

Moral Psychology with Nietzsche

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Brian Leiter needs little introduction: renowned legal scholar, creator and long-standing editor of the controversial ranking of US philosophy departments the *Philosophical Gourmet Report*, author of the recent *Why Tolerate Religion?*, but especially herald of an uncompromisingly naturalistic interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy. His recently published book *Moral Psychology with Nietzsche* is comprised of seven chapters that all come from previous work, but have often been thoroughly revised to take into account critical responses and new interpretations in the secondary literature that have emerged in recent years. The book systematically and succinctly showcases all the major themes of Leiter's research on Nietzsche, with special emphasis on value anti-realism, the relation between affects and moral judgments, the freedom of the will, and the nature/nurture debate around our character and personality. All these, and many other topics, are related by virtue of their relevance to moral psychology, and actually constitute, in Leiter's opinion, Nietzsche's most significant philosophical contribution to this field of enquiry.

Leiter defines moral psychology, at the very beginning, as concerning "the psychological explanation of what is involved in both making moral

judgements and acting morally" (p. 1). Philosophy should contribute to it by providing "clarity about the concepts in play", in particular about "the nature of morality and of moral judgments, what would be involved in agency and distinctively *moral* agency (which is always in the modern tradition understood to be *free agency*), and the workings of a mind in which such agency is possible." (Ibid.) Accordingly, Leiter examines those and many other related concepts throughout the book.

The book, with its chapters derived from previous papers of Leiter's, offers mainly fine-grained debates about the exegetically correct and most coherent interpretations of Nietzsche's understanding of those concepts. This comes despite Leiter often at pains in claiming that his "interest in Nietzsche is not motivated by antiquarian concerns" (p. 83); and, especially, despite his hopes that "the volume will be of interest to philosophers interested in the philosophical issues, even if not especially interested in Nietzsche." (p. 14) However, the extreme level of detail with which Leiter contributes to rather insular debates within the Nietzsche scholarship will probably discourage after a few pages those philosophers who are merely interested in the topic of moral psychology. This is not to say, of course, that many of the concepts and arguments tackled there are not potentially relevant to moral psychology in general, but only that if philosophers are ready to delve into those chapters in order to understand and appreciate the issues at stake, then they must also be willing to deeply familiarize themselves with Nietzsche scholarship as well.

This is also not to say that Leiter's exposition of the debates offered are not interesting and accurately represented, providing one is acquainted enough with the necessary background. As a matter of fact, Leiter's interpretation of Nietzsche's positions is one of the most internally coherent and thought out one can find in the literature, to such an extent that offering a thorough exposition of its full ramifications here is an arduous endeavour. Rather than doing that, going through each chapter and offering comments on them respectively, I will explore two major questions that in my opinion can help one get a grasp of Leiter's general stance, connect some of the central themes

developed separately in the chapters, and – or so I hope – reveal a potential weak flank in Leiter’s systematic interpretation.

The first question is the following: is human flourishing objectively preferable to decadence? This question tackles Leiter’s interest in the scope of Nietzsche’s critique, namely what he dubs MPS: ‘morality in the pejorative sense’. With this, he means all moralities Nietzsche condemns, for reasons other than simply being moralities, in particular for holding “values not conducive to the flourishing of human excellence”. (p. 49) To answer this we can start from the second chapter, ‘Nietzsche’s Metaethics – Against the Privilege Readings’, where Leiter deepens his attack against realist interpretations, in particular those that take Nietzsche’s position to be assigning objective value to power. Leiter’s truck is with the idea that Nietzsche has room for a conception of existing values which do not depend on any perspective, a value that is also ‘a natural property’. The problem, it seems, hinges on how we should understand Nietzsche’s revaluation of values. “In offering a revaluation of MPS” Leiter asks, “is Nietzsche doing anything more than giving his idiosyncratic opinion from his idiosyncratic evaluative perspective? [...] In short, is there any sense in which Nietzsche’s evaluative perspective can claim some epistemic *privilege* – being “correct,” being better justified – over its target?” (p. 49). On Leiter’s account, Nietzsche believes that “all normative systems which perform something like the role we associate with ‘morality’ share certain structural characteristics.” In particular, they include both descriptive and normative claims: on the one hand, certain metaphysical and empirical claims about agency, and on the other, norms that favour “the interests of some people, often (though not necessarily) at the expense of others” (p. 12). This sounds all very plausible. However, Leiter continues, “it is *not* the falsity of the descriptive account of agency presupposed by MPS, per se, that is the heart of the problem, but rather its distinctive normative commitments.” (Ibid.) In other words, it is not the specific descriptive component of MPS which makes it worse than other moralities, and since the normative one cannot be evaluated as objectively true or false, Nietzsche’s condemna-

tion of MPS cannot be objectively correct “or, at least, better justified.” (p. 50)

Leiter has a specific reason to defend this view: his strong commitment to anti-realism, namely, that there is no objective ground to claim an evaluative stance as superior or more true than any other (because an evaluative stance ultimately expresses, in Leiter’s account, an affective relation with the world). Moreover, since Nietzsche is taken by Leiter to be endorsing this himself as an explicit advocate of anti-realism, he (Nietzsche) could not possibly be so inconsistent as to defend at the same time any evaluative stance as objectively preferable. Therefore, if that is the case, Nietzsche’s opinion about his own evaluative standards is that they do not enjoy any privilege over those he criticizes.

To support this reading, Leiter quotes EH IV:7, where Nietzsche writes that “it is *not* the error as an error” that horrifies him, but rather that “the only morality that has been thought so far, the morality of un-selfing, demonstrates a will to the end, it *negates* life at the most basic level.” He then concludes the section with: “*Definition of morality*: morality, the idiosyncrasy of decadents with the ulterior motive on taking revenge *on life* – and successfully. I attach value to *this* definition.”

This last sentence seems to undermine any attempt to defend a realist interpretation of Nietzsche’s metaethics, and Leiter’s chapter does a good job at arguing this case, focusing especially on critiquing standard interpretations of power as some kind of objective evaluative standard. However, he does not give much space to explanations of both why a descriptive component is inherent to any morality, and why MPS values are not conducive to the flourishing of human excellence. If morality has a descriptive component, for instance a certain account of human agency, then it makes claims about how the world is objectively. For instance, it may hold that there is a relation of intentional causality between a doer and the actions performed by the body it commands; that this doer coincides with a spirit or soul; and that the substance of this soul is ontologically different from the natural world in which the actions commanded by the soul are performed. Nietzsche goes to

great lengths to show us why those descriptive claims, and especially their presuppositions, are false. The idea of free will, to which Leiter dedicates many pages, is a notable example. Moreover, these false stories about the world we tell ourselves through our moral account of it seem to play a role in our decadent trajectory. Thus, the question seems to be, is the plausibility of the descriptive account moralities provide somehow relevant in evaluating their conveyed normative commitments? Why does one need to justify to oneself and others one's moral values, i.e. one's affective reactions to what happens around, with the aid of descriptive claims about how the world *really* is? Probably because our beliefs – what we tell to each other about the world we inhabit and shape together – play a role in our capacity to sustain and transmit such commitments, and Leiter acknowledges as much when he writes that Nietzsche “expresses the optimistic view that revising our beliefs might actually lead to a revision of our feelings.” (p. 77) Both our understanding of the world and our affective relations to it are mutually constituted, and what underpins this mutual constitution is necessarily a common feature of our singular perspectives, a common constraint on our interpretation of the world that allows the possibility itself of our telling to each other stories about it we can agree or disagree with. Consciousness, after all, is for Nietzsche nothing but the result of our need to communicate. This view is thoroughly exposed in GS 354, the only passage from the Nietzsche corpus – together with GM III:12 – that Leiter examines in great detail (pp. 84-92).¹

But then, might Nietzsche not be making a descriptive claim – a psychological one, to be precise – when he criticizes morality, namely that our nor-

¹To this, Leiter replies that rather than accepting the claim that “moralities are symptoms of affects, but not only affects”, Nietzsche’s ‘more ambitious’ answer would be that “‘belief fixation’ – that is, the doxastic state in which an agent takes a belief seriously enough that he will act on it – is itself dependent on affective investment in that belief (think, e.g., of his explanation of how a desire to punish motivates belief in free will).” (p. 78) But if that is all there is, then it is no longer clear where Nietzsche’s optimism about changing our feelings by revising our beliefs would come from, for ultimately it would all come down to feelings our beliefs have no effects upon.

mative commitments, our attachment to a certain morality, would change should we possess the mental capacity to look at our stories and see their self-deceptive character? Would an individual’s affective relation with the world change if they were to realize the nihilistic trajectory of our moral and cultural outlook they engender in consequence? Would we still choose decadence were we to see it in all its clarity? After all, to claim that people are psychologically constituted in such a way as to evaluate positively the consequences of certain actions is not to make a claim about the metaphysical objectivity of the value of those consequences. Therefore, it is not clear why MPS cannot be a privileged perspective in a sense compatible with Leiter’s anti-realism. Privileged not because of a special access to a metaphysical truth, but because of reasons internal to the other perspectives. A perspective can in fact be privileged in virtue of its capacity to take into account a wider multiplicity of factors and derive conclusions from them that would be preferable also for narrower or simply different perspectives, were they able to gain access to those factors. That perspective would be privileged not in general, but only in relation to the aims and goals of those other perspectives to which it is compared. No metaphysical claim about an absolute value is involved here. But then, if there is a morality that does not entail decadence, wouldn’t it be objectively preferable, given certain common psychological features of people’s perspectives? Of course, this requires a conception of decadence which transcends those idiosyncratic psychological features constituting our evaluative stances (what Leiter calls psycho-physical “type-facts”), for otherwise some characters would evaluate or adapt positively to what others would consider strong cases of decadence. But there seems to be in Nietzsche a conception of decadence encompassing different evaluative stances in virtue of its hinging on basic shared human features. This more ‘objective’ conception of decadence is often expressed by ideas about ‘life turning against itself’ and a lack of will and the possibility to desire. In other words, the undermining of the possibility of experiencing one’s life as meaningful – what goes by the name of nihilism. When he famously claims, at the end of the Genealogy of Morality, that “man would rather will

nothingness than not will,” he seems to be referring to human beings in general, not a specific psychological type. (GM III:28)

Note that this relates to the alleged practical justification of our preference for truth – in the sense of the correct identification of causal relations – that grounds the objectivity of epistemic norms. This is the topic of chapter four, one of the most interesting in the book, as Leiter brings together an in-depth analysis of the two aforementioned passages from Nietzsche’s books (GS 354 and GM III:12) and fundamental questions about the value of truth. In particular, it tries to answer the puzzle about Nietzsche’s purported anti-realism about value and his insight that (scientific) beliefs based on evidence depends on values as well: thereby, the discussion of the communicative nature of consciousness and the interconnectedness of our perspectives.

Leiter’s answer is, in short, that “our conscious knowledge is subject to evolutionary pressures which are only accidentally truth-tracking but are essentially reproductive-fitness-tracking: thus we lack a capacity for knowledge, having only an ability to “know” what is useful for the “herd” (p. 87). This builds up toward the strenuous defense of naturalism presented at the end of the chapter, and takes us to the second, more provocative question: is there something that, ultimately, is not moral, in the sense of being part of a perspective that avoids an in-built and guiding form of a particular morality? If Leiter’s interpretation is correct, then our conscious knowledge of the world is directly informed at an unconscious level by processes selected through evolutionary pressures in function of what is or was useful for the community. This means that what we experience perceptually is already shaped by those processes, we do not “report” or reconstruct at a conscious level the information gathered through the interaction between our sense organs and the environment “simply as it is”.

The question, however, is what counts as useful and why. If morality, precisely in virtue of all its false representations of the world, has been useful for a very long time as it to some extent has, then our conscious knowledge of the world might be shaped by morality more than we are able to recognize and ready to admit, including the individuation of true causal relations and

inductive forms of reasoning.² Attempts to justify epistemic values objectively on purely pragmatic grounds run the risk of overlooking their hidden moral nature.

The main argument presented by Leiter that I am interested in here is the following: “The interest in predicting the future course of experience is, it would seem, a widely shared interest, one that facilitates crossing the street, cooking a meal, indeed, living a life. On this kind of view, we should be naturalists because *naturalism works*, not because it is “true” or “justified” in some sense either independent of or dependent upon naturalistic criteria.” (p. 101) So Leiter has no issue with the fact that cognition is value-laden and ultimately enabled by the partiality of those values, but tries to confine them to a question of personal utility that applies to all human beings in virtue of the fact that we perform similar actions in a similar environment. One of Nietzsche’s most unsettling strategies, however, is to warn us against precisely such pragmatic justifications of the value of truth: for they are often self-deceptions about why we act one way or another. We do not converge towards truth because it is always pragmatically more convenient for us individually, but because our mind is structured upon normative commitments that enable the existence of the herd in the first place. On this reading, the prediction of human beings’ behaviour in function of their social control – that is, to make them responsive to normative constraints as socially imposed – always has priority over the alleged practical advantage of the prediction of the world for personal aims. The *Gay Science* passage I have in mind is called

²That is the second sense in which Lanier Anderson, in a recent article, claims Nietzschean perspectives are partial: “Nietzsche insists that perspectives are partial, in the general sense of being incomplete, *because* they are partial in the more specific sense of being personal and bound up with the interests and values of a particular individual or group.” [...] “Perspectivism is supposed to be a novel and illuminating idea precisely because it shows how deeply value-laden our cognitive life is, even when we are striving to be most objective” (2018, R. Lanier Anderson ‘The Psychology of Perspectivism: a Question for Nietzsche Studies Now’, *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 48.2, Penn State University Press, p. 222-225)

'In what way we, too, are still pious' and, interestingly enough, comes just ten paragraphs before the one Leiter analyses:

“This unconditional will to truth – what is it? Is it the will not to let oneself be deceived? Is it the will *not to deceive*? For the will to truth could be interpreted in this second way, too – if ‘I do not want to deceive *myself*’ is included as a special case under the generalization ‘I do not want to deceive.’ But why not deceive? But why not allow oneself to be deceived? Note that the reasons for the former lie in a completely different area from those for the latter: one does not want to let oneself be deceived because one assumes it is harmful, dangerous, disastrous to be deceived; in this sense science would be a long-range prudence, caution, utility, and to this one could justifiably object: How so? [...] Precisely this conviction could never have originated if truth *and* untruth had constantly made it clear that they were both useful, as they are. So, the faith in science, which after all undeniably exists, cannot owe its origin to such a calculus of utility; rather it must have originated *in spite of* the fact that the disutility and dangerousness of ‘the will to truth’ or ‘truth at any price’ is proved to it constantly. [...] Consequently, ‘will to truth’ does *not* mean ‘I do not want to let myself be deceived’ but – there is no alternative – ‘I will not deceive, not even myself’; *and with that we stand on moral ground.*” (GS 344)

This passage, in light of the preceding discussion, shows that the implicit commitment to truth enshrined in our culture (and partly responsible for its decadent trajectory) is moral in character, in that it enables the distribution of punishments and rewards through the identification of causal relations and the subsequent attribution of responsibility to the various members of a shared, evaluatively determined perspective.³ If the value of objective, sci-

³In this regard see, especially, GM II 2: “Such is the long history of the origin of responsibility. As we have already grasped, the task of breeding an animal which is entitled to make promises presupposes as its condition a more immediate task, that of first *making* to a certain extent necessary, uniform, an equal among equals, regular and consequently calculable. [...] it was by means of the morality of custom and the social strait-jacket that man was really *made* calculable.”

entific truth follows from this, then the attachment to a strict naturalistic worldview might be less neutral than what it claims, and we cannot offer an evaluation of it simply by appealing to its alleged practical advantage. Rather, Nietzsche seems often to suggest that such evaluative stances should be examined in light of the purpose they serve for life, where also falsity, forgetfulness, partiality, and self-deception possess a fundamental utility.

One of the most powerful and perversely disturbing traits of Nietzsche’s philosophy is this capacity to get under our skin, so to speak, and reveal glimpses of an open-ended process of reality construction and interpretation that we can never fully grasp. Finding and sustaining a somewhat coherent interpretation is an incredible achievement of the human mind that always comes at the cost of a partial distortion, a forgetting what should not be seen, an acceptable narrative one can deceive oneself with. If there is a trade-off between achieving coherence and casting suspicion on one’s convictions, then Leiter decisively leans toward the former, and the quality of his results repays close study. But to what extent does he manage to question the subtle ways in which his interpretation itself might be more moral than he is ready to admit? In what way are his intransigent naturalism and himself too, still pious?