Chapter Title:

Friedrich Nietzsche: The Hammer Goes to Monticello

Chapter Abstract:

In countless public speeches and pieces of private correspondence, Thomas Jefferson proclaimed the innate goodness and rationality of human beings. He believed governments propped up by irrational claims of authority, particularly the “monkish ignorance” of religious authority, had subverted these qualities too often. Diminished liberty and pervasive despair prevailed throughout the world. Fortunately, a new science of politics, one grounded in reason rather than superstition, offered hope because it allowed for the discovery of a rational foundation for government worthy of the people it would serve. Although the United States was the first country to implement a regime based on reason, Jefferson sincerely expected America to inspire other nations, and, eventually, all nations, to embrace the new rationalism and trust their people with self-governance. Sentiments such as these have led many political theorists, historians, and regular citizens to view Jefferson as an embodiment of American political idealism, love for humanity, and faith in reason.

For Jefferson, reason provided access to the truth about reality and initiated a desperately needed break from a decadent past filled with incense and nonsense. Reason was the guide to progress as well as the means to ending history itself. Friedrich Nietzsche would find much to object to in these areas of Jefferson’s political thought. In many writings, Nietzsche argued rationalism did not inaugurate a break from the religious past so much as it re-packaged pre-existing ethical and political beliefs in language stripped of many theological and metaphysical associations. Thus, modern rationalism was no new thing under the sun; it was an example of a serious problem Nietzsche already identified in Christianity, that is, nihilism.

In this chapter, Nietzsche’s understanding of reason, morality, equality, Christianity, and democracy will be described and applied to an explanation and analysis of the same elements of Jefferson’s political thought. By borrowing Nietzsche’s hammer to “sound out” Jefferson’s mind, it will be argued that Jefferson’s oft-celebrated democracy of reason is tinged with misanthropy and world hatred. In other words, such a vision is a manifestation of the ascetic ideal and thus is ultimately nihilistic. Because many see Jefferson as a paradigmatic figure in the American Founding, even as an incarnation of the American spirit, the chapter has broad implications for interpreting a fundamental dimension of the American political tradition.