Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality

Brian Leiter

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In recent years analytic philosophers have shown increasing interest in Nietzsche as a philosopher, especially as a moral philosopher, and Brian Leiter's book confirms the quality of that interest. *Nietzsche on Morality* is rigorously argued, textually precise, historically informed, and "excruciating[ly]" clear (xv).

Leiter's book serves, in one sense, as a summation of two decades of scholarship during which American and British philosophers have sought to reframe Nietzsche's philosophy in terms of traditional analytic concerns in ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics and thereby to challenge (or simply ignore) dominant Continental readings. Richard Schacht's comprehensive *Nietzsche* (Routledge 1983) marked the beginning of this effort. The work of Maudemarie Clark, with whom Leiter has collabroated on other projects, represents another landmark.

In *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge 1990) Clark intelligently enagaged interpreters like Heidegger, De Man, and Derrida as well as Rorty and Nehamas as she

argued that Nietzsche's perspectivism does not entail the wholesale rejection of truth and objectivity. She defended Nietzsche as an empirically-minded philosopher sympathetic to science rather than a skeptic of science and truth. Less poetic, less ironic, and less playful than his Continental versions, Clark's Nietzsche was also less riddled with the paradoxes of skepticism and relativism.

Of crucial importance for Leiter and other scholars was Clark's reading of the development of Nietzsche's thought over time, an account that resolved basic inconsistencies. To make sense of Nietzsche's numerous claims to the effect that "truth is an illusion," Clark carefully plotted the evolution of his thinking from early to middle to mature works-- a task overlooked by most Continental commentators, who tended to approach Nietzsche's writings ahistorically. In early and middle works, Clark argued, Nietzsche accepts the Kantian idea (inherited from Schopenhauer and from the neo-Kantian Friedrich Lange) that human understanding is necessarily phenomenal and thus cannot grasp reality as it is "in itself." In works after 1887, however, Nietzsche comes to reject the distinction between noumenon and appearance, and so abandons the "falsification thesis" it entails. It is important for Clark's reading that in final works like the *Genealogy*, *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist*, *and Ecce Homo* Nietzsche no longer makes reference to truth as "illusion" and frequently expresses sympathy with the findings and methods of science.

Clark's reading rendered Nietzsche more attractive to mainstream Anglo-American philosophers. Accordingly, the 1990s saw a surge in analytic Nietzsche scholarship, including new editions of *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Clark with Alan Swensen, Hackett,

1998) and *Daybreak* (Clark with Brian Leiter,[1] Cambridge, 1997) and several solid books and anthologies.[2] Leiter's articles on Nietzsche's ethics from this decade established him as a leading Nietzsche scholar and they form the backbone of *Nietzsche on Morality.*

[1]Leiter is Professor of Law and Philosophy at the University of Texas, Austin. He is co-editor with John Richardson of the anthology *Nietzsche* (Oxford 2001), co-editor with Maudemarie Clark of the above-mentioned edition of *Daybreak* (Cambridge 1997) and co-editor with Gerald Postema of *Objectivity in Law and Morals* (Cambridge 2001).

[2]These books include John Richardson, *Nietzsche's System* (Oxford 1996): Aaron Ridley, *Nietzsche's Conscience: Six Character Studies from the* Genealogy (Cornell 1998); and Simon May, *Nietzsche's Ethics and his War on 'Morality*' (Oxford 1999). Anthologies include *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche'*s Genealogy of Morals, edited by Richard Schacht (University of California 1994); *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, edited by Bernd Magnus and Kathleen Higgins (1996); and *Nietzsche,* edited by John Richardson and Brina Leiter (Oxford 2001).

Following Clark, Leiter has continued to remove inconsistencies from Nietzsche's position. He argues persuasively that Nietzsche cannot be coherently understood as a radical skeptic and relativist distrustful of science and objective truth, or as a guileful anti-philosopher hiding behind the masks of self-cancelling claims. The central interpretive thesis of Leiter's book is that Nietzsche is at bottom a philosophical *naturalist*, akin to earlier naturalists like Spinoza and Hume as well as to 19th-century scientific theorists of human nature like Darwin and Freud. The focus on Nietzsche's naturalism is the most distinctive feature of the book and the aspect that philosophers will find most enagaging. In Leiter's hands naturalism is a powerful interpretive category that brings unity and coherence to Nietzsche's mature works. It also serves as a powerful weapon to combat "postmodern" interpreters who for Leiter have produced the most egregious misreadings of Nietzsche (Foucault is his main target early on but Derrida, De Man, Rorty, Nehamas, and Heidegger, among others, are also indicted, but on very scant evidence). For Leiter, the central error of the postmodernists is to accept as Nietzsche's final view his assertions (from early and middle works) that 'there are no texts, only interpretations of texts'. Applied to human beings this leads the postmodernists to assume, anachronistically, that for Nietzsche "there are no 'deep facts' about human nature," only contingent interpretations (2), and thus to misconstrue Nietzsche's mature project of "revaluing" moral values on the basis of a theory of human nature.

The book is divided roughly into two halves. The first half and most original component is Leiter's exceptionally clear, systematic exposition of Nietsche's critique of morality as it is grounded in a naturalistic psychology and ethics (Chapter 1-4). Clarity of

presentation and strong interpretive focus make these 161 pages arguably the best introduction to Nietzsche's moral philosophy available. The scope of the account, which considers Nietzsche's intellectual background, epistemology, and metaphysics along with his ethics, also makes it an excellent general introduction to Nietzsche's philosophy for advanced undergraduate and graduate classes.

The second half of the book (Chapter 5-8) is devoted to a book-by-book commentary on *On the Genealogy of Morality* meant to illustrate Leiter's argument from the first half. These chapters are more narrowly focused on interpretive issues within the *Genealogy* and for best effect should be read in conjuction with it (for example, in a graduate seminar).

The final chapter (Chapter 9) considers the literature since 1900 and addresses critical questions raised by recent moral philosophers, such as Phillippa Foot. Here, in response to objections that Nietzsche's critique is misguided or simply perverse, Leiter defends the coherence and, perhaps, plausibility of Nietzsche's primary concern: that "a thoroughly *moral* culture undermines the conditions under which the most splendid human creativity is possible... "(300).

To return to the core of the book, *naturalism,* broadly speaking, refers to Nietzsche's belief that human "beliefs, values, and actions" are causally determined by "features of human nature" (5), namely, by the array of largely unconscious drives, affects, and physiological mechanisms-- "all those distempers, debilitations, excitations, the whole chance operation of the machine of which we still know so little!" (*Daybreak:* 86)--that make one who one is. Leiter formalizes this idea in what he calls Nietzsche's "doctrine of types," which states that "each person has a fixed psycho-physical constitution, which

defines him as a particular *type* of person" (8). Accordingly, for Nietzsche, what one believes and how one acts is closely circumscribed (though not strictly determined) by the type of person one is, and the type of person one is is by and large an expression of one's physiological and affective dispositions.

Leiter thus defends, convincingly, two related but unpopular claims: 1) that Nietzsche's numerous remarks about "physiology" must be taken at face value and cannot be dismissed as non-essential; and 2) that Nietzsche's outlook is profoundly *fatalistic* (though not deterministic) and cannot be unproblematically construed as advocating "existentialist" self-creation. Leiter builds his case for these claims skillfully, often citing multiple passages that reinforce one another. On page 9 for example, to illustrate Nietzsche's "doctrine of types" Leiter cites: "every great philosophy so far has been... the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir" (BGE: 6), and then adds, by way of elucidation: "[M]oralities are... merely a sign language of the affects" (BGE: 187); "moral judgments are symptoms and sign languages which betray the process of physiological prosperity or failure" (WP :258), that is, "images and phantasies based on a physiological process unknown to us" (*Daybreak* :119). Cumulative citations are used in this manner to reinforce a single point.

Chapter 1 helpfully clarifies and refines the meaning of "naturalism" when applied to Nietzsche and to other philosophers like Spinoza and Hume. Nietzsche is mainly a *methodological* naturalist in that he believes that philosophy ought to conform to the results and and methods of science (this includes not only the natural sciences but also historical sciences like philology, in which, Leiter reminds us, Nietzsche was a trained

professional). The scientific "result" most telling for mid-19th century Germans--that humans are of the same origin as the rest of nature–is fundamental to Nietzsche's project, as it is to Darwin's and Freud's.

Nietzsche is also a *substantive* naturalist to the extent that he denies supernatural causes, but not to the extent of contemporary materialist philosophers who seek to reduce everything to calculable physical phenomena, a position Nietzsche calls "a crudity and naivete" (GS:373). Leiter's distinction explains how Nietzsche can sometimes rail against the materialist science of his time--because it is substantively reductionist–but still embrace the task of explaining human behavior in terms of natural causes.

Chapter 2 concisely summarizes Nietzsche's intellectual background and history and places his naturalistic outlook in historical perspective. Of special interest here are Leiter's discussion of the role of 19th-century German Materialists (figures mainly neglected in the secondary literature) and of the ancient Greek Sophists in the development of Nietzsche's naturalism.

Thucydides and Callicles, Leiter observes, held views on morality and human nature close to Nietzsche's. Like Callicles, Nietzsche maintains that moral values are created because they serve the interests of specific types of people (and thus may harm the interests of other types), specifically, that they are created by the "weak" to inhibit the actions of the "strong." As Plato has Callicles put it, "the weaker folk... frame the laws for their own advantage" in order to "frighten [the strong] by saying that to overreach others is shameful and evil" (Leiter 52; *Gorgias*, 483b-d).

Situating Nietzsche among the ancient Greek (and Roman) writers with whom he

felt great affinity also helps to remind us that his naturalistic critique of morality is not an end in itself but part of a larger *concern for human greatness* that preoccupied Nietzsche throughout his life--greatness achieved, for Nietzsche, in ancient Athens and Rome, in Renaissance Italy, and only sporadically since. The primary concern of Nietzsche's philosophy is thus, for Leiter, not theoretical or (anti-)metaphyscial. It is that the values of traditional morality–selflessness, mildness, compassion for others–may impede the flourishing of those creative geniuses whom Nietzsche calls "*the higher men*."

Chapters 3 and 4 articulate a detailed interpretation of how, for Nietzsche, the theory and culture of morality inhibit the flourishing of "higher men"--men like Beethoven, Goethe, and Nietzsche himself. Leiter usefully distinguishes between *descriptive* and *normative* components of this critique. He also astutely isolates those elements of morality that threaten to harm the higher men, since, Leiter argues, not all moralities are *necessarily* harmful in this way (though empirically most have been). The harmful elements of morality Leiter terms "morality in the pejorative sense" or "MPS."

Chapter 3 identifies three descriptive components of MPS. Though not objectionable in themselves (that is, simply because they are false; though Nietzsche believes they are false, human flourishing, and not truth, Leiter reminds us, is Nietzsche's main concern), they are connected in complex and interesting ways to the normative elements and practices that are. The descriptive componenets of MPS are the belief in *free will* (supporting moral agency); belief in *transparency of the self* (allowing us to assess moral motives or intentions); and the belief in *similarity* of all humans (allowing for objective application of moral norms). Nietzsche's naturalism denies all three: there is no free will

because you are constrained in your basic responses and actions by the type of person you are; there is no transparency of self because the causes of thought and action (a complex struggle of unconscious drives and affects) are usually unfathomable to us; and humans are essentially dissimilar in that there is a range of higher and lower types rather than a generic "human type."

Leiter's analysis in Chapter 4 of the normative component of MPS is equally nuanced and forceful. His main thesis is, again, that Nietzsche's critique of MPS is "driven by the realization that the *moral* life is essentially inhospitable to the truly creative life..." (123), that is, to the life of the (potential) creative geniuses Nietzsche calls "the higher men." Leiter presents a useful analysis of the elements of MPS (whether Christian, Kantian, Utilitarian or other) that Nietzsche finds objectionable, chief among them: valuing *selflessness* over self-interest, *happiness* over suffering, *equality* over difference in rank, and *compassion* over indifference to the suffering of others. Precisely these attitudes diminish the chances that a "higher man" will achieve greatness.

Here a problem arises. If, as it follows from Nietzsche's doctrine of types, "the higher men" are higher--more creative--by *nature* and not by choice, then why should the norms of traditional morality interfere with their flourishing in the first place? It is because the norms of MPS are internalized as part of the culture of MPS, creating a sort of "false consciousness." "[T]he risk is that a culture–like ours–which has internalized the norms *against* suffering and *for* pleasure will be a culture in which potential artists–and other doers of great things--will, *in fact*, squander themselves in self-pity and the seeking of pleasure" (133).

To conclude the chapter, in a sophisticated discussion Nietzsche's metaethical positions, Leiter determines that Nietzsche must be a *realist* about prudential values (because certain things are *in fact* good for certain types of people) and yet an *anti-realist* about moral values (because moral values are perspectival and type-dependent; thus there is no objective basis to the distinction, e.g., between "higher" and "lower" types).

In sum, *Nietzsche on Morality* is a systematic interpretation of Nietzsche's ethics that deserves to become a standard resource in the classroom. Fans of Continental philosophy may be put off by Leiter's attempt to make Nietzsche "speak clear, precise, 'analytical', philosophical English" (xiii) and in general by his unabashed dislike for Continental philosophy. They might consider paring the book in the classroom with one or more of the "postmodern" interpreters Leiter summarily dismisses. But they should not be put off from reading the book, for it is one of the clearest, most coherent expositions of Nietzsche's philosophy to date.