Review of:

Andreas Urs Sommer. *Kommentar zu Nietzsches* Zur Genealogie der Moral. *Historischer und kritischer Kommentar zu Friedrich Nietzsches Werken. Band 5/2*. Herausgegeben von der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2019.

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Andreas Urs Sommer’s commentary on Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality* (GM)[[1]](#footnote-1) is part of the monumental *Nietzsche-Kommentar* edited by the Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften. Sommer had already authored the volumes on *Beyond Good and Evil* and on Nietzsche’s 1888 writings. With the appearance of this further volume on GM, he has now covered all post-Zarathustra works.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is an extraordinary scholarly feat, cementing Sommer’s reputation as arguably the leading expert in Nietzschean philology. (In the case of GM, the task of producing a commentary of this sort is made even harder by the fact that almost no preparatory *Nachlass* materials are available (see p. 3).)

Though it contains a brief synopsis that could be useful also to the uninitiated (section 5 of part I), those who will most benefit from the *Kommentar* are readers already familiar with GM and, especially, Nietzsche scholars. (Future editors and translators of GM should also consult it, for Sommer discovered a few mistakes in the reference German text printed both in KGW and KSA.) The book is divided in two parts. The first one—roughly 50 pages—offers an overview of GM, addressing, among other things, its textual genesis and print history, its conception and structure, Nietzsche’s own statements regarding GM and the work’s reception. The second one—roughly 600 pages—offers a painstakingly detailed commentary about all GM’s sections (plus the title).

The overview part stresses some important and usually neglected points. First, GM was conceived as a twin-work to BGE, the claims of which it was supposed to complement and exemplify, as Nietzsche has it explicitly printed on the title-page verso. (As Sommer registers (see p. 53), this note, though crucial to properly situate GM within Nietzsche’s *oeuvre*, is not printed in the main corpus of KGW and KSA.) Second, and again regarding Nietzsche’s own attitude towards GM, Sommers notes that by 1888 he had already retrospectively changed his view of GM’s status, for then he took its three essays to constitute “preliminary works” towards his *Umwerthung* project, as he writes in *Ecce Homo* (see p. 15). Third, by briefly tracing the history of GM’s reception, Sommer argues that Deleuze and Foucault were the first interpreters to treat it as a free-standing major work, a view later to become widespread among anglophone Nietzsche scholars. Relatedly, he also contends that it was Foucault who introduced the idea that the notion of “genealogy” refers to a distinct method devised by Nietzsche. This claim, that again became widely accepted among scholars, is—rightly, I think—contested by Sommers. That Nietzsche does not reserve the term “genealogy” and its cognates to mark out his own “stories” is shown by the fact that he uses such terms also to characterize alternatives he not only rejects, but downright ridicules (compare GM 4: the hypotheses of the “*English* sort” about the origin of morality he lampoons in that section are still qualified as “genealogical”, their proponents being called “genealogists of morality”; see pp. 47-48 for discussion). Thus, it is questionable that there ever was a proprietary “genealogical method” Nietzsche meant to apply in GM. (The overview has more to offer: as already mentioned, the work synopsis in section 5 will prove helpful to readers less familiar with GM; those interested in the chronology of GM’s composition and printing process should consult section 1.)

The commentary part analyses all sections (and the title) of GM separately and sequentially. The commentary to each section starts with a summary of its content, often accompanied by observations about, among other things, its argumentative structure and role within the relevant essay. It then goes on to highlight and comment on single passages or expressions. These can be specific claims, descriptions, quotes, foreign words, or hidden references. Let´s take the commentary to GM I 1 as an example. (What follows is but a small, illustrative sample.) For instance, Sommer shows that Nietzsche’s reference to and description of “English psychologists” is indebted to the work of the late 19th century psychologist Harald Höffding (p. 89); he explains the meaning of the French expression “*partie honteuse*”, which Nietzsche uses there (p. 90); he tracks Nietzsche’s usage of the expression “*Verkleinerung des Menschen*” in his other works as well as in the *Nachlass* (p. 91). In general, as illustrated by the reference to Höffding, Sommer provides extremely rich information about Nietzsche’s “sources”, i.e. about texts from which he directly picked up, among other things, technical concepts—“*Schwelle des Bewusststeins*”, also appearing in GM I 1 (and only there), is again traced back to Nietzsche’s engagement with Höffding (see p. 93)—, scientific views, historical evidence, quotes, and numerous other things. To give you an idea: the list of direct “sources” and other contemporary texts Sommer refers to in his effort to work out GM’s intertextual context takes up 30 tightly printed pages.

Though Sommer’s work builds on decades of *Quellenforschung*, many of Nietzsche’s “sources”, including their specific contribution to the genesis of GM, are systematically researched and identified here for the first time. Furthermore, much of the information already available was dispersed in papers and books devoted to Nietzsche’s relation to this or that author as well as in a vast number of philological notices published over the years in the *Nietzsche-Studien*. To have it organized in just one volume—and, of course, completed by Sommer’s own discoveries *in philologicis*—not only makes it much easier to look up, but also allows one to better appreciate its relevance. Imagine you had innumerable puzzle pieces distributed all over the place. Sommer not only collects them, but also puts them together meticulously, thus placing the reader in the position to enjoy the whole picture and, at the same time, see where exactly each piece fits into.

Of course, which ones among these philological materials count as especially remarkable will depend on one’s own scholarly interests. I shall mention a few examples among those that stroke me as most fertile. The first example concerns Harald Höffding, the late 19th century psychologist already mentioned before. Though he was already known to be among the scientific “sources” of Nietzsche’s late psychological views, Sommer demonstrates how pervasive his influence was on the textual genesis of GM. Given that psychological explanations are crucial to the “stories” Nietzsche provides in the three essays, taking Höffding´s own views into account may help to clarify some of his claims. The second example concerns the “sources” of Nietzsche’s etymological speculations about the meaning of “good” and “evil” in GM I. We already knew that there Nietzsche draws extensively on the work of philologist Leopold Schmidt. However, Sommer helpfully systematizes and integrates the relevant philological information. The third and final example is Nietzsche’s treatment of ancient punishment practices and debtor-creditor-relationships in GM II. Again, though it was already known that he relies on the scholarly work of contemporaries such as Josef Kohler, Friedrich von Hellwald and Albert Hermann Post, Sommer’s systematic reconstruction proves extremely helpful to sort out what Nietzsche borrows from whom.

As already mentioned, the commentary to each section of GM begins with a short summary. There is also where Sommer usually points out and addresses the interpretive puzzles raised by the Nietzsche’s book. On many occasions, he finds shortcomings in Nietzsche’s argument: sometimes it is elliptical or ambiguous; sometimes it jumps abruptly from one issue to another; sometimes it reaches a conclusion that seems to contradict a claim held a couple of sections before. Though I don’t think Nietzsche is always guilty of the charge, Sommer should be praised for such an outright attitude.

A striking feature of Sommer’s treatment is that he constantly undermines any attempt to extract general philosophical lessons from what Nietzsche says in GM. In part, this attitude is motivated by the fact—underscored by Sommer, as we noted above—that GM was initially designed to illustrate claims already contained in BGE. However, this doesn’t show that no general philosophical thesis is put forward in GM. A more robust motivation for his deflationary take stems directly from Sommer’s methodological approach. As he makes clear in the “Preface”, the *Kommentar* aims at uncovering “the contexts out of which Nietzsche thinks and writes” (vii). Though this implicitly recognizes that GM transcends these “contexts”—Sommer also adds that the point is not at all to “diminish its originality”—, the *Kommentar* does often seem—at least to me—to treat GM as the mere resultant of Nietzsche’s engagement with a host of contemporary authors working in the most disparate fields. My impression, on the contrary, is that Nietzsche often uses their work as a Tractarian ladder to be promptly thrown away. (Indeed, Sommer’s *Kommentar* seems to confirm that this pattern occurs frequently.) To be clear: I am not at all suggesting that Sommer’s careful reconstruction of Nietzsche’s intellectual environment has nothing to contribute to a proper understanding of his thought. As it should be clear from what I have said so far, I think the contrary is the case. Rather, what I am contesting is simply that a knowledge of that background, no matter how exhaustive, suffices to make sense of GM *qua* philosophical work. (This is a point I shall come back to in due course.)

This does not mean that I always disagree with Sommer’s deflationary proposals. For instance, I think he is right in downplaying the relevance given to the figure of the sovereign individual in recent Anglophone scholarship (see pp. 232 ff.). Here, however, what makes interpretive modesty appropriate is a different and more plausible strand of methodological contextualism. Characters, episodes and hypotheses make their appearance in GM as part of Nietzsche’s convoluted “stories”. Therefore, one needs to consider carefully whether they have further theoretical job to do besides merely contributing to such “stories”. Sommer certainly does that. So even if one might disagree with him about the theoretical significance of some of those characters, episodes and hypotheses, his warnings against overhasty generalizations prove salutary in this regard. (Though here too I find that he goes too far in assessing “how strongly situative arguments are in Nietzsche’s texts” (p. 556), as he puts it.)

Sommer’s deflationary attitude—which, as I have argued, seems to result from his general contextualist approach—also leads him to intersperse his *Kommentar* with polemic remarks mainly directed at contemporary Anglophone Nietzsche scholarship. The recurrent charge is that because of its severe lack of philological accuracy it ends up construing a more or less fictional Nietzsche. See, for instance: “From these discussions much can be learnt about the effects that the lack of philology can produce in philosophy as well as about the way in which interesting thought experiments in the style of analytical philosophy can be mounted on the basis of Nietzsche snippets, without any serious reading of his works”, p. 80; see also similar remarks on p. 41). In my view, this criticism is off the mark. First, as I have suggested before, no bottom-up reconstruction of Nietzsche’s text can settle the interpretive puzzles it raises. Second, and relatedly, those puzzles concern the questions posed and the claims put forward by Nietzsche, which—as Sommer acknowledges—clearly transcend all the “contexts” that played some role in the textual genesis of his work. Their resolution demands philosophical insight and scrutiny, skills that can’t be replaced by philological discoveries and that philosophers trained in analytic philosophy may very well display. Of course, philological evidence may prove relevant and even crucial to make sense of certain aspects of Nietzsche’s thought. However, this simply means that Anglophone scholars—as, of course, anyone else working on Nietzsche—should carefully look at the evidence so expertly organized by Sommer to see whether it bears on the systematic issues they are interested in—which is likely to be the case—, not that they should stop pursuing those issues altogether.

The worries I have just raised are of meta-methodological nature. They do not detract from the fact that Sommer has produced a formidable research tool. It resembles a powerful microscope through the lenses of which one can appreciate plenty of previously unnoticed details. If you’re a scholar working on GM, your lab will need it.

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1. In this review I quote from the Clark/Swensen English translation of GM (Indianapolis: Hackett 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I mean here *entirely new* works, thus excluding the fifth book of *Gay Science* as well as the prefaces Nietzsche added to the second edition of his earlier works, which also appeared after *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)