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Review of "Nietzsche, Psychology, & First Philosophy"

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Book Review | *Nietzsche, Psychology, & First Philosophy*

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Robert Pippin’s *Nietzsche, Psychology and First Philosophy* is a distinctly Nietzschean piece of work. In this compelling analysis, Pippin aims at nothing less than the revaluation of Nietzsche in totality. Pippin’s primary task in the book is to argue that Nietzsche is most appropriately understood when placed in conversation with the French moralists (La Rochefoucauld, Pascal, and Montaigne). These writer’s preferred prosaic reflections on lived life to grand, metaphysical theories of reality. Pippin aims to present a comprehensive interpretation of what Nietzsche means by ‘psychology,’ what the relationship is, as he understands it, between such a psychology and traditional philosophy, and why he thinks such a psychology is (indeed is, as he says, ‘now’) so important, why it is ‘the path to the fundamental problems’ (xi-xii).

Nietzsche’s prosaic writing tends to embody this newly understood goal, as stated by Pippin, which is why the work is organized around four central Nietzschean themes: the notion of truth as a woman; the idea of a gay science; the death of God; and his idea of lightning being indistinguishable from its flash, as is the doer with the deed. These first four chapters of the book stem from a lecture series in 2004 that Pippin gave at the College de France.

In the first chapter, Pippin deals with Nietzsche’s argument that psychology will become the queen of the sciences, ultimately passing metaphysics as the Western world’s primary mode of thought. This is where Pippin highlights Nietzsche’s affinity for and similarity with the French Moralists. His analysis, though, ends up leading Pippin to propose, quite radically, that Nietzsche cannot be considered to be a viable source of any philosophical theory in the traditional sense. Nietzsche’s thoughts, Pippin argues, somehow refuse theorization.

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Psychology, for Nietzsche, is nothing less than a return to Aristotle’s ‘First Philosophy,’ and this can only be understood by placing Nietzsche in conversation with the French Moralists. After adopting a similar project, Nietzsche sought to highlight psychology, a certain form of thought, as the queen of the sciences, as the very ground on which one moves towards addressing the most fundamental problems of being human. These psychological questions were, for Nietzsche, logically prior to grandiose, abstract schemes about the nature of reality.

From the best we can tell, Nietzsche’s work is a psychology in the sense that it privileges our relation to the truth rather than the object of examination itself. The book aims “to present a comprehensive interpretation of what Nietzsche means by ‘psychology,’ what the relationship is, as he understands it, between such a psychology and traditional philosophy, and why the thinks such a psychology is...so important, why it us ‘the path to the fundamental problems’ “(xi-xii). But Pippin’s understanding of psychology, particularly as he uses the term in relation to Nietzsche, is never clearly defined. The reader gets the clearest picture in his examination of Nietzsche’s famous claim that “Truth is a woman.” Here, Pippin explains, Nietzsche is primarily interested in how individuals relate to her. Will they clumsily dominate? Or will they wax poetically? (19).

The second chapter, “What is Gay Science?” links the issue of first philosophy will the notion of intentionalism. Here, Pippin repeatedly analyzes the primacy of psychology for Nietzsche, which turns into a discussion of the passive projection of value into the world (29). Chapter three deals with issues such as the death of God and the nihilistic tendency that manifests itself culturally in the wake of God’s death.

The fourth chapter, “The Deed Is Everything,” deals the issues of agency and intentionality. Here Pippin examines Nietzsche’s analysis of lightning and the flash, or the doer and the deed. (71) At this point, Pippin unveils his critique of naturalist readings of this passage, readings that mark this text as the denial of any sort of free will in the thought of Nietzsche. Pippin argues, though, that Nietzsche’s view is incompatible with naturalism because naturalism typically highlights some motivating force behind the material event as the motivating cause, whereas Nietzsche refuses to separate the deed from the doer.

The fifth chapter, “The Psychological Problem of Self-Deception,” seems like the most fertile ground for Pippin to finally champion what he is getting at in his analysis of Nietzschean psychology. The driving question of the chapter seems to be: How can one philosophically imagine psychology as first philosophy? Instead of clearly answering this question, Pippin spends the chapter jumping from subcategory to subcategory, analyzing the relationship between intentionality and corporeality as well as the subject and its deed (87).
While the analyses are fascinating and helpful for understanding specific issues in the work of Nietzsche, no real answer is given to the chapter’s driving question.

Pippin’s final chapter is entitled, “How to Overcome Oneself: On the Nietzschean Ideal.” Here, Pippin rightfully asserts that the only type of freedom that catches and sustains Nietzsche’s attention is an empowering sort of overcoming (112). In the midst of discussing the issue of self-overcoming, Pippin analyzes the implications for theories of self-knowledge, spontaneity and autonomy in the wake of Nietzsche. In a surprising turn, Pippin argues that Nietzsche never reaches the point of authentic theorization, as he lacked the sort of balance that Montaigne maintained (121). This is because his ideas turn into ‘anti-theories’ that merely mirror philosophical ideas, but refuse to break out of their own skepticism.

Academics and casual readers alike will appreciate Pippin’s attempt to take Nietzsche on his own terms. Pippin is right: Nietzsche is not a typical philosopher, and “the complexity of the literary dimensions of Nietzsche’s project have been strikingly underestimated,” so much so, “that it is far more difficult to ascribe a position to him than has been appreciated” (46). As much as Pippin’s background knowledge of Nietzsche seems to be right on, the overall thrust of the analysis is lacking. Strangely enough, the gesture of divorcing Nietzsche’s work on psychology from the philosophical realm seems to be the very problem Nietzsche was responding to. Nietzsche himself serves as the revaluation of philosophy as such. Why are readers so afraid of postmodern thinkers that defy philosophical categorization, ultimately pushing it and stretching it towards a new end (xv)? If the project of philosophy—at its most basic level—is to determine who is accepted into the proper canon, then Nietzsche’s critique is all the more poignant and the philosophical project should be ended altogether. But the obvious rebuttal is that philosophy is about much more than preserving, protecting and categorizing its own canon; its about the theorization of the nature of reality and how human being necessarily relates to that reality. And this is a project that Nietzsche is quintessentially participating in.

I believe Pippin’s call for the revaluation of Nietzsche is spot on, and his diagnosis of the inherent lack and disjointedness of contemporary Nietzsche studies is completely welcomed. But I ultimately believe that Pippin can’t live up to his own challenge; the actual analysis does not properly address the diagnosis. The reader is left wondering why psychology has to be devoid of philosophical content. Isn’t Nietzsche’s task the revaluation of all value, the revaluation of philosophy itself for the sake of generating a philosophy of life? Nietzsche himself reads: “I took myself in hand, I made myself healthy again: the condition for this—every physiologist would admit that—is that one be healthy at bottom. A typically morbid being cannot become healthy, much less make itself healthy. For a
typically healthy person, conversely, being sick can even become an energetic stimulus for life, for living more. This, in fact, is how that long period of sickness appears to me now: as it were, I discovered life anew, including myself; I tasted all good and even little things, as others cannot easily taste them—I turned my will to health, to life, into a philosophy” (Ecce Homo, aphorism 2). Pippin, even after all the contextualizing and re-reading, still struggles to take Nietzsche at his word. Instead, Pippin reads him like other philosophers, which primarily comes through in his analysis of the doer and the deed in the book’s fifth chapter.

There is, in contemporary Nietzschean analysis, an absurd refusal to let Nietzsche be Nietzsche, to read Nietzsche as a genre-bending critic of all abstracting forms of thought that technically qualify as philosophy. In a certain sense, it is fairly astonishing that this conversation still holds any sway at all. Nietzsche himself confounds and confuses the entire project of philosophy as he inherited it, and he does so through rigorous analysis and shockingly clear prose about the nature of reality as such. What, after all, is philosophy if its not a commentary on itself, a discussion of the nature of reality and our participation in it as human beings? Maybe readers should wait alongside Nietzsche, taking him at his word, as he waits for the world to catch up to him: “I am still waiting I am still waiting for a philosophical physician in the exceptional sense of that word—one who has to pursue the problem of the whole health of a people, time race, or of humanity—to muster the courage to push my suspicion to its limits and to risk the proposition: what was at stake in all philosophy hitherto was not at all ‘truth’ but something else—let us say, health, future, growth, power, life.” (Friedrich Nietzsche, Preface to The Gay Science, 1886.)