WHO'S AFRAID OF FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE? EFFECTIVE AND INEFFECTIVE CRITICISMS

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When one finds a philosopher inspiring, it is all too easy to adopt an uncritical reading. This would be to treat the author as an exception. The hallmark of such arguments from reverence is that they often start with 'As so-and-so said...' and appear as the final statement on the matter. Friedrich Nietzsche is subject to such reverential treatment at the hand of undergraduate and A-Level devotees. I hope in the course of this brief survey to suggest some worthwhile criticisms of Nietzsche while at the same time point to criticisms that are ineffective. First, popular criticisms that I deem unsuccessful.

One family of criticisms I deem ineffective are those that are dependent on Nietzsche's style of writing. A critic might allege that his philosophy is contradictory, *ad hominem*, and unsystematic. Nietzsche is influenced by Hegel's style of writing which seeks to absorb the reader in the text, to spin them around in a dance of words. Nietzsche is adamant that the fact of the matter is not to be found in any thesis nor antithesis but partly in each, somewhere in between and in some cases nowhere at all. In what is arguably his most mature work, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) Nietzsche makes this point as follows:

> How *could* something arise from its opposite? Truth from error, for example? Or the will to truth from the will to deception? (*Beyond Good and Evil* I.2)

Nietzsche goes on to set out his stall:

> Little by little I came to understand what every great philosophy to date has been: the personal

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> confession of its author, a kind of unintended and unwitting memoir. (BGE I. 6)

For Nietzsche, philosophy is autobiographical and this is attested to by Nietzsche's deliberate adoption of a highly personal, idiosyncratic and anecdotal writing style. The mistake of past philosophers was to assume a discoverable, objective system of truth. For Nietzsche to adopt a systematic, objective style of writing would be to lessen this message, so he doesn't. Further, any accusation of Nietzsche being unsystematic has to be tempered: there is coherence and arrangement to his work though he does not attempt grand, metaphysical system building. Once the author's interests are clearly understood, criticisms concerning his style dissolve. But is Nietzsche right in his assertion that philosophy is personal? We shall return to this avenue of enquiry in a few paragraphs' time.

An evaluation worth separate treatment is the informal mistake known as the genetic fallacy. This is a fallacy of irrelevance that is often waged against the Nietzschean method and holds that one is wrong to apportion praise or blame to an argument according to where the argument has come from i.e. its origin or genesis. The genetic fallacy is attributed to Aristotle who pointed out that the driver of fat oxen need not be fat. One commits the genetic fallacy by evaluating one property in terms of another, where one property is associated with how the entity came about. So, for example, you might discount the health giving properties of nettle tea because the tea is derived from plants that sting. One commits the genetic fallacy in this case by wrongly associating a beneficial property with a negative property in the source (that nettles sting). Note that the fallacy only holds when the property under evaluation is deemed irrelevant to or is not affected by the property of the source.

So, is the genetic fallacy a fair criticism? I believe that the genetic fallacy is a fair criticism as it stands but that it is not an effective criticism of the Nietzschean project as

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there is no question of evaluating different properties. Nietzsche's genetic methodology is one of death by analysis. In examining the 'human all too human' origins of metaphysical beliefs, Nietzsche seeks to demythologise such beliefs so they lose their epistemic and moral status. Nietzsche turns this method of demythologization on: God, goodness, free will, the soul and metaphysical claims to 'Truth'. One example occurs in the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) where Nietzsche tells us a story as to the origins of European morality. The narrative is at the same time psychological, sociological and linguistic: it holds that the notions of good and evil were invented by the subjugated class in society thousands of years ago out of a mixture of fear, resentment and the desire to control the dominant. For Nietzsche, this story has more resonance than alternative accounts (such as Christianity) and represents a condemnation of the values of the present moral period that are governed by such a subjugated mentality. The property in this case is traditional moral value which is the same property under analysis as in his critique of nineteenth-century European morality. There is no case of irrelevance. However, does Nietzsche successfully show that morality is a human phenomenon and nothing more? In judging this one would need to look carefully at the historical examples the author chooses such as his analysis of the Flamen de Alis of Ancient Rome. Nietzsche is, however, careful to frame his account of morality not in strictly historical terms (so the accusation of pseudo-history runs dry) but as mythology. Whether this is appropriate philosophical discourse is a point we shall now address.

Two threads have been left dangling: Is Nietzsche correct in asserting that all philosophy is personal? And what constitutes an appropriate philosophical method? Implicit in both questions is the criticism that Nietzsche uses an unphilosophical method, that he relies on forceful assertion rather than argumentation. Yet this is part of Nietzsche's challenge – to ask more fundamental

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questions about the philosophical enterprise than have previously been framed. These questions are questions of value and questions concerned human motivation: Why do we value logical argument? Why do we rely on the Socratic tradition in philosophy? Is an inference doing anything more than underscoring an assumption? In sum, are the joint quests for validity and truth themselves just red herrings, distractions from what is important. The Nietzschean response to accusations of being unphilosophical is twofold. First, the philosophical method falsely promises objectivity and is really a form of rhetoric that can be traced back to a sophistical Socrates. Secondly, there is nothing wrong with being iconoclastic and bucking the philosophical trend. For Nietzsche, philosophical argument is as much an act of will than anything else (BGE I. 19).

Nietzsche buys the Schopenhaurian theme that biology is stronger than reason, in fact reason is just a particular aspect of human biology. We use reason to get what we will. This has serious implications for any critic of Nietzsche as a general Nietzschean response to any criticism appears to be: 'I'm not buying into your rational, Socratic system as it is founded on a false dichotomy between truth and falsehood, therefore I shall ignore any further accusations of formal or informal fallacy'. If reason has led him to observe such a false dichotomy, it is of course reason in the physiological sense (his will). Where does this leave the Nietzschean? Nietzsche suggests we substitute two criteria in place of reason: usefulness and life-affirmation. Perhaps then this is where more effective criticism can begin. Nietzsche's two new criteria certainly beg the question: What is useful for us? What is life-affirmative? The Nietzsche reader is well advised to put these notions under pressure. For example, in the field of social and political implications, and find out whether they are anything more than empty formulae.

It is apparent from the above discussion that a general stance against Nietzsche is more effective than any reliance on the critical powers of discrete fallacies such as

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the genetic or *ad hominem* fallacies. By general stance I mean a challenge to Nietzsche's conception of what philosophy is, his metaphilosophy. Following in this vein, a defence of reason may be pursued against Nietzsche's strong claim that all philosophy is personal and nothing more. One might nod acknowledgement towards the fact that any philosopher's agenda and preconceptions exert influence yet retain some notion of the academic independence of philosophy as a discipline. This discipline is manifest twofold in the clarity of how an argument is presented (i.e. the analytic tradition of unambiguously framing a statement) and in, secondly, making clear where the justification of any belief lies. The alternative is to court ambiguity and confusion. Such a defence of the analytic tradition can be waged with impunity.

Yet the history of analytic objections to Nietzsche has been dogged by a criticism that doesn't work: the argument from self-refutation. This evaluation relies on a contradiction and is often unwisely applied to overly rhetorical extracts from Nietzsche's notebooks that were not intended for publication. The critical move is as follows: take a Nietzschean quotation on truth such as the famous epigram 'there is no truth only interpretation'. Then state that if this statement is true then it is false as there is at least one truth i.e. that there is no truth. We know Nietzsche lectured on the *Protogoras*, a platonic dialogue which features this problem of self-refutation. So we can infer from this historical fact that either Nietzsche recognised the problem and chose to ignore it or that he meant something else by such a statement and its companion pronouncements. I favour the latter explanation and tend to read the comment as meaning: there is no grand system of metaphysical truth and we cannot escape our human subjectivity. I construe Nietzsche as denying metaphysics in the same way as a tourist might admit to not being able to speak a language. Admittedly if a traveller stated '*Je ne parle pas un mot de français*' they have committed a contradiction as they have at least eight French words but if they state '*Je ne parle*

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pas français' they mean they do not have the French language. In denying a theory of truth (such as the platonic account) Nietzsche's meaning is equivalent to the second French statement. Nietzsche's denial of the metaphysics of truth does not, of course, entail that he cannot talk in terms of truths in the sense of contingent facts about the world, such as 'Friedrich Nietzsche was born in 1844'. Yet it does commit him to a thoroughgoing empiricism.

So did Nietzsche successfully shed the vestiges of metaphysics and how good an empiricist was he? These are our two remaining questions. There is a trap in how to reject metaphysics without becoming a fellow metaphysician. The difficulty consists in the act of denying metaphysics, as the act of denial commits one to a metaphysical standpoint. It is a philosophical event. Nietzsche makes no apology for his anti-metaphysical, 'metaphysical' standpoint and goes so far as to indulge in some elaboration. His three canonical notions are: the will to power, the doctrine of the eternal return and the doctrine of the übermensch. Note that these philosophies are very far removed from the discrete, contingent facts about the world that a Nietzschean can call truths. Yet to assess these notions fairly, we need to meet them as Nietzsche intended. They are provocative thought experiments created by Nietzsche to sting us like gad flies and awaken us from our dogmatic slumber. Philosophy is after all the personal confession of its author, the ideas in question are no exception. Nevertheless, the force of Nietzschean rhetoric often confuses the reader into thinking the author is unveiling eternal metaphysical truths which is an understandable mistake as it is not easy to find admittance of advancing a personal philosophy, yet there are passages where Nietzsche admits to this, such as; *Human All Too Human* V. 286, 292; *Daybreak* Preface Sec II, III. 149; *The Joyful Wisdom* 276; *Beyond Good and Evil* VII. 231.

The main difficulty is not that the three notions of the will to power, eternal return and the übermensch compound Nietzsche's hypocrisy as a fellow metaphysician, this is to

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misunderstand the nature of these thought experiments. The error is that the reader remains unsure as to what the three thought experiments are saying. The will to power is such a vague phrase that it is at times used as a synonym for a physical force or energy (*Will to Power*, 1067) while alternatively it appears as the desire of the will to assert oneself over another being or thing (BGE I. 9). The doctrine of eternal return at one time is a quasi-physical theory that nothing can be created nor destroyed, that the universe consists of a finite number of atoms that are reformed through time. While elsewhere the doctrine of the eternal return is given an ethical spin (BGE III. 56): that we should act according to a way of life we could envisage ourselves living over and over again *ad infinitum* as not to live in this way would be inauthentic. Thirdly, the term übermensch carries biologistic connotations by referring to those individuals who are most disease resistant, adaptable to their environment and successful at producing healthy offspring. Alternatively, there is an aesthetic sense of being an übermensch defined in terms of being free from the constraints of convention and being free to create one's own values. For the above thought experiments to work as Nietzsche intends them, the philosopher has to define his terms.

Next, is Nietzsche a successful empiricist? Three claims against Nietzsche's success as an empiricist are: that much of the Nietzschean canon represents pseudo-science, that Nietzschean notions such as the will to power are unfalsifiable as science (following what has been said in the preceeding paragraph) and that even if Nietzsche is successful as an empiricist, he more than once commits the naturalistic fallacy in moving from a non-moral premise to a moral conclusion. The accusation of pseudo-science may be cashed out in terms of pseudo-biology and pseudo-psychology. To cite one example for each, one might accuse Nietzsche's theory of the will to power as being pseudo-biological in that the account extrapolates from what is observed in nature, to posit an immeasurable,

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rudimentary force that is the will to power and which governs every action. Further to this, in many cases Nietzsche's psychological reflections seem to lack any explanatory power. His explanations fail to delve down an ontological level and remain speculative and general. The following example refers to the will:

> Let us say that in every act of willing there is first of all a multiplicity of feelings, namely the feeling of the condition we are moving *away* from and the feeling of the condition we are moving *towards*; the feeling of this 'away' and this 'towards', and then a concomitant feeling in the muscles that, without our actually moving 'arms and legs', comes into play out of a kind of habit, whenever we 'will'. (BGE I. 19)

There is a wider concern about Nietzsche's notion of the will to power, namely that it is an unfalsifiable thesis and hence an example of bad science and, as a consequence, a bad theory. The principle of unfalsifiability was first devised by the Austrian born philosopher of science Karl Popper (1902–1994) who held that a theory was to be judged scientific if it were testable i.e. a set of conditions could be stated whereby at least in principle the theory could be shown to be false. The classic case of falsifiability often cited is the Einstein-Eddington experiments whereas much of Marx, Freud and Adler are deemed unfalsifiable. An effective criticism adds Nietzsche's name to the list of unfalsifiable theorists as there does not seem a clear case where Nietzsche's notion of the will to power could be proved false. It is a theory that is so broadly framed to fit any of the data: when chimps fight they express their will to power but when they exhibit symbiotic alliance they express their will to power in a different way. The unfalsifiable nature of many of Nietzsche's claims renders his empiricism suspect.

Finally, even if Nietzschean empiricism could be retrieved, it would be no more than empiricism and any

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attempt to evaluate (or re-evaluate) value would fall beyond such a factual remit. The mutually exclusive worlds of facts and values were noted first by Hume in the eighteenth century and analysed by G.E. Moore in the twentieth century. What has become known as the naturalistic fallacy has too many formulations to précis here but suffice to say that the problem unfolds as follows: one cannot escape the creation of values yet facts do not supply any foundations for such values. Moore notes in his *Principia Ethica* (I.10) that one cannot describe the simple and unanalysable notions of 'good' and 'moral' in naturalistic terms. Yet Nietzsche does move frequently between naturalistic and non-naturalistic descriptions. For instance, in (BGE III. 62) he points out that humans suffer, but that Christianity is wrong in praising such fragility, '. . .they have preserved too much of that which ought to perish'. Yet to argue that nature ought to be left to take its course is to say more than meets the empiricist brief.

In conclusion, this brief survey intends to set out the critical landscape and as such is a first port of call for any student of Nietzsche. I believe there is insufficient mileage in criticisms of Nietzsche that revolve around style, accusations of the genetic fallacy and self-refutation. Instead more fruitful avenues of criticism to be pursued include: a defence of philosophy's analytic method together with accusations of pseudo-science, unfalsifiability and the naturalistic fallacy. The above in no way diminishes the reward in reading Nietzsche but shows that critical appreciation of any author is at the same time critical as well as appreciative.

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Recommended Reading

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