

# Walking-Derived Metaphysics in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

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**ABSTRACT** Friedrich Nietzsche's Zarathustra, the protagonist of his most famous book, can be regarded as a philosopher who works towards becoming a sage—something that, towards the end of the narrative, ultimately seems to happen. Over the course of the account, he travels between his lonely cave and human society several times, walking up and down a mountain. In this article, I focus on how Nietzsche describes those walks using language that breaks with Cartesian dualism through its employment of such expressions as “lead-drop thoughts.” As a systematic frame of reference intended to support the analysis of these descriptions, I make use of Antoni Kempinski's concept of energetic-informational metabolism. Then, motivated by the preceding observations, I outline the philosophico-therapeutic hypothesis of a human transformation taking place as a two-phase procedure: (1) replacing the view of Cartesian dualism with what I call the “theatre of forces,” and (2) “de-selfing” the stage, or regarding this theatre as impersonal. Finally, reaching out to a Buddhist philosophical conception of the impersonal, I consider the possibility of a metaphysics entirely derived from sensations.

**KEYWORDS** de-selfing; energetic-informational metabolism; introspective description; metaphysics; walking

Friedrich Nietzsche's book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* can be read as a philosophical manifesto, just like almost all books by this author. This particular manifesto is centered around walking, which is present in the book both as a frequent activity of the protagonist and as a metaphor describing the human condition. One of its first scenes depicts a tightrope walker, where this example is used by Zarathustra to tell us that we humans, as a species, are in the phase of transformation from animals to overmen. Metaphorically speaking, we are walking on tightrope, which means that we can easily fall down. Nietzsche's Zarathustra is himself engaged in undertaking a personal journey. In "What is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?" (2021), Heinrich Meier describes him as a philosopher turning into a prophet. Similarly, Pierre Hadot's (2017) analysis of ancient history provides us with a picture of a philosopher as someone who undertakes training of a sort that will transform them from an ordinary person to a sage. Nietzsche's most famous book is undoubtedly a story dealing with such a conversion. In this article, I will focus on a specific aspect of the walks of Zarathustra: namely, their introspective descriptions. These will then serve as a starting point for proposing a conception of metaphysics entirely derived from sensation.

#### HOW DOES ZARATHUSTRA FEEL WHILE WALKING?

Nietzsche's Zarathustra, first of all, is a wanderer. He often walks through woods and swamps, and seems to fancy night walks, during which he loves "to look in the face of all sleepers" (Nietzsche 2006, 13), deliberately choosing dangerous paths. What sort of felt experience does he have of his own act of walking? Let us start with something that, if Zarathustra were a real person, could be an auto-phenomenological description of walking up a mountain path:

Darkly I walked recently through cadaver-colored twilight—darkly and hard, biting my lip. Not only one sun had set for me.

A path that climbed defiantly through boulders, a malicious, lonely path consoled neither by weed nor shrub—a mountain path crunched under the defiance of my foot.

Striding mutely over the mocking clatter of pebbles, crushing the rock that caused it to slip; thus my foot forced its way upward.

Upward—in defiance of the spirit that pulled it downward, the spirit of gravity, my devil and arch-enemy.

Upward—even though he sat atop me, half dwarf, half mole, lame, paralyzing, dripping lead into my ear, lead-drop thoughts into my brain.

“Oh Zarathustra,” he murmured scornfully, syllable by syllable. “You stone of wisdom! You hurled yourself high, but every hurled stone must—fall!

Oh Zarathustra, you stone of wisdom, you sling stone, you star crusher! You hurled yourself so high—but every hurled stone—must fall!

Sentenced to yourself and to your own stoning; oh Zarathustra, far indeed you hurled the stone—but it will fall back down upon you!”

Then the dwarf became silent, and that lasted a long time. But his silence oppressed me, and being at two in such a way truly makes one lonelier than being at one! (Nietzsche 2006, 124)

“Walking darkly,” “a path that climbed defiantly,” that arch-enemy “the spirit of gravity,” and “silence that oppressed me”—these expressions clearly show how far away we are here from materialistic physicalism and Cartesian metaphysics. What Descartes perceived as dead matter is psychologized, and what belongs to Cartesian “thinking substance” is described by Nietzsche with words typically used for depicting the material. One is prompted to ask whether walking is a kind of activity that is particularly effective when it comes to destroying the Cartesian metaphysical landscape.

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a work of fiction, but we have a strong basis for thinking that it reflects how its author felt about the world. This comes from Nietzsche's biography: his life shows his utmost sensitivity to the environment, which pushed him to frequently change the places where he lived. He seems to have been a man without skin, someone who is supersensitive: always in danger of surrendering to external influences but, simultaneously, someone who is able to perceive forces not seen by other people, such as a “certain energy in the air” (Chamberlain 1997, 38). Nietzsche noted that down in the Italian city of Turin, where he was writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and divided his day into three activities: writing, eating and walking in the mountains. “He told the Danish critic Georg Brandes that he had conceived the whole *Zarathustra* Book I in ten days out walking in the mountains” (Chamberlain 1997, 40). One of the first sentences of that part of the work reads as follows:

To the spirit there is much that is heavy; to the strong, carrying spirit imbued with reverence. Its strength demands what is heavy and heaviest.

What is heavy? thus asks the carrying spirit. It kneels down like a camel and wants to be well loaded.

What is heaviest, you heroes? thus asks the carrying spirit, so that I might take it upon myself and rejoice in my strength.

Is it not this: lowering oneself in order to hurt one's pride? Letting one's foolishness glow in order to mock one's wisdom?

Or is it this: abandoning our cause when it celebrates victory? Climbing high mountains in order to tempt the tempter? (Nietzsche 2006, 16)

From the translator's footnote (Nietzsche 2006, 199), we know that *Zarathustra* was not written in one go. Instead, the book was preceded by several drafts and copious notes that Nietzsche made in his notebooks while out on his long mountain treks. The writing of the final version of the text would seem to have been no more than a matter of organizing the notes. It is safe to assume that expressions such as "dripping lead into my ear, lead-drop thoughts into my brain" were conceived while walking and not sitting in front of a desk. This expression is interesting in itself: it breaks away from describing the experience in Cartesian terms in a highly peculiar manner. At first, it seems to be a description of physical processes: lead travels to material destinations such as the ears or the brain, and exerts its force. However, the "lead-drop thoughts" direct us towards gravitation, and of a specific sort—that of thoughts. The mental activity is, at one and the same time, a proprioceptive sensation observed during walking upwards. This will culminate in the expression "spirit of heaviness," frequently employed in Nietzsche's book.

Although physical in its provenance, according to Meier (2021), the spirit of heaviness often exerts its force in fighting against what we typically ascribe to the mental realm: e.g., love of oneself. The spirit of heaviness allies with the spirit of revenge: "The two, the spirit of heaviness and the spirit of revenge, meet in the negation of the world as it is" (Meier 2021, 108). They both consist of what Nietzsche calls the "self," which is a psychosomatic entity:

Zarathustra deploys the "self" against the backworldsmen's "specter," against a spirit or a soul without body. It is an expression of Zarathustra's recourse

to physiologia. We may read it as a translation for the individual nature in its concrete form, which changes throughout the course of life. The “self” is directed to the earth by means of the body, and to the overman by dint of creating—for creating over and beyond itself, this “it wants most dearly, this is its whole fervor” (Meier 2021, 22).

The self is not only psychosomatic, but also processual. It weighs, as the increased sensation of heaviness while walking upwards in Nietzsche's description shows. Thus, the self changes not only throughout the course of life but also in the act of moving our body and acting with it against the force of gravitation. It is not a weightless psychic bubble that walks through the landscape, but a force (as in “physical force”) generated from the act of walking. It changes and assumes a new form due to what can be called—as we are still near Turin—a *paesaggio* factor: the self-constituting force of the environment. It seems that the illusion of self-separateness is felt only by people with thick skin and abandoned by those who are more sensitive—especially by Nietzsche himself, the man without skin. The landscape around us does not modify our thoughts; it is present in what seems to exist “within us” as our thoughts. We are open systems, and the felt degree of our separateness is determined by our sensitivity of attention, not by frontiers existing objectively in the world. Thoughts do not originate from the soul of the walker, but are established, modified, and sublimated as a result of a play of sourceless forces. In the next section, I will try to describe this play using as a systematic frame of reference the concept of informational metabolism as proposed by the psychiatrist Antoni Kepiński.

#### ZARATHUSTRA'S METABOLISM

Thinking of the world as a collection of objects in space, and of ourselves as an observer of them that comprises psychic and physical aspects, is not the only option. Nietzsche's descriptions of walking furnish us with a completely different picture: that of a theater of forces acting on each other and creating a dynamic landscape of what life is. The landscape is not chaotic. Nietzsche uses terms such as “the spirit of heaviness” in specific contexts, such as the above-mentioned one of self, or of a fight with the spirit of revenge. This provides readers of his books with a picture of a partially organized universe that, to a great extent, nevertheless remains a mystery. We do not know, for example, what fundamental rules rule over such a universe. To depict Nietzsche's cosmos in more analytic terms, I intend to employ as a systematic frame of reference the conception of the energetic-informational universe created by psychiatrist Antoni Kepiński,

who writes, amongst other things, that “[a] feature of life is dialectics of changeability and conservation. Life consists of constant change, which is an effect of its metabolic character—living beings are so-called open systems, i.e., they live due to continuous exchange (the metabolism) of energy and information with the environment, without which they cannot exist” (Kępiński 2007b, 6).

Kępiński states that living organisms cannot exist by themselves. They are contextual appearances that are emerging, moment by moment, from the theater of forces and not from some metaphysical entity such as the soul. The fundamental notion within his description is that of energetic and informational metabolism. It is true that Nietzsche deploys the idea of the soul, but only as a descriptive means. His focus is always on the process of life, which can culminate in the feeling of joy, or—to express it in more gravitational terms—a feeling of elevation applied equally to the material and the mental: “Knowingly the body purifies itself; experimenting with knowledge it elevates itself; all instincts become sacred in the seeker of knowledge; the soul of the elevated one becomes gay” (Nietzsche 2006, 58).

This is a description of a metabolic-like activity Nietzsche-style. When supplemented by a description of a clash of those forces that act upwards with those that act downwards, as in the opening quotation in this article, it aligns with Kępiński’s characterization of the informational-energetic metabolism in depicting an open system “under a constant process of building and destroying, a pulsation, with a side-effect of constant anxiety” (Fabjański 2022, 70). Walking, especially, reveals the basic structure of individual organisms as open systems, as during this activity we absorb from the paths not only the sensations felt on the undersides of our feet but also the path’s maliciousness and loneliness. The atmospheres absorbed create thoughts and these, in turn, may attack the wanderer. Thoughts may bite him, and their gravity is “terrible” (Nietzsche 2006, 129) .

Nietzsche invokes the metabolic character of open systems even when offering up general remarks on human life: “Why live? All is vain! Life—that is threshing straw; life—that is burning oneself and yet not getting warm” (Nietzsche 2006, 163). It is not that humans, while metabolically burning themselves up, walk through life physically or metaphorically. Human beings themselves are journeys:

What is great about human beings is that they are a bridge and not a purpose: what is lovable about human beings is that they are a crossing over and a going under.

I love those who do not know how to live unless by going under, for they are the ones who cross over (Nietzsche 2006, 7).

Nietzsche's metabolic system consists of forces not detected by Kępiński—forces that overcome time in that they come from the past not simply as memories of past events, but rather as the presence of the whole universe in us. This is possible because we have lived our lives innumerable times before. This presence is not obvious, as it is repressed by human memory.

[E]very human animal has lived its qualitatively identical life innumerable times before. And since every human animal possesses a faculty of memory, it must be possible for it to remember these innumerable identical previous lives. More precisely, Nietzsche defines human memory as a counter-faculty by means of which its animal forgetting is suspended or disconnected. And animal forgetting, he writes, is “an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of repression that is responsible for the fact that what is only absorbed, experienced by us, taken in by us, enters just as little into our consciousness during the condition of digestion (one might call it ‘inpsychation’) as does the entire thousand-fold process through which the nourishing of our body (so called ‘incorporation’) runs its course” (GM II:1) (Loeb 2010, 221).

According to Loeb, the author of the above analysis, the picture becomes even more complex in that humans also have to digest their future:

Indeed, given the account of mnemonic relations suggested by Nietzsche's aphorism, according to which my “future” self-stages can actually communicate with, and care for, my “past” self-stages, we might want to conclude that eternal recurrence allows for a much richer and thicker concept of personal identity than the usual one which emphasizes only the unidirectional relations from my past self-stages to my future self-stages (Loeb 2010, 31).

Let us suppose that Walter Kaufmann, Nietzsche's biographer, was right when he defined his therapy as an attempt to limit the chaos of our experience by integrating all the impulses into a harmonious flow (Kaufmann 2013, vii-viii). In that case, walking might have served the author of *Zarathustra* through the superimposition of a certain structure on the multitude of forces. Being rhythmical, walking structures the forces, changing them from disparate ingredients into a dish that is possible to digest. This is precisely why we suffer less while walking—as if it were a form of living activity that renders the digesting of existential pain more effective. Even

if that last statement does not hold true for all of us, it certainly was like this for Nietzsche, who is famous for writing while walking.

Kępiński's model explains not only what is happening in the theater of forces at a given moment, but also the evolution of the theater: "In the process of human development, informational metabolism gets enriched, and it takes on a leading role" (Kępiński 2007a, 101).

This enrichment of the metabolism, as described by Kępiński, leads in a direction opposite to that which Nietzsche hoped would be taken by human beings over the course of the evolution of civilization. The German philosopher was hoping for our metabolism to include energy and be less information oriented, as concepts—for him—were dead obstructions to the felt vitality of the process of life. The latter transport us to a nether world, cutting us off from the reality experienced right now. The overman was supposed to reverse the tendency of the metabolism to become more and more informational. This required expanding the field of awareness, and breaking the barrier between the conscious and the unconscious—as, according to Kępiński, informational metabolism acts in two phases, one unconscious (below the threshold of consciousness and independent of will) and the other conscious.

Nevertheless, not letting the informational side of metabolism grow too much in relation to the energetic one by simply refusing to absorb new concepts or withdrawing from overexposure to the world of information would not work. We absorb information, and use it to establish and maintain our own order within the theater of forces. Halting this absorption would be possible only if we found a new way to take care of our own order, this time by energetic means, as we have to counteract the force of entropy one way or another. And this is exactly the process that is described in *Zarathustra*. As Kępiński writes, "[l]ife is an effort to maintain our own order against the natural gravitation of matter towards entropy" (Kępiński 2007a, 102).

What Zarathustra does in fighting against the dwarf on the mountain path is what Kępiński calls creating "negative entropy"—a tendency to superimpose our own order on the environment. Nietzsche's way of deploying this negative entropy, his therapy, is to deconstruct notions, especially general ones, and sensitize our attention so as to make it effective in attuning us to the wild environment.

Kępiński writes that excessive growth in respect of informational metabolism results in a tendency to believe in immortality (Kępiński 2007a, 208). This resonates with Nietzsche's critique of religion, theology, and the very concept of immortality. The latter would like the informational side of metabolism to be starved and vacate the stage for the energetic one. Walking is an activity that promotes this tendency much more than sitting. It



produces not only fewer thoughts than sitting, but also better ones. For Nietzsche, higher-quality thoughts seem to originate directly from vital experience, not from speculation on the part of people cut off from the felt reality of their bodies and their environment. Such thoughts are not products of the ego:

Your small reason, what you call “spirit,” is also a tool of your body, my brother, a small work- and plaything of your great reason. “I,” you say, and are proud of this word. But what is greater is that in which you do not want to believe—your body and its great reason. It does not say “I,” but does I (Nietzsche 2006, 23).

#### PURIFICATION BY IMPERSONAL FORCES

Taking the above analysis as its basis, I wish to now outline a hypothetical philosophico-therapeutic method of ego-overcoming of a sort that leads to what in ancient philosophy was called “human flourishing.” This goal was not just a lofty ideal: it was a concrete result of practice, or perhaps several diverse practices. According to Pierre Hadot, in Antiquity

each school had its own therapeutic method, but all of them linked their therapeutics to a profound transformation of the individual’s mode of seeing and being. The object of spiritual exercises is precisely to bring about this transformation (Hadot 2017, 83).

Moreover, “[e]ach school will elaborate its rational depiction of this state of perfection in the person of the sage, and each will make an effort to portray him” (Hadot 2017, 57).

Achieving perfection Nietzsche-style could be divided into two phases. In Kępiński’s terms, the first would consist of clearing the informational noise by resisting the impulse to fight the entropy by means of the scaffolding of concepts, while the second would involve replacing this noise with an awareness of the sensations flowing into one’s consciousness from one’s body and from a healthy environment. Nietzsche was constantly searching for such an environment, as he spent his summers in the Swiss Alps, moving down in the winter towards the Italian shore. His well-being depended on a kind of *osmosis*, an atmospheric absorption of the richness of the landscape with its ancient alpine coolness, southern light, smells of pines, and Mediterranean soil. Such a strategy of achieving flourishing would require an immense trust in nature (and distrust of social conventions), as well as a sensitized power of attention and the robust virtue of

courage. All these factors are present both in ancient therapeutic philosophy and in Nietzsche's own life.

The two-phase procedure we have been able to reconstruct from *Zarathustra* can therefore be summarized as follows:

1. Replacing the view of Cartesian dualism with that of a theatre of forces.
2. "De-selfing the stage," or regarding this theatre as impersonal.

I have already described how the first of these stages is to be achieved: by means of a meditative attunement to one's bodily sensations and the impulses coming from a healthy environment, and by changes to the patterns of one's thinking such as are engendered by the more rarified but clear thoughts issuing from this kind of meditation. This procedure should prepare the ground for activating healthy metabolic (digestive) forces—something which would not be possible for someone leading a non-philosophical life, someone who exposes himself or herself uncritically to information produced by the human herd:

Just look at these superfluous! They are always sick, they vomit their gall and call it the newspaper. They devour one another and are not even able to digest themselves (Nietzsche 2006, 35).

The stage of "de-selfing" would be achieved by even deeper meditative means, entailing a further sensitization of one's attention; being in the present moment, in the manner of mindfulness, would not suffice. As in the case of Buddhist insight-oriented meditation, the procedure would require one's attention to be directed to specific features of the experienced world, such as life's impersonal character. Buddhism expresses this in the form of a central principle of non-self (*anattā* in the Pali language).

Some of my own autobiographical observations that stem from covering on foot, in the footsteps of German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, the long distance from Leipzig to Kaliningrad, suggest that the impersonal character of life reveals itself on various levels while walking. As I wrote in my notebook:

My autonomy is now taken care of by something other than thinking—by the rhythm of steps or perhaps the natural return of attention to the body during walking. I have experienced this several times during this walk. By the end of the first kilometer, thoughts become less frequent, perception sharpens, and a feeling of peace and joy penetrates the body. It continues until the fatigue or pain becomes too severe.

Wandering, especially in the wilderness, produces two types of experience. The first type is the feeling that a separate person is walking through a world of objects and events outside of him, located somewhere in space-time. Such a person feels captured within his skin and separated from every tree and stone he passes. He is going somewhere to pursue his goals, for example, to Kaliningrad. The second type of experience is when attention becomes attuned to the sensations—the variable distribution of the impact of gravity on the head, torso, and limbs, the touch of the wind on the face, and heat felt on both sides of the skin. Then, such a person finds himself within the order of nature. His body was liberated from the self and given over to the process of life.

Walking meditation, Nietzsche-style, would eventually lead to a distinguishing of two categories of force within the field of experience: those that are self-derived and those coming from sources other than the self. Of these, I call the second sort “free forces.” The sense of self is weakened when attention is immersed in these. Our self-derived identity gradually comes to be replaced by what elsewhere I have called “environmental identity:”

When talking about “environmental identity,” I refer to identity, which uses what I call Open-source Intelligence for its purposes. This intelligence operates as if from outside of the bubble of the psyche. Which brings up questions: Is wisdom impersonal? Is intelligence such? Various Buddhist teachers from the Thai Forest Tradition, the contemporary philosophical school most open to the environment, seem to answer “yes” to these questions when they write, e.g., that “wisdom investigates” experience in the process of meditation. Not person, not meditation, wisdom. And this impersonal wisdom is capable of intelligent strategies. Forest tradition master Ajahn Maha Boowa writes about such an intelligence: “The nature of the citta [mind or consciousness—author’s reference] is such that once it investigates anything to the point of seeing it clearly, it lets go (Fabjański 2022, 115).

This environmental identity is perhaps that of Nietzsche’s overman. Loeb expresses a similar insight when he writes, in his book on death in *Zarathustra*, that “Zarathustra articulates a positive supra-personal task that will justify all of their combat and sacrifice” (Loeb 2010, 130).

**CONCLUSION: ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A SENSATION-DERIVED METAPHYSICS**  
 Let us consider the alluring possibility of creating a metaphysical system derived entirely from sensations as distinct from pre-existing concepts in

our society. Of course, such a metaphysics would, by necessity, be a felt metaphysics, and when expressed in any language would be spoiled by mistakes in thinking such as occur in every human herd. Any such attempt should, then, be considered an approximation. Nietzsche's metaphysics was, for him, an intimately disclosed one, which he felt most clearly while walking mountain trails.

Various passages in *Zarathustra* show how the body reveals metaphysics, ultimately squeezing out any suspicion of spirit as a part of the process of life:

“Since I have come to know the body better”—Zarathustra said to one of his disciples—“the spirit is only a hypothetical spirit to me; and all that is ‘everlasting’—that too is only a parable” (Nietzsche 2006, 99).

Another teacher of metaphysics would be gravity:

I am a wanderer and a mountain climber, he said to his heart. I do not like the plains and it seems I cannot sit still for long. And whatever may come to me now as destiny and experience—it will involve wandering and mountain climbing: ultimately one experiences only oneself (Nietzsche 2006, 121).

This “oneself” is spiritless. It is free as it needs no ideology, justification, or proof of existence. As such, it is subject to no metaphysical language games. It lacks no sense or meaning, because it does not need them. In this regard, it resembles not only Buddhist but also Daoist philosophy, as one author notes while comparing the philosophies of Nietzsche and Zhuangzi:

Nietzsche pictures the world of appearances as a world of becoming, change, contradiction, multiplicity, and even chaos. Things appear, become, and change, things disappear, are destroyed and annihilated. Nothing stays permanent, certain, and fixed, all is in the flux of becoming; this is what Nietzsche has in mind as the sole necessity of the apparent world. The world of appearances is indeed a constant or perpetual flow of appearing and disappearing, becoming and passing away, in which nothing can be possibly fixed, structured, endured as Being, Reality, and certainty (Shang 2012, 87).

The original meaning of Dao was “walking.” It became a metaphysical principle only in the later stages of Daoism (see Shang, p. 13). Coincidentally, Nietzsche's walking philosophy, expressed not only in books—especially *Zarathustra*—but also in the philosopher's life as his favorite activity, finds

itself standing in an unexpected connection to one of the oldest philosophical terms known today.

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