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Book Review

Daniel Conway, **Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*.** Edinburgh University Press, 2024, 264 pp.

Dirk Johnson[1]

Beyond Good and Evil (BGE) is one of the most challenging of Nietzsche's texts, particularly when compared with his later writings. In this work, Nietzsche strikes a delicate balance between overt critique and contemplative serenity, touching on many of his standard topics—Christianity, aspects of science and religion, the scholarly life and nationalism, to name a few—but with less of a polemical edge that characterize works such as the *Genealogy* or *Twilight of the Idols*. For this reason, it remains one of the most popular of his works—in some academic courses, it serves as the main introduction to his thought—one that can be appreciated for the many deep and cogent insights into a modern world we can still recognize today. It is also paradigmatic for the "Nietzsche" that has entered our public consciousness—a seemingly non-committal philosopher with open perspectives, who critiques some of our most cherished beliefs while not offering any new "system" or set of values in place of those he debunks.

Daniel Conway's critical guide—a scholarly contribution to Edinburgh University Press's critical series dedicated to Nietzsche's complete published works—offers a close reading of each chapter of BGE, including an extended stanza-by-stanza interpretation of its concluding poem ("From Lofty Mountains: 'Aftersong'"). The nature of the critical guide justifies such an approach. At times, though, it seems that the author relinquishes a stronger authorial interpretative stance for the sake of equal treatment of each chapter and almost every section. Like a tour guide who offers a fair overview of all artworks in a museum collection in consideration of his generalist audience, Conway decides against the kind of deep, illuminating, perhaps daring analyses of individual sections that will resonate and remain with the more informed viewer. This is no fault of the author's but a feature of generalist guidebooks.

To give his guidebook an interpretative thread, Conway introduces two thematic points. He argues that Nietzsche's text is structured as a manual that is intended to speak to his "best readers" and to get them to become the kind of thinkers he

[1] Dirk Johnson, Hampden Sydney College, United States. E-mail: drjohnson@hsc.edu

wants them to become. The epithet "best readers" appears numerous times throughout Conway's book, sometimes multiple times on a single page, and it assumes the role of a leitmotif. Given that the subtitle of Nietzsche's work is "A Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future," his approach appears justified, since Nietzsche seems to gesture towards an as-of-yet unfulfilled philosophical future. In addition, Nietzsche adopts a "dialogic-narrative" voice (1) that lends credence to Conway's position that he intended his work to guide his readers through the pitfalls and siren-calls of modernity to point them in the direction of new philosophical horizons.

Conway also argues that Nietzsche intends to dislodge his "best readers" from the allegiances to contemporary mores and recalibrate our (what he calls) "affective-somatic mode of existence," a term that reappears frequently in his text as well. He recognizes Nietzsche's "emerging depth psychological framework that informs his post-Zarathustra writings" (47) and that Nietzsche understands that our innermost emotional affinities must be disrupted if we are to become the philosophers of the future he desires us to be. But more on this later.

With these two perspectives, Conway leads us through the work, pointing out how Nietzsche sets out to problematize our conventional affinities and allegiances, such as to religion and aspects of science. In his second chapter on Part I of BGE ("On the Prejudices of Philosophers"), Conway tries to reconcile the clearly science-critical components of the section with Nietzsche's alleged overall endorsement of science. This inherent tension leads him to create a distinction between the virtues of modern science on the one hand and what Conway calls the "nihilistic trend in 'modern philosophy'" on the other hand (45). While science and the "scientific worldview" can assist us in challenging the "moral-religious worldview" that has held sway for millennia, the will to truth imperative behind modern science, if taken too far, can lead to a nihilistic dead end that can sap the energy and affirmative spirit of Nietzsche's "best readers."

In this way, Conway tries to make sense of the outwardly divergent strains of Nietzsche's thought by suggesting that his science-critical comments relate to a version of science that is animated by a belief in the "superlative value of truth" and not to science as such. And yet, he leaves in the air the question of how one should conceptualize a mode of science that can represent a more truthful alternative to (religious) morality while not remaining beholden to ultimate truth claims. The failure to address this paradox leaves it vague as to what the "best readers" should aspire to, and the best that Conway can do is project a rather anemic end-state: "His goal […] it to persuade his best readers to exert themselves more forcefully in their efforts to renounce (or neutralize) their remaining moral prejudices and, thereby, to accelerate their progress towards a cheerful embrace of the scientific worldview" (68). However, Conway does not entertain the more radical possibility—articulated most clearly in GM 3: 27 (and already hinted at in

Part I of BGE)—that Nietzsche's critique of science is further reaching, ultimately undermining the basis for the project of modern science altogether.

Conway's treatment of Part III of BGE ("The Religious Character") focuses on the domain of the moral-religious worldview, which he indicates has served as the counterpoint to science. His overall framing of Nietzsche's position makes it appear that Nietzsche is interested in antithetical worldviews, i.e., clearly demarcated thought-systems, rather than in always viable potentialities of human thought: "While his general intent is to liberate the scientific worldview—and, by extension, its adherents—from the moral and religious prejudices that retard the progress of its development, he is also concerned to steer his best readers away from the nihilism that modern science is currently poised to enact" (87). However, it is not two abstract systems of thought that stand in direct confrontation; rather, individuals in the modern age have become mixed types, equally susceptible to the suggestions of both systems, at times either leaning to moral-religious perspectives, at others to the explanations of modern science. It is the instinctual make-up of modern men—confused by the two-thousand-year reign of Christian metaphysics—which predisposes them to either one of the explanatory paradigms, or even to both at the same time.

Conway's approach to the "religious character," as a result, focuses on Christianity at the meta-level. In his opening to the chapter, he admits to the difficulty in translating the German term, *Wesen*, as in "*Das religiöse Wesen*," the title of Part III. He renders it as "character": "The title for Part Three—*Das religiöse Wesen*—is almost certainly intended to confound. The word translated here as 'character'—*Wesen*—is also (and more commonly) rendered as 'nature' or 'essence', either of which would faithfully convey his intention to determine 'what religion is'" (72). But this shifts the focus onto the phenomenon of Christianity as a system (i.e., 'what religion is') rather on the instinctual nature of the religious believer. The German term *Wesen* can also refer to an individual human being, in this case, one predisposed to aligning with the Christian worldview. When used in such a way, it suggests a strange, almost curious human type with an interesting (though for Nietzsche, problematic) instinctual make-up.

This terminological distinction might appear trivial, but it has repercussions for our awareness of Nietzsche's objectives. Conway's perspective is from the top-down—Christianity as an "essence" that forms individuals in its image: "according to Nietzsche, the defining 'character' of a religion—or at least the religion under consideration in Part Three—is revealed in the 'character' displayed by those 'characters' or types (e.g., the saint) whom it has produced in its image" (73). But in my reading, it is bottom-up: the religious type is an instinctual typology that gravitates and requires the kind of metaphysics that Christianity provides to make sense of its instinctual reality. In that sense, Christianity has not molded the

religious individual in its own image; rather, it lives from and sustains itself from an ongoing subset of curious psychological typologies.

Conway's close readings of the remaining sections of BGE follow essentially the same framework: seeing Nietzsche's work as a kind of manual that will assist in loosening modern man's allegiances to misconceived systems in preparation for a "philosophy of the future": "Nietzsche thus invites his best readers to play a decisive role in the timely self-overcoming of Christian morality and to accede in the process to the optimal experience of freedom and power that is available to them" (197). Rather than covering each of the remaining chapters separately, then, I will conclude by focusing on Conway's reading of the final poem, the "Aftersong."

Conway devotes eighteen pages to this three-page poem, examining each stanza at considerable length. Overall, I appreciated that he did not treat it as an afterthought, and he subjects it equally to rigorous examination. Conway evaluates the poem from the same thematic point of view, namely, as an example of what he determines is Nietzsche's ultimate strategy: to prepare and to cultivate his "best readers":

> Unlike those philosophers who do not practice what they preach, Nietzsche bids *adieu* to his readers by demonstrating for them the depth and intensity of his own affective-somatic transformation. In doing so, as we shall see, he also models to his readers the extent of the immunity he has acquired with respect to the twin temptations—pity and disgust—that will torment them in their carefully cultivated loneliness and isolation. His 'Aftersong' is thus intended as a final souvenir of their matriculation through his finishing school for gentlemen (211).

Conway's approach, therefore, is a highly functional one—regarding the poem as just another expression of what he regards as the central message of the work as a whole.

Nietzsche research in recent years, particularly German-speaking scholarship, has given more attention to his poetic modes of expression and to the strategies behind his insertion of poetic interludes throughout his texts.[2] These efforts reassess Nietzsche's poetic output and do not just treat it as inferior or ancillary to his "philosophical" prose writing. This ongoing reassessment will perhaps get us to regard the prose work, too, in a new way and to understand that his literary

[2] See the following: Grätz, K. and S. Kaufmann (eds.) (2017) *Nietzsche als Dichter* (Berlin: De Gruyter) and Häfner, R., S. Kaufmann and A.U. Sommer (eds.) (2019) *Nietzsches Literaturen* (Berlin: De Gruyter). See also Johnson, D. (2022) "Nietzsche and Literature" In *Nietzsche-Studien* 51: 371-86.

ambitions, often marginalized until recently, are integral to his philosophy's meanings.

One of the key features of many of Nietzsche's poetic passages is to capture and immortalize a specific mood, thereby conveying, through poetry, subjective states that cannot adequately be rendered in prose. In such a reading, the final poem articulates a spirit of liberation reflected in BGE as a whole—a spirit of lofty contemplation and vindication that now can look down on the various perspectives of modernity that he has critiqued in the work and overcome. The poem does not gesture toward a "future," then, but apotheosizes the present moment, celebrating its stages of overcoming and accomplishment.

Moreover, despite the representation of his old friendships in the poem (which Conway criticizes: "Nietzsche's dismissal of his late-arriving friends […] betrays a significant measure of narcissism on his part" [216]), the poem welcomes the possibility of new beginnings, revealing that his heart, though subjected to disappointments, remains open to the forging of unexpected friendships: "For only those who change keep ties with me." Nietzsche's position, therefore, does not need to imply a dismissal or rejection of his old friends (in fact, Nietzsche generally remained friends with many of the people he befriended in his early years), but is a recognition that one must not feel trapped by perspectives and vantage points from earlier allegiances simply because there were once heartfelt bonds that one has since outgrown. It further emphasizes the subtext of BGE: that overcoming one's prior perspectives, i.e., those Nietzsche critiques in BGE, often implies growing further apart from once cherished human beings, who might still remain uncritical of those perspectives, particularly if one offends them by one's distancing from views once held in common.

The question now becomes what to make of Nietzsche's projected "philosophy of the future." Conway's study suggests that the work sets the groundwork for such a future by encouraging his "best readers" to take the bold steps to liberate themselves from the constraints of the present. Though I agree with Conway, to a certain extent, that BGE is meant to destabilize our affinities by recalibrating our "affective-somatic experiences," Conway presents this as a future-oriented ideal, that is, as a collective end-state that will emerge once one has challenged Christian morality and has arrived at a "cheerful embrace of the scientific worldview."

But the "future" Nietzsche suggests is non-prescribed, open-ended, and completely uncertain and indeterminate. It is unpredictable what his unleashing of human potentiality will lead to, but BGE indicates what it has meant for Nietzsche: a critique of current allegiances along with an affirmation of the present moment. In short, I do not see BGE representing a manual for "best readers," who will lay the groundwork for a future superhuman ideal, but rather as the testimony of a spirit that models a new human sovereignty within the present moment and apotheosizes it for posterity. On the other hand, the word "future," at least in the

way it has come to be understood through the Christian inheritance we have absorbed, is an understanding that Nietzsche rejects in BGE in its teleological form.

Even though I end up disagreeing with Conway's framing of BGE as a whole, I find he provides many cogent analyses of Nietzsche's individual sections. For readers who are unfamiliar with this text or Nietzsche's others, this guide states clearly and straightforwardly its major themes and links them with Nietzsche's broader concerns. It will serve as a good starting point for those interested in better understanding the complex thread of arguments that make up this fascinating, enigmatic text.