The Review of Politics 70 (2008), 278–283.
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doi: 10.1017/S003467050800034X Printed in the USA

Nooks and Hunched Backs: A Reply to Ruth Abbey

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> "Almost always the books of scholars are somehow oppressive, oppressed; the "specialist" emerges somewhere—his zeal, his seriousness, his fury, his overestimation of the nook in which he sits and spins, his hunched back; every specialist has his hunched back." Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 366

In her reply to my article "*Human, All too Human* and the Problem of Culture," Ruth Abbey takes me to task for not engaging sufficiently with the secondary literature, that is, for not "heaping stone upon stone, brick upon brick," as Nietzsche himself recommends. When Nietzsche made this recommendation, I am not sure it was heaping up references to the secondary literature that he had in mind. He did have some pretty negative things to say about the "antlike industry" of scholars over the course of his career, as the quotation at the head of my reply suggests. Nevertheless, I am not entitled to Nietzsche's high-handed disdain of scholars, and therefore Abbey's request that I engage the secondary literature on Nietzsche is not unreasonable. I thought I had done my due diligence in this regard, but I suppose one can always do more. In taking up Abbey's challenge, I will engage mostly with her own book, *Nietzsche's Middle Period*, since this is the secondary work that she most frequently chides me for having neglected.

Let me begin by addressing what seems to be the central issue that Abbey raises about my article: What does looking at *Human, All too Human* (henceforth, *HH*) in the context of the problem of culture add to our understanding of that text? She acknowledges my point that most commentators on *HH* have focused their attention on Nietzsche's investigation of the "history of the moral sensations" and its connection to his later "genealogy of morals." She even seems to concede that my attempt to understand *HH* in terms of Nietzsche's long-standing concern with culture is distinctive. Her problem with my analysis is that it "fails to demonstrate clearly the heuristic value of [its] focus on culture" and it does not sufficiently explain "how reframing the problems of morality as a concern about culture really does illuminate Nietzsche's purposes and achievements in this work." She attributes this failure to my focusing primarily on the text of *HH* instead of—to repeat the refrain of her reply—engaging with the relevant secondary literature.[1]

[1]Ruth Abbey, "Bricks and Stones: A Reply to Paul Franco," *Review of Politics* 70 (2008): 273.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467050800034X Published online by Cambridge University Press

In order to answer Abbey's criticism, I need to say a bit more about why I adopt culture as the lens through which to understand *HH*. As I point out in my article, the problem of culture had been the pervasive preoccupation of Nietzsche's earlier writings, from *The Birth of Tragedy* through all four *Untimely Meditations*. He shared this concern about the aimlessness and fragmentation of modern culture with Wagner, and both pinned their hopes on art, specifically Wagnerian art, to resolve it. It is well known that Nietzsche's disillusionment with Wagner and the theory of culture they shared led him to flee the Bayreuth Festival in August of 1876 and immediately begin writing the notes that would eventually become part of *HH*. These facts alone suggest an important connection between Nietzsche's earlier preoccupation with the problem of culture and *HH*, and this connection is further confirmed by the prominent place of reflections on culture in the text of *HH*: in the absolutely crucial aphorism—unmentioned, as far as I can tell, in Abbey's entire book on the middle period—on the need for an "altogether unprecedented *knowledge of the preconditions of culture* as a scientific standard for ecumenical goals" (*HH*, 25), as well as in the central chapter on "Tokens of Higher and Lower Culture." It is interesting to note that in one of Nietzsche's early plans for *HH* the title of the first chapter is "Philosophy of Culture."[2]

None of this constitutes proof of my contention that the theme of culture "represents not merely an overlooked aspect of *HH* but the key to the book as a whole."[3] But it was enough to motivate me to test whether the theme of culture was capable of providing a unifying thread for understanding a text that contains (if you include the two supplements) over 1,400 aphorisms on a variety of different topics. The "demonstration," as it were, consists in seeing whether reading *HH* in the light of this theme actually illuminates the text and renders it more intelligible and coherent. Such a demonstration could only proceed by a careful and integrative reading of the primary text. Indeed, I cannot for the life of me see how debating with the secondary literature could advance it one little bit. Abbey characterizes my effort to find a unifying thread for *HH* as "Casaubonesque."[4] But unlike the repellant pedant of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, I am not trying to produce a "key to all mythologies" but merely to understand a single book, albeit a very rich and complicated one.

As part of my interpretation of *HH*, I argue that "Nietzsche's reflections on the problem of culture lead him to ever more fundamental reflections on metaphysics, morality, and religion."[5] Here Abbey thinks she catches me in

[2]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), 8: 25 [3].

[3]Paul Franco, "Nietzsche's HH and the Problem of Culture," *Review of Politics* 69 (2007): 217.

[4]Abbey, "Bricks and Stones," 277.

[5]Franco, "Nietzsche's HH and the Problem of Culture," 242; see also 218–19.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467050800034X Published online by Cambridge University Press

a self-contradiction. If, she writes, "questions of morality, metaphysics and religion (MMR) are more fundamental than those of culture, where have earlier interpreters erred in focusing on morality? What interpretive value is added by Franco's focus on culture if it immediately returns us to the more fundamental level of *MMR*?"[6]

This objection completely misses what I am trying to do in my article. To argue that the problem of culture provides the impetus for Nietzsche's reflections in *HH* does not imply that this problem is self-contained or does not raise other, perhaps more fundamental, questions—no more than the salience of the problem of justice in the *Republic* prevents Plato from taking up more fundamental questions about the nature of knowledge and reality. Because Plato proceeds in this way, is Abbey suggesting that the interpreter of the *Republic* should simply skip over the discussion of justice and go straight to the doctrine of the ideas? I never for a moment deny in my article that Nietzsche's reflections on morality in *HH* are of fundamental importance, especially in the light of his later philosophy. I also do not suggest that other scholars err in focusing on them. What I do say is that the motivation for these reflections remains somewhat mysterious unless they are placed in the larger context of Nietzsche's concern with the problem of culture. Why does morality move into the center of Nietzsche's philosophical thinking after *HH*? How does this concern with morality relate to the concern with culture that had dominated Nietzsche's thinking prior to *HH*? These are questions that the study of *HH* is uniquely suited to answer, for in this pivotal text we see Nietzsche's concern with culture—and his disillusionment with Wagner's romantic conception of it— leading directly to a critical investigation of morality.

But, Abbey asks, does this approach really modify or add anything to what previous scholars have said about Nietzsche's proto-genealogy of morality in *HH*? I think it does. Without going into my whole argument, I will simply indicate that what interests me about Nietzsche's analysis of morality in *HH* is the way it parallels his critique of romantic, Wagnerian music and the concept of culture it supports. What led Nietzsche to flee Bayreuth in 1876 and start writing *HH* was the realization that Wagnerian music, far from being a panacea for the problem of modern culture, was actually a symptom of it. With its pursuit of intoxicating effects, its indulgence of excessive emotion, and its Schopenhauerian obsession with suffering and redemption, Wagner's music merely fed the insatiable appetite of an already ignited and over-excited age. Nietzsche's analysis of morality reveals the hidden connection to this Wagnerian romanticism. For morality, too, "blackens" the world with its false oppositions of good and evil, egoism and unegoism, and this in turn gives rise to the intoxicating and narcotizing remedies provided by art and religion. The real solution to the problem of modern

[6]Abbey, "Bricks and Stones," 275.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467050800034X Published online by Cambridge University Press

culture, Nietzsche argues at the end of his chapter on "The History of the Moral Sensations," lies in moving from a "moral to a knowing mankind" (*HH*, 107). Instead of being subject to the savage passions spawned by morality and nourished by romanticism, such a knowing, scientific culture will be marked by moderation, simplicity, and equanimity.

How does this compare with Abbey's discussion of Nietzsche's genealogy of morality in the middle period in her book? At the beginning of one of the chapters that she complains I ignore, she states that the purpose of Nietzsche's genealogy of morality is to "foster individualism" by promoting self-love and freeing people of shame.[7] This is a rather generic interpretation of the purpose of Nietzsche's genealogy; and while it is probably true in some sort of generic way, it does not capture his specific intention in *HH* to expose the way in which morality artificially blackens existence and thus creates the need for the "lightening" remedies provided by religion and romantic art. The same imprecision characterizes Abbey's discussion of egoism, which focuses on the way in which Nietzsche moves from using egoism as a neutral description of human action to actually celebrating it.[8] But in *HH*, Nietzsche is not so much concerned with celebrating egoism as he is with exposing the error of unegoism, an error that makes fallible, egoistic human beings dissatisfied with themselves and hungry for miraculous cures. His therapeutic purpose in disclosing the egoistic basis of all action is to temper this hunger and make us more moderate, cheerful human beings.

In connection with moderation, Abbey references her discussion of this virtue and even claims that my discussion of it complements her own. But it is difficult to see how. My discussion of moderation is intimately connected with my understanding of the centrality of the culture question in *HH*. I argue that Nietzsche's defense of moderation in *HH* is tied to his reaction against the immoderation of Wagnerian music and romantic culture. Abbey's brief discussion of moderation in her book is largely taken up with apologetically countering Nietzsche's reputation, based on his later writings, as a thinker who celebrates excess.[9] There is very little effort to connect Nietzsche's surprising defense of moderation to his other concerns in *HH* with art, culture, religion, morality, and metaphysics. I suppose this allows her to avoid the charge of being "Casaubonesque," but it also gives her discussion of moderation, like so many other discussions in her book, a strangely discrete and isolated character.

One of the connections Abbey overlooks in her discussion of moderation is to Nietzsche's repudiation of free will. She does take up this topic in another section of her book; indeed, in her reply, she references this section as yet another aspect of her book that I failed to engage. But her treatment of

[7]Ruth Abbey, *Nietzsche's Middle Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 35.
[8]Ibid., 36–39.
[9]Ibid., 52–53.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467050800034X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nietzsche's critique of free will suffers from some of the same defects that are found in the rest of her analysis of Nietzsche's genealogy of morality. She makes a good point that Nietzsche's critique of free will is not as sweeping as he sometimes suggests (see also what I say about the role that Nietzsche assigns to intellect in determining human conduct).[10] But she says nothing about the cooling, moderating effect of Nietzsche's doctrine of the complete unaccountability of human beings, which is what receives the greatest emphasis in *HH*. Instead, she focuses on the aesthetic motives behind Nietzsche's critique of free will, with most of her references for Nietzsche's "notion of the aesthetic self" coming from *Daybreak* and *The Gay Science*, not *HH*.[11] This points to another problem with Abbey's general analysis. Though she admits that the works of the middle period cannot be "referred to as a single entity" and that "it is important to remain sensitive to differences among them,"[12] in practice she tends to lump the middle works together and often fails to register crucial differences between them.

I hope this is enough to suggest that something may be learned from looking at Nietzsche's critique of morality in *HH* in the context of his larger concern with the problem of culture. But this still does not get me off the hook, as far as Abbey is concerned. For it is not only my analysis of Nietzsche's critique of morality that does not break new ground; even my discussion of his transformed view of culture presents nothing "novel." Once again, Abbey refers to her book, specifically the chapter "We Children of the Enlightenment," and states that she, too, deals with Nietzsche's new emphasis on science and the importance of history.[13] But this ignores everything specific and potentially interesting in my analysis of the chapter on "Tokens of Higher and Lower Culture" in *HH*. It is only by reducing my analysis to something as blandly generic as "the importance of history and the endorsement of a scientific approach to knowledge" that Abbey can then pronounce it devoid of novelty. Is this what "engaging the secondary literature" means?

As I have mentioned, my discussion of Nietzsche's new conception of culture proceeds by way of a careful analysis of (what I take to be) the central chapter of *HH*. It is concerned not merely to highlight Nietzsche's "endorsement of a scientific approach to knowledge" but to flesh out what exactly is involved in Nietzsche's peculiar notion of a culture governed by scientific consciousness. It is concerned not merely to bring out "the importance of history" for Nietzsche but to show how historical consciousness serves both as a contemplative ideal, allowing us to achieve "cosmic self-consciousness" (*AOM*, 185), and as an indispensable practical aid, providing an "altogether unprecedented *knowledge of the preconditions of culture*" (*HH*, 25). Along the way, I discuss the new

[10]Franco, "Nietzsche's HH and the Problem of Culture," 227.
[11]Abbey, *Nietzsche's Middle Period*, 24–33.
[12]Ibid., xii.
[13]Abbey, "Bricks and Stones," 276.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467050800034X Published online by Cambridge University Press

role of art in Nietzsche's post-romantic, scientific culture, the continuing need for error and illusion, the problem of producing and educating the free spirit, Nietzsche's critique of the romantic cult of genius, and the relationship between culture and politics. None of this is touched on in Abbey's chapter "We Children of the Enlightenment," which ranges indiscriminately over all of the middle works and takes up a miscellany of topics.

Abbey concludes her reply by mentioning three issues that warrant further investigation. Only the first, relating to the question of whether Nietzsche really sloughs off the influence of Schopenhauer and Wagner in the middle period, directly concerns me in my article. For understanding the significance of *HH*, I still think Nietzsche's break with his former mentors remains of paramount importance. It is clear from his notebooks that Nietzsche's disenchantment with Wagner and Schopenhauer had been growing for some time prior to the Bayreuth Festival of 1876, but the nature and dimensions of this disenchantment only become clear in *HH*. Nevertheless, I am willing to concede that Nietzsche's relationship to his "educators" is more complex than simple rejection, and it would be difficult, indeed, to deny that they remain "important interlocutors." Just to take Schopenhauer—despite Nietzsche's rejection of his doctrines of the thing in itself, the will to life, the metaphysical need, the intelligible character, the unalterable character, pity, and resignation—there is a way in which Nietzsche retains an aspect of Schopenhauer's contemplative ideal in his understanding of scientific culture in *HH*.

As for her other two issues, Abbey is right that much has been written on Nietzsche's multifarious style—much of it from a postmodern perspective—but I cannot say that any of it causes me to retreat from my "confident, Casaubonesque assertion about culture providing the key to *HH*."[14] On the subject of whether Nietzsche's historical generalizations about primeval times and primitive humanity pass scientific muster, much, obviously, could be said. A good deal of recent scholarship on Nietzsche has revealed how engaged he was during his middle period with contemporary anthropology and evolutionary social theory: with Darwin, Spencer, Bagehot, Lubbock, and Tylor. Any extended discussion of Nietzsche's genealogy of morality in the middle works would require a full examination of this scientific context. Curiously, none of these names appears in the index of Abbey's book.

But enough heaping of bricks and stones. Whether it has been an edifying exercise, I do not know. What I do know is that my back is a little more bent now than it was before I began. The overarching lesson Abbey draws in her reply to my article is that it is important to engage with what previous scholars have said about Nietzsche's middle period. To this I would only add that it is important to *truly engage* with this scholarship, attending to what is potentially distinctive in it before reducing it to the echo of other scholarship. Only then can we hope to emerge, at least briefly, from our scholarly nooks.

[14]Ibid., 277.

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