Nietzsche and Ethics (review)

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The title *Nietzsche and Ethics* subsumes a collection of various articles from a conference held in September 2004, under the auspices of the Friedrich Nietzsche Society, U.K. This open, almost

vague formulation of the topic reflects the following difficulty: that one cannot ascertain with certainty what constitutes Nietzsche's ethics or indeed whether one can speak of moral thinking in Nietzsche at all. It is, however, this nexus between Nietzsche and ethics that opens up a space for a diversity of contributions ranging from either the affirmation or the rejection of Nietzsche's dismissal of moral values to attempts at delineating a new ethics from his writings. This is confirmed by the editor's introduction, which observes that scholars, despite their agreement on the importance of Nietzsche's thinking for moral philosophy, tend to diverge in their conclusions about Nietzsche's relation to ethics (7).

The different philosophical and methodological approaches of each contributor add to this confusing variety of views, and the reader should not necessarily expect to come closer to a final verdict on the merits of Nietzsche's ethical considerations. Yet at the same time, the impossibility of pinning Nietzsche's philosophy down to its "true" moral content is itself inherent in his perspectivism, which has been both the curse and the fortune of Nietzsche scholarship. According to Nietzsche, truth and moral truth are related to the constant shifting of perspectives in relation to changing constellations of power.

While some articles in this volume seem to ignore the perspectival character of truth in Nietzsche altogether, embarking on a search for the esoteric contents of his moral philosophy, the approach of Robert Guay provides a welcome contrast insofar as it gives credit to Nietzsche's ever-shifting perspectives. Guay engages with Nietzsche's claim to be an immoralist and interprets his critique of morality as a necessary corrective: "Any approach that offers definitive answers or that relies on the fixity of character to provide stability harms its own provision of practical guidance" (73). By rejecting morality, immoralism questions the dogmatic character of hitherto fixed ethical systems. What remains is "human flourishing" (*GM* P:3), a teleology without any particular telos—an everlasting play of will-to-power quanta. This means—according to Guay—that Nietzsche's immoralism leads back to the fundaments of human nature and the human need to find a purpose for existence: "So we need teachers of the purpose of existence to make sense of life, and we need to be able to live up to our sense-making in order to sustain our purposiveness" (77). This circle, in which life is giving itself a purpose for the sake of doing so, is constantly shifting, and thus Guay's interpretation seems to be in accordance with Nietzsche's understanding of perspectivism and the will to power.

It follows from this perspectival reading that Guay disagrees with Edward Harcourt's approach to interpreting Nietzsche's ethics along the lines of eudaemonism. Harcourt places Nietzsche's reflections between the neo-Aristotelian and the immoralist positions. Similarly to Guay, he understands Nietzsche's concept of "human flourishing" from the preface of *GM* as central for his ethics but defines this as a eudaemonistic position. This comes at the price of excluding inner harmony from the essential realm of eudaemonism.

In their attempt to get hold of Nietzsche's ethics, both contributions place an emphasis on those texts by Nietzsche that seem to affirm their arguments, thereby neglecting others and ignoring the development and changes in Nietzsche's thinking. Whereas Guay could argue that there are perspectival changes, Harcourt falls into the trap of finding a fixed ethical position in Nietzsche and of applying this assumption to contradictory arguments in Nietzsche's work. To avoid this difficulty, one must either follow Karl Jaspers by deliberately looking for those contradictions in Nietzsche that suit one's interpretation or choose a philological approach that investigates thoroughly the development of Nietzsche's thinking on ethics. This is one of the reasons why the edition of the *KGW* and the *quellenkundliche* contributions in its commentary and in *Nietzsche-Studien* have been so important.

Thomas Brobjer belongs to this tradition of Nietzsche scholarship and has contributed numerous amendments to our knowledge of Nietzsche's sources. His article in this volume shows the development of Nietzsche's moral thinking and his engagement with different ethical systems. To deal with Nietzsche and ethics requires knowledge of this development—Nietzsche's religious youth; his belief in a new spirituality by awakening the Greek tragic culture in *BT*; the engagement with

positions such as utilitarianism, amoralism, and immoralism. As some contributions to this volume do not differentiate between the periods in which various texts by Nietzsche were written, it is necessary for any reader to have a close look at Brobjer's article first. Unfortunately, his contribution does not—as one would expect—open the volume but, rather, closes it. (The introduction does not clarify the chosen order of the articles.)

The volume begins with a contribution by Ken Gemes, focusing heavily on *GM*. This is unfortunate as (together with the aforementioned texts by Guay and Harcourt) it shifts the emphasis of Nietzsche's considerations of ethics to this *Streitschrift* or polemic and gives the impression that Nietzsche's thoughts on moral philosophy are restricted to it. Here we have to remember that Nietzsche described *GM* as a commentary on *BGE* and both of these texts as, in turn, a commentary on *Z*. Beginning with the preface to *GM*, Gemes traces Nietzsche's arguments on the will to truth as a "tool to repress and split off part of our nature," which undermines the belief in the sovereign individual and in free will. It is, he argues, Nietzsche's aim to "bring home to us the disturbing message that we splintered moderns are strangers to ourselves" (20). It would have been worthwhile if Gemes had put Nietzsche's thoughts on the will to truth, on the scientific spirit, and on free will and genuine selfhood into the context of the unpublished fragments, in which Nietzsche had been occupied with some of those questions long before *GM*. Here one can follow Nietzsche's thoughts on the origins of morality and on how the will to truth developed from it, only to turn against itself at the very end of this process. In an unpublished fragment from autumn 1881 Nietzsche states that the suicide of morality is its own last moral demand ("der Selbstmord der Moral ist ihre eigene letzte moralische Forderung" [Nachgelassene Fragmente Frühjahr 1881 bis Sommer 1882, *KSA* 9.640]).

It has to be pointed out that the focus on Nietzsche's published writings and a neglect of the *Nachlass* constitute a prevailing tendency in anglophone Nietzsche scholarship, as there is still no complete translation of the unpublished writings available. We are also reminded of the fact that even good translations do not necessarily further understanding when we read the article of Gudrun von Tevenar on *Mitleid*. For the English reader, *Mitleid* could be rendered as either "pity" or "compassion." Using this differentiation, Tevenar attempts to develop a new understanding of Nietzsche's rejection of *Mitleid* as, according to her hypothesis, his concern was mainly to focus on "compassion" as weakening life. This methodological approach seems to me highly problematic, as it suggests a differentiation that Nietzsche could not have had in mind as a German writer. Instead of trying to understand Nietzsche's thinking, this approach adapts his philosophy to the English-speaking mind. (This Anglo-Saxon emphasis of the volume is also affirmed by the fact that most contributors do not cite the German original quotes in the footnotes.) Rebecca Bamford's article also deals with Nietzsche's rejection of *Mitleid*. Focusing on Zarathustra's encounter with the ugliest man in part 4 of *Z*, she defends Nietzsche's critique by pointing out that virtue still prevails in Zarathustra's attitude: "Zarathustra's benevolence, his capacity for honesty, and most particularly his capacity for shame, allow us to admire him as a virtuous character" (266).

Whereas most of the contributors draw their attention to the late immoralist writings of Nietzsche, in particular *GM*, Herman Siemens uses the late concept of *Umwertung aller Werte* as a tool for interpreting *BT*. According to Siemens, *BT* is Nietzsche's first attempt at a transvaluation of values. The affirmation of life is opposed to the Socratic culture of Western society. Siemens highlights the problem of this approach, as Nietzsche's claim will always remain contradictory as long as his overcoming of Socratic values remains at the level of discourse. That is why Nietzsche's discursive challenge has to be supplemented by a performative one that is, according to Siemens, the Greek concept of *agon*: "In short, Nietzsche's text *is* itself *agonal* culture, as the affirmative interpretation of life thematized throughout his work as the highest from of life: (the rebirth of) tragic culture" (173).

Robin Small investigates Nietzsche's understanding of evolution in the context of today's evolutionary ethics. Nietzsche's critique of altruism is based on his rejection of an approach that identifies the good with the well-being of the species. The concept of the will to life—which Nietzsche attributes falsely to Darwin—is replaced by the will to power. In this way, Nietzsche

is able to formulate an evolutionary concept that emphasizes individuals and not species. Small describes this development in Nietzsche's thought from the time of his friendship with Paul Rée up until the late writings.

Small's interest in Nietzsche's contribution to modern theories of evolution is accompanied by another article on the reception of Nietzsche's ethical thinking. Carol Diethe examines how Nietzsche's sexual ethics was received by the different circles in the first wave of Nietzsche reception. Her survey ranges from the so-called *Kosmiker* to the male projection of the "femme fatale," from Otto Weininger to Magnus Hirschfeld. In her informative overview she puts a special emphasis on the reception of Nietzsche among the early members of the feminist movement, especially Helene Stöcker. As Diethe shows, Stöcker's concern with the social improvement of married mothers and the demand for a revaluation of female sexuality were miles apart from Lou Andreas-Salomé's concept of the sexual and the general fulfillment of female expression.

"Toward a Will to Power Sociology" is the title of Henry Staten's contribution to the volume. Here he looks at Nietzsche's understanding of consciousness as determined by the instincts and drives. Arguing against such a biological determinism, Staten claims a semiautonomous status for consciousness, where the "I" is not solely a plaything of the unconscious will to power and the struggles of the body but partially also the result of determining processes developed through cultural and sociological forms. This becomes evident in the concept of *techné*, where the know-how of socially acquired skills intermingles with the drives and instincts of the body, thereby blurring the boundaries between consciousness and unconsciousness. According to Staten, this opening of the social makes possible a productive new engagement between the notion of the will to power and ethical theory (164).

James Wilson's article, "Nietzsche and Equality," is rather polemical in nature. A thorough examination of Nietzsche's thought is overshadowed by a personal value system that forms the basis of his engagement with Nietzsche's moral philosophy. Wilson states that "despite Nietzsche's undoubted interest and brilliance as an ethical thinker, at the deepest level, we must think of him as an opponent" (222). His attempt to replace the theory of the will to power and the pathos of distance with an ethical concept of equality could certainly be seen as an argument in favor of will to power. It is an interpretation that tries to overcome the other by means of power. Although he deals with Nietzsche as an opponent, the author assures us that he views Nietzsche's arguments against egalitarianism from a perspective that is friendly to Nietzsche. One wonders whether this kind of value judgment helps us to understand Nietzsche's ethical position at all. But the engagement with Nietzsche's concepts of morality from a philological and hermeneutical point of view—something that is necessary to understand Nietzsche's statements in the context of his time and to protect oneself from any emotional Nietzschean or anti-Nietzschean outbursts—is not what James Wilson seems to favor: "Treating the interpretation of Nietzsche's text as a purely scholarly endeavor without any implications for what we *ought* to think about morality diminishes both Nietzsche and ourselves. It diminishes Nietzsche, because it treats him merely as a figure in the history of ideas, rather than someone who is making serious claims about how we should live" (229). It is, however, precisely a hermeneutical-scholarly approach that would produce very important implications for our moral conduct, preventing us first from adhering uncritically to Nietzschean ethics and its problematic implications and second from making polemical egalitarian statements that do not want to engage with Nietzsche's thinking at all.

As is always the case with the publication of conference proceedings, the quality of the essays varies, and the range of topics is widespread. But for all of those who are interested in recent debates in moral philosophy and the role of Nietzsche's philosophy in these debates, this volume provides a welcome opportunity to gain an overview.

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