

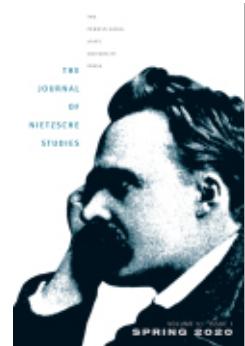


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Nietzsche on the Decadence and Flourishing of Culture by
Andrew Huddleston (review)

Tom Stern

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(Review)



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broader project and the important influences on Nietzsche's thinking, and he employs this knowledge to provide an interpretation that stays close to the original text and yet does not devolve, as some introductions are wont to do, into a mere paraphrasing of the ideas found therein. For these reasons, I highly recommend Ure's introduction to GS to students and scholars alike.

Andrew Huddleston, *Nietzsche on the Decadence and Flourishing of Culture*.

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Reviewed by Tom Stern | University College London

Andrew Huddleston's book sets out a vision of Nietzsche as a philosopher of culture. His approach sheds light on some familiar problems and opens up a new way of thinking about cultural criticism. Nietzsche's concern, he argues, lies with *both* the instrumental and final value of *both* individuals and whole cultures. In terms of the Anglophone secondary literature, this places Huddleston between Leiter, who tends to suggest that individuals are all that matters, and Young, who tends to suggest that communities are all that matters. A repeated claim is that Nietzsche evaluates cultures in a manner that is analogous to the evaluation of art, and much of the book involves exploring the subtleties of what that analogy entails.

The book is blessedly slim and divided into eight brisk chapters. The first sets out an "existential" function of culture: it enables human beings to cope with existence. *BT* is an obvious focus, but Huddleston traces this through later works, too. The focus shifts in chapter 3, via an illuminating digression on Nietzsche's relation to the *Bildung* tradition (chapter 2), from culture as functional to culture as end in itself. Building on *UM I*'s description of culture as the "unity of artistic style in all the life expressions of a people," Huddleston claims that a culture can be viewed as a "massive piece of collectively-embodied art" (48, see also 157). The point is not that

cultures are evaluated using aesthetic criteria such as beauty, but that, like art, culture as a “collective entity” or “way of life” bears value as a whole and in itself (49).

Chapter 4 complicates the relation between great individuals and their surrounding cultures in a number of directions. Great individuals are not (just) valuable in splendid isolation from their surroundings. Many of their great properties are extrinsic, for example, relative to the inferiority of others (72) or requiring their recognition (75). Christianity, correctly understood, has arguably been “as much a benefit as a curse by Nietzsche’s reckoning” (7). An essential quality of greatness, in any case, is that one can turn bad circumstances and *prima facie* misfortune to one’s advantage (68). Hence, “the best Nietzschean conclusion” (though “not the one he himself draws” in *GM*) to the question of whether culture undermines greatness would be: if one’s surroundings prevent one from being great, one wasn’t great in the first place (69). Nietzsche sometimes suggests that the way to combat decadence is to eradicate those who are decadent. Huddleston argues (chapter 5) that, since eradicating one’s enemies is a *symptom* of decadence in Nietzsche, eradicating the decadent cannot or at least ought not to be Nietzsche’s favored solution, individually or culturally. A healthy society can therefore flourish in spite of the decadence of most of its members—so a majority of decadent members does not entail a “decadent” culture.

In fact, in chapter 6 Huddleston gives an account of how individual decadents might be used or incorporated in a culture, forming the base or scaffolding on which greatness unfolds—a functional role that Huddleston calls “slavery,” although that need not entail being the property of another. The headline is that Nietzsche thinks that being a slave of this sort is the best possible life for many people. Christianity sometimes undermines and sometimes fosters this form of slavery. Chapter 7 targets anti-realist readings of Nietzsche’s meta-ethics (or meta-axiology, as Huddleston calls it) and dismisses realist views that “ground all value in ‘Life’ or in the will to power” (147). He keeps fairly quiet about what he takes Nietzsche’s specific views to be, claiming that the texts do not establish things one way or another. The final chapter takes Christian morality as a case study of Nietzsche as cultural critic. Christianity, for Nietzsche, is not problematic only or primarily because it inhibits greatness. It is problematic because it is, itself, not great. This last chapter goes further than the others in demonstrating (Huddleston’s) Nietzsche’s broader significance.

Interpreting cultures as one interprets works of art enables one to object to something in a culture not merely because it causes certain problems, but because it enshrines something bad. To borrow Huddleston's example, one might object to racist laws not only because they cause harm, but also because they enshrine "a certain offensive idea" (158). Huddleston finds analogous moves in Nietzsche, although they are less morally intuitive (to us). The point is not that Huddleston stands behind Nietzsche's particular evaluations themselves, but rather that the mode of evaluation presents a helpful model.

There is a lot to admire in this book. Huddleston's style is at once breezy and precise, staking out its territory pragmatically, robustly, yet without aggression. He combines minute textual analysis with broad-sweeping gestures toward Nietzsche's place in intellectual history, while never losing sight of major critical currents. Most of all, he is careful with his claims, drawing subtle distinctions that will make him harder to misunderstand and that will provoke and further the critical commentary. Thus, for example, he claims that it is true that only a few individuals are valuable in their own right (because most individuals are not); but false that only individuals are valuable in their own right (because cultures can be valuable in their own right); and false that those individuals who are not valuable in their own right are thereby dismissed altogether (because a "more modest form of excellence" is available to them) (39). The prose of the book somehow manages, again and again, to set out this kind of analysis clearly and without pedantry. Moreover, since there is no question that Nietzsche was (and wanted to be) a critic of culture in some sense, further debate is more than welcome and probably overdue. One of the main messages here—that Nietzsche, as cultural critic, has been ignored for too long—is well taken. For any Anglophone philosophical scholar wishing to write on Nietzsche and culture, this book will—I predict—soon become the first place to look.

Many of Huddleston's remarks about specific passages and his local criticisms of other scholars were thoroughly convincing—for examples of both, see chapter 7's critique of anti-realist meta-ethical interpretations. But on the broad points at issue, as a reading of Nietzsche himself, the book did not convince at key points. That doesn't mean the text shows Huddleston to be *wrong*, as such—or, at least, I don't claim to demonstrate that in what follows. Usually, it is a matter of Nietzsche talking about something slightly different from Huddleston, something that doesn't bear directly on the issue at hand or, if it does, raises significant questions about the way Huddleston uses it.

There is a further question about whether Huddleston intends his book to convince in the way that, in my view, it does not—a point to which I return at the end. But first things first. I focus here on two broad themes that, as evidenced by the summary above, while not exhaustive, are representative in being striking and central: cultures as artworks and the flourishing slave.

One major claim, we have seen, is that Nietzsche, early to late, views cultures as collective entities or complete ways of life, akin to works of art in that they are ends in themselves. The texts raise further questions about, first, the collective entity in question and, second, whether it really is treated as a valuable end in itself. Huddleston repeatedly cites Nietzsche's remark in *UM I:1* about culture as "above all, unity of artistic style in all the life-expressions of a people" (my translation; see 34, 45–48, 52, 59, 91, 149). There is no doubt that "culture," for Nietzsche, is broader than an aggregate of conventional works of art. But the nature of the "collective entity" (48) must be qualified in light of the overall line of argument in *UM I:1*, which is somewhat convoluted, and which Huddleston does not explore. Nietzsche is contesting the claim that German culture was victorious over French culture in the Franco-Prussian War. His point is that the military victory was not a cultural one. "Our culture played no part even in our success in arms," he claims, which success was down to "stern discipline, natural bravery and endurance, superior generalship, unity and obedience in the ranks, in short, elements that have nothing to do with culture" (3–4). So when Huddleston claims simply that "all the life expressions of a people" would include "the whole way of life, and its characteristic attitudes, practices, modes of comportment, and so on" (48), he sets himself *against* what Nietzsche seems to say, which is that culture does *not* include comportment of a fairly significant, war-winning kind. This doesn't refute Huddleston's claim that culture is evaluated as quasi-artwork. However, it does limit the scope of the artwork in question and *contrasts* Nietzsche with the German Romantics (but see 50). If everything counts as culture, then Nietzsche cannot maintain—as he wants to—that German culture did not crush French culture. Because we do not get the context, we do not get to ask some pressing questions. Where does German culture stop and the German military begin? (We are talking about nineteenth-century Prussia!) And can *UM I:1* really be used as a template for Nietzsche on culture in general? It would be difficult even to pose the question of culture versus the military when it comes to other polities, such as the Spartans.

Likewise, when it comes to the claim that Nietzsche values cultures as ends in themselves, Nietzsche's interests are not always placed before the

reader. Nietzsche writes that “in what matters most (which is still culture)” the Germans of today are deficient. Huddleston presents this as the claim that what “matters most” is culture *as opposed to individuals* (55; but see *TI* “Germans” 4). In fact, in context, it is culture that matters most in comparison with *the state*. Nietzsche is referring to a contemporary debate (see also *SE* 6) on state and culture, but he isn’t talking about the one versus the many.

Now, Nietzsche’s remarks about the military or the state suggest that “culture” excludes, even antagonizes, parts of a society—including, presumably, those concerned with organized violence and narrow political advantage. With minor exceptions (35, 113n39), these relations are not explored in Huddleston’s book. He claims, plausibly, that Nietzsche doesn’t have much of interest to say here, except that the state should keep out (113n39). Certainly, Nietzsche’s remarks on this topic are scattered and disconnected from other major themes, which means they can arguably be excised without doing much damage to any overall interpretation. But Huddleston also downplays other relevant background features of the quotations he is drawing on to establish that cultures are valuable ends. These features are more pervasively integrated into Nietzsche’s thought. The most obvious is the role of “Life” or—more or less equivalently—will to power and the related notion of life-affirmation, together with the speculative physiology on which they rest. It is striking that, when late Nietzsche is evaluating the cultural formations Huddleston himself mentions, these quasi-biological concepts are always in play. Nietzsche’s remarks in praise of Rome, Moorish Spain, and the Renaissance are treated, by Huddleston, as a case of finding a culture to be an “independent bearer of perfectionistic value” (53). Because Nietzsche praises them as the “*sensuous embodiment* [...] of certain noble ideals” (52), they are presented as cases in which the evaluator looks upon the culture as an “achievement” in its own right. In fact, in all cases, their significance, for Nietzsche, lies explicitly in their relation to Life, basically saying “yes” to or, which is the same thing, acting in accordance with Life’s power-seeking force. Nietzsche is commenting on how “Life-ey” these societies are. One could then ask whether Nietzsche thinks that Life-affirmation, as exemplified in these collectives, is instrumentally valuable in relation to individuals or finally valuable as culture (or neither). I am not sure that the texts really determine things either way, though, like Huddleston, I find little suggestion of the first. It is a question that seems to have arisen among commentators, largely independently of Nietzsche’s interests, and he doesn’t appear to give

it much thought. Because Huddleston does not acknowledge the biological context (except partially, at 57, and, I think, with some confusion about its relation to individuals, at 101n8), his book gives little hint as to how he would propose to integrate the instrumental versus final value question he is asking with Nietzsche's own analysis in terms of physiological flourishing.

Incidentally, the Life-affirmation dimension of Nietzsche's outlook complicated Huddleston's analysis in other places, too. Huddleston, we have seen, claims that great individuals can benefit from bad cultural surroundings. He notes that Nietzsche treats Raphael and other figures of the Italian Renaissance as great. Huddleston then asks, "is the greatness of the Renaissance even thinkable without the Christian worldview that centrally informed it?" (65). The answer to *that* may seem obviously to be no, but only via equivocation on the term "Christian worldview." Nietzsche's claim is only that the Renaissance was "anti-Christian" (and that Raphael was "not Christian"), because it (he) was *Life-affirming*, where "Christianity" in the relevant, pejorative sense means something Life-denying, that is, something that impedes or opposes Life's power-seeking. It is hardly obvious that Raphael's art is unthinkable without Life-denying Christianity. Life-denying Christianity *may* have benefits, for all that—it just hasn't been demonstrated in these passages.

I now turn to Huddleston's claim, as described above, that a flourishing culture should incorporate and make use of decadent elements (rather than extinguishing them) and, further, those elements may include those who, as "slaves" in a functional sense, are living their best possible lives in that way.

On the first part, Huddleston helpfully points to a possible conflict in Nietzsche's writing between his advocacy of the extermination of decadents and the suggestion that extermination projects are, themselves, decadent (87). Huddleston puts more weight on the latter, which he uses to downplay (though not deny) the former. This was too quick for me. Nietzsche does indeed think that seeking to exterminate something *can* be a sign of decadence, but most of the examples of extermination as decadence are highly specific about the kind of something in question: in the decadent cases, what is supposedly being extirpated is something natural or essential, as Nietzsche sees it. Passions, instincts, and indeed conflict in toto (as opposed to particular conflicts) all fall neatly into this category. Getting rid of decadent parts of an organism or society might not count, precisely because those parts are not required for life. Huddleston moves, for example, from Nietzsche's remarks about the decadence of

being anti-*passion* to conclude that it would be decadent to be anti-*parasite* (92–93; *TI* “Skirmishes” 36; “Morality” 1–2). But, when it comes to extermination, the rules are probably different for passions and parasites. Rather than resolving the apparent conflict by concluding that we ought to integrate decadents, we ought probably to resolve it by distinguishing between essential things, which it is decadent to seek to extirpate, and nonessential, even hostile things, which it is healthy to extirpate.

This casts doubt, coming to the second part, on whether *decadents* should be placed on the base of the broad pyramid of high culture (95–96, 112). Nietzsche, as far as I can tell, never claims this in the passages Huddleston mentions (*A* 57; *GS* 356; *BGE* 61). *A* 57, with its Platonic variations on Jacolliot’s “Manu,” is describing Manu’s ideal society, in which three physiological types are placed in their appropriate functional roles. But those on the lowest, base level are not decadents. *BGE* 61, written prior to Nietzsche’s explicit interest in decadence, says that Christianity *could* be used, in the right hands, to make some commoners content with their lot. But *BGE* 61 flows into *BGE* 62 (to which Huddleston does not refer), which says that in actual fact Christianity, because it was not in the right hands, has worked to preserve those who should perish, against the interests of the rest. It looks more likely that decadents, who are so often presented as those who should be eliminated, would find no place at all in the pyramid. They would be bred out and, indeed, if allowed in, they would undermine the foundations. Socialists, for example, are decadents (*TI* “Skirmishes” 37), and *A* 57 argues that they impede the workers from functioning properly. Better be rid of them, surely. One way to see why is to use one of Huddleston’s own arguments in reverse. Just as the healthy know how to turn every circumstance to their advantage, so the decadent, Nietzsche suggests, ruin everything that comes their way and cannot be made healthy. If you can be used as a solid foundation on which to build a society, then you are *not* decadent.

Suppose hopelessly decadent individuals could never find a place in the pyramid. It could still be true that there are non-great, non-decadents who are suited to the lowest level and that they find their most meaningful lives there. Plausibly, *A* 57 and *BGE* 61 give conjectural accounts of societies in which this is the case (less so *GS* 356). Then again, *BGE* 258 suggests, of a similar situation, that those at the base would thereby be rendered not fully human. If we decide that Nietzsche meant the *A* 57 and *BGE* 61 version, not the *BGE* 258 version, then our conclusion would be that *some* people—we cannot say how many, let alone if they are the majority of our

current society—could find their best lives in being the lowest level of a social pyramid. Christianity has in fact worked to undermine this, but, in different hands, it might foster it. This maintains some of Huddleston's message, albeit in a narrower application.

If pertinent, what do my reflections show? In part, that depends on what Huddleston takes himself to be doing. Unusually, Huddleston has addressed this point explicitly in methodological remarks ("Why (and How) We Read Nietzsche," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 49.2 [2018]: 233–40). They may explain how he could respond to the sorts of criticisms I've set out, assuming I am right about the texts. In sum, he advocates producing a *kind* of Nietzsche who lies between what the actual Nietzsche was personally on about—which is where my critical comments have focused—and any project of producing one's own completely Nietzsche-independent philosophy. If Huddleston means to contribute to a conversation that bears a certain looser relation to Nietzsche's texts, and which is also guided by the interest of subsequent Anglophone commentary toward something "provocative and interesting" (5), then he has certainly achieved that in spades. All I have done so far is to cast some light on the nature of the looser relation.

Perhaps, if that is the case, the reviewer of the book—but also, in my view, its author—should spend less time combing over the texts, and more on the theory that emerges. The idea that one should treat cultures analogously to artworks is stimulating, especially in light of the multiple distinctions and qualifications that Huddleston draws out during the course of his analysis of Nietzsche. It would be interesting to see it applied to a case more morally complex than that of overtly racist laws and to contrast it with the relative weakness (presumably) of other approaches. Doing so would bring out not only some of the approach's subtleties and advantages, but also some of the challenges it faces. I will close with one of these. As in art, so in culture, the status of the critic would come into question: too wrapped up in the culture and she might be biased or compromised; too distant and she might be ignorant; either way, unable to find an appropriate footing. Not an insurmountable problem, since there are, after all, good art critics. But a live-and-let-live stance to art criticism is easier to swallow than its ethical or political counterpart. On what ground does the cultural critic stand? The Frankfurt School, whom Huddleston considers Nietzsche's heirs, expended considerable energy trying to figure this one out. Their various answers are not, in the end, all that satisfying, and often drift toward controversial, universal claims about human welfare. As do Nietzsche's. In *BT*, his cultural critique is grounded

in his metaphysical story; in the later works, in his biological story. In both cases, cultural criticism has a firm, independent foundation. Huddleston does not explore either of these Nietzschean foundations in much detail, which is his prerogative. While he does not rule out grounding criticism in objective foundations, he does not offer any, and his concluding remarks emphasize Nietzsche's role in helpfully offering a variety of internal criticism (169–71). There, again, it is hardly plain sailing. Intuitively, we might want to say that people can change their minds mistakenly, under subtle coercion, or in ways that damage them. The difficulty lies, notoriously, in producing an account of social criticism that avoids these pitfalls. My point is not that these issues are unresolvable, but only that I wish there had been, or indeed will be, more space allotted to them than the closing few pages of the book.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments from the Period of Thus Spoke Zarathustra (Summer 1882–Winter 1883/84)*.

Translated, with an Afterword by Paul S. Loeb and David F. Tinsley.

Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019. 880 pp.

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Reviewed by Robin Small | University of Melbourne

The Stanford University Press edition of Nietzsche's works in English translation continues here with the *Nachlass* from what is described as “the period of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.“ Based on the edition of Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, it corresponds to volume 10 of their *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe* and to volume 7/1 of their *Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Werke*, which appeared in 1976. Colli and Montinari’s editorial apparatus has been included, and the translators, Paul S. Loeb and David F. Tinsley, have added notes of their own, as well as a lengthy afterword. The result is a substantial volume of over eight hundred pages, with much of interest to Nietzsche scholars in various ways.