitable cross-pollination or cross-contamination of high and low culture, “is how Nietzsche’s self-described ‘promotion’ of the ‘severe form of great contagious nihilism’ subsequently has affected a vast array of popular literature, music, and cinema but also of murderers.” Waite applies his political philology both to Nietzsche’s relationship with the popular press and literature of his time and to his reference to “my centrum,” concluding his essay with a detailed annotation of Nietzsche’s last letter to Jakob Burckhardt.

Daniel Conway’s essay also centers on the rhetorical effects of Nietzsche’s texts but offers a more positive reading of Nietzsche’s intentions and influence (indeed, Conway’s chapter marks a shift in the volume as a whole from critique to respectful interpretation). While Waite maintains that Nietzsche’s rhetoric serves destructive and indeed murderous purposes, Conway suggests that it is rather designed to educate and train “his best readers.” Conway begins with Nietzsche’s reference in the Genealogy to his “unknown friends,” an instance of the general type of comment one finds throughout Nietzsche’s writings addressing a “we” or his “friends.” These comments range in tone from impassioned and exhortatory to intimate and confessional, from seductive to ironic, but in every case they raise the question of who Nietzsche means to reach with this
rhetorical device, and never more so than in his reference to his “unknown friends” in the Genealogy. Conway’s argument is that Nietzsche’s goal in the climax of the Genealogy is to bring his “unknown friends” into being by teaching them how to turn the destructive power of the ascetic ideal against itself. He begins by highlighting several rhetorical snares and pieces of textual misdirection in these final sections, designed in the first place to separate those among Nietzsche’s readers who are determined to oppose the ascetic ideal from those who will be satisfied with half-measure or simple self-deception. Once the “last idealist of knowledge” have pressed on, however, and have recognized themselves in Nietzsche’s portrait of the last, noblest instantiation of the ascetic ideal, their education and training begins. Nietzsche, according to Conway, forces his best readers to realize that their devotion to scientific truth is ultimately grounded in the ascetic ideal, so that their attack on that ideal must be launched from within its “closed system.” This means then that the overcoming of the ascetic ideal will require the self-overcoming, and thus possibly the self-destruction, of these “unknown friends” Nietzsche sets out to create in the Genealogy. Even Conway’s relatively benign or life-affirming Nietzsche requires his best readers to live dangerously.

Keith Ansell-Pearson’s essay considers Nietzsche in relation to one of his contemporaries, Jean-Marie Guyau, whose works Nietzsche read with appreciation. Although Ansell-Pearson modestly announces that his hope is to shed light on “the wider intellectual context” of Nietzsche’s work, the comparison with Guyau is of more than purely historical interest. While Ansell-Pearson is certainly successful in showing that Nietzsche read and esteemed Guyau as an important writer, the essay goes further and reveals Guyau to be an interesting thinker in his own right. Furthermore, Ansell-Pearson provides a concise yet surprisingly comprehensive account of Nietzsche’s thought on morality and nihilism through a series of point-by-point comparisons by Guyau, who illuminates Nietzsche as much by articulating what both have in common (but in a way that emphasizes different aspects or a different context than does Nietzsche) as by contrasting with him.

Ultimately, however, Nietzsche did find Guyau wanting as a thinker, and consigned him to the rank of “free thinkers.” As Ansell-Pearson’s title indicates, Nietzsche draws a clear distinction in his mature works between “free spirits” and “free thinkers,” where the former are clearly superior to the latter. Nietzsche’s dismissal of Guyau as a mere “free thinker” forces us to ask what exactly separates the two. Ansell-Pearson answers this question in the course of his overview of Nietzsche’s thought, which uses the contrast between free thinkers (like Guyau) and free spirits (like Nietzsche) to show the importance for Nietzsche of affirming precisely the unchristian and immoral aspects of life and nature, which are absolutely essential for vitality and growth. Thus Nietzsche’s censure of morality is not merely a matter of an abstract critique of concepts like selflessness and free will, but of affirming suffering and discipline as the
only means to enhance humanity. As Ansell-Pearson succinctly puts it, “the free thinker holds that the human herd can develop without the need of a shepherd; the free spirit upholds the need for one.” Thus while Ansell-Pearson is less critical or dubious of Nietzsche than some of the earlier essays, he agrees that Nietzsche is no liberal and no democrat: “Nietzsche does value autonomy, personality, and sovereign individuality but he couples his valuation of them not with the Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity but with an unashamedly elitist ‘radical aristocratism.’”

My own contribution continues the focus on Nietzsche’s analysis of social or political life and its relation to nihilism. It looks specifically at Nietzsche’s account of the origin of political society in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and asks whether Nietzsche’s argument is that all society, precisely because it enacts and relies upon repression of instinct, poisons its members with *resentment* and thus leads to nihilism. I begin by asking whether the question of origins should have any bearing on the examination of nihilism at all, given Nietzsche’s emphatic statement that origins do not determine later meaning, and more generally his keen awareness of the historical mutability of morality and human nature. I suggest several reasons why the question of origins is relevant to an appraisal of morality (especially for Nietzsche), the most important of which is that an investigation of how political society, and so the “bad conscience,” came into existence reveals the matrix or condition of all morality, and in particular the role of nature in shaping and driving moral creation. I then turn to the particulars of Nietzsche’s account in the Second Essay of the *Genealogy*, and suggest that Nietzsche’s view is that socialized morality, despite requiring instinctual repression, expresses the same natural-form-creating force manifest in the founders of states, and is therefore an experience of actual, creative power, and as such does not provoke *resentment*.

The final two essays stand as something of a counterpoint to the rest of the volume. While all of the other essays more or less agree that Nietzsche regards nihilism as a genuine and terrible crisis, and that his analysis of nihilism is meant to have profound political and social consequences, James Porter argues that Nietzsche is not and cannot be a nihilist, and Robert Guay that Nietzsche’s response to nihilism is fundamentally apolitical.

Porter begins his chapter with a brisk statement of the essay’s thesis or premise: “If you love life you cannot be a nihilist about life.” Porter’s argument is that nihilism, or the negation or rejection of reality, is impossible for both philosophical and psychological reasons. Porter traces the influence on Nietzsche of both Kant, who argued that one cannot negate reality, and Schopenhauer, who argued that one cannot negate life, and shows how both convinced Nietzsche “that willing is an irrefragable constituent in human life.” Yet the fact that the kind of total or uncompromising negation that nihilism may seem to imply is not possible does not mean that we are or can be caught up in a simple or unambiguous affirmation, either: “Nietzsche effectively wants to love life
unconditionally, but knows he cannot do so because he recognizes that life itself is never loved or lived simply or unconditionally: life is loved and lived out of a complexity of motives, only one ingredient of which will be a purely affirmative gesture, the instantaneous affirmation of things. Love is overshadowed by these complexities; and it is ultimately compromised by them as well.”

Nietzsche, in short, “by no means affirms all the forms of life, and he possibly affirms no form of life unconditionally; all that he affirms is the most basic affirmation of life.” This is enough, however, to make nihilism an impossibility. One cannot negate without willing, and one cannot will without affirming life as a basic or general condition (here Porter points to Nietzsche’s discussion of asceticism in the Third Essay of the *Genealogy*). But what of nothingness, the total lack of meaning and purpose? Is not the specter of nihilism crippling and terrifying, an abyss in which one’s will is annihilated, not something that one can even affirm by negating? No, for the “prospect of the sheer absence of meaning is not too horrific to bear owing to any lack of meaning, but rather owing to its excess of meaning. Such an idea will always have too much meaning for a subject. We can never, in fact, be nihilistic enough to realize the insignificance that nihilism requires of us.” Thus nihilism remains as impossible as pure affirmation, and we remain caught in the uneasy space between the two, seized and animated by an imperfect love of life.

Robert Guay’s essay begins with an excellent account of how to reconcile Nietzsche’s insistence on human creativity with his insistence that human action is determined by impersonal forces of nature and history. “According to Nietzsche, our spontaneous powers are not only conditioned by various determinations, but they also depend on them, so much so that the possibility of these powers is contingent upon being embodied, having a claim to a history or histories, and belonging to a culture.” This means that contingency plays a crucial, formative role in human identity and action: “Contingency is a feature of human existence because we play a role in shaping our identities: what we are is neither simply determined from outside nor invented in the absence of any constraint.” Because contingency is such an essential and inescapable part of the meaning that sustains agency, the possibility of failure is a necessary part, indeed a necessary condition, of meaningful human action. How then should we deal with or understand the inevitability of failure?

Guay identifies two major categories of responses to contingency in Nietzsche’s writings, the Prudential and the Ironic. The Prudential seeks to eliminate or at least minimize the gulf between our aspirations and our reality, either by simply believing the two are already identical (Idealism), or by revising one’s hopes so that they are attainable (Realism). The Ironic, on the other hand, affirms the distance between the ideal and the actual, reacting to this reality with either despair or a tragicomic self-awareness and resolve to continue orienting one’s life by impossible ideals. Guay argues that for Nietzsche, the tragicomic response is not only the most noble but in fact the only one able to support the possibility
of meaningful choice and action: “The productive process that makes us what we are depends on maintaining a tension between human situatedness and human aspiration.” Modern politics, on the other hand, is prudential and therefore vacuous according to Guay, since its sole concerns are the rational management of resources and facilitating peaceful social interactions. Nietzsche is thus a liberal in Guay’s reading, but a very specific and unusual kind of liberal: “Nietzsche’s position functions as a form of liberalism, since the role of the state is restricted for the sake of free self-development. The point of this restriction, however, is not to acknowledge inherent human worth, but to promote conflict in a manner that is productive of the meanings that sustain our senses of self.” Nietzsche, in other words, wants to preserve the division between public and private in its modern liberal form, but only because it positively produces or promotes more intense private conflict and tragicomic struggle—not, as in the case of Richard Rorty, because relegating such spiritual struggles to the private realm makes the public sphere of liberal procedural justice more secure. In this reading Nietzsche subordinates the public to the private because he subordinates the prudential to the tragicomic.

It is a cliché to say that a philosopher’s thought exhibits “breadth and depth.” And these essays, while certainly giving evidence of the scope, rigor, and penetrating brilliance of Nietzsche’s mind, do more than simply answer a formal requirement for diversity and heft. They not only demonstrate the power of Nietzsche’s insistence that we stop worshipping the shadows of a dead God, but, taken as a whole, force the reader to confront both aspects of nihilism as Nietzsche experienced and anticipated it: both the “long plenitude and sequence of breakdown, destruction, ruin and cataclysm that is now impending . . . this monstrous logic of terror,” and the “free horizon” and “open seas” that “[w]e philosophers and ‘free spirits’” perceive when hearing of the death of God (GS 343). From just over the horizon Nietzsche calls to us, vehemently imploring us to face the deadly truth of nihilism, joyously tempting us to share in his “gratitude, amazement, premonitions, expectations.” Whether this is a sinister siren song, the delicate and luminous tune of a Dionysian pied piper, or the fading echo of an explorer who has suffered shipwreck? That we cannot know without setting out on these waters ourselves.