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978-0-521-79041-3 - The Soul of Nietzsche's: Beyond Good and Evil

Maudemarie Clark and David Dudrick

Excerpt

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Introduction

Learning to Read Beyond Good and Evil

Why doesn't Nietzsche write like a philosopher? Why doesn't he set out his views clearly and give arguments for them? That he does not has led some readers to suppose that he is not a philosopher at all but only a poet, a guru, or a self-proclaimed wise man. Although this is hardly a crazy view, it is no longer a prominent one. The connections that can be drawn between Nietzsche and other figures in the history of philosophy – past and present – are just too numerous and interesting to deny that philosophy is the game he was attempting to play, the conversation he was attempting to enter. But then why doesn't he write like other philosophers? In particular, does he minimize argument in his writings to reject something that is essential to philosophy as traditionally understood and practiced?

For a time, the standard view seemed to be that he does, that the ways in which he writes express a rejection of the whole “truth project” of traditional philosophy. Interpreters operating under the influence of postmodernism took Nietzsche to be an early proponent of its attack on truth, its rejection of all truth claims as illusory. Nietzsche does not write “like a philosopher,” according to this account, precisely because he rejects a concern with truth, reason, and argument. He rejects the “logocentric” paradigm of philosophy that informs the work of those who do write “like philosophers.” But this postmodernist view of Nietzsche's philosophy is no longer dominant, having been successfully countered by “truth-friendly” accounts of Nietzsche. These find in his works a commitment to truth and, in his later works, a “uniform respect for science, truth, and the facts” (Clark 1990: 105).¹ But then why does he write so as to

¹ Among the books that have contributed to the overcoming of the postmodernist Nietzsche are Wilcox 1974, Schacht 1985, Clark 1990, Leiter 2002a, and Richardson 1996 and 2004.

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suggest otherwise? What can defenders of the truth-friendly Nietzsche contribute to our understanding of why Nietzsche writes the way he does? These questions lie behind the present book. We do not address them directly, however, until the Conclusion. We think that answering the question as to why Nietzsche writes as he does requires more careful attention to *how* he writes than we find in the current literature. This attention is especially needed in the case of *Beyond Good and Evil* (*BGE*), the book with which we will be concerned here. There is a problem concerning this book, two problems really, that we believe can be solved only by paying closer attention to *how* it is written, by *learning* how to read it.

1.1 THE PROBLEM

Of Nietzsche's thirteen books, *Beyond Good and Evil* (*BGE*) is plausibly considered the most important statement of his philosophy. Dealing with all of the important topics of his later philosophy, it is his most comprehensive book and makes the strongest impression of being intended as a major statement of that philosophy.² Many philosophers would choose *On the Genealogy of Morality* (*GM*) instead, on the grounds that it makes a more important contribution to philosophy. It certainly makes a more accessible contribution. Its form is more evident, making it much easier to determine its topic, claims, and arguments. Its content makes it seem to be an important and original book. But, on the back of the title page of *GM*, in the print manuscript submitted to his publisher, Nietzsche instructed that it be "appended" to *BGE* "as a clarification and supplement" (*KSA* 14: 377). It seems strange to accord the appendix more importance than the book it is meant to clarify and supplement. The solution might simply be to treat *GM* as a part of *BGE*, as Laurence

² *Twilight of the Idols* may be almost as comprehensive, but it reads like a summary and simplified statement, its relationship to *BGE* analogous to that of Kant's *Prolegomena* to the first *Critique* or Hume's *Enquiries* to the *Treatise*. Nietzsche himself enthused over *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (*Z*), declaring that it "stands alone" not only in his own body of work but in the history of philosophy (*EH* III: Z 6). Yet he also said that *BGE* "says the same things" as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "but differently, very differently" (letter to Burckhardt, 2 September 1886) (*KSB* 7: 254), the difference presumably being that *Z* says it poetically, whereas *BGE* says it philosophically, or at least much more philosophically than *Z* does. And if two books say the same thing but one of them says it more philosophically, that one should surely be considered the more important work of philosophy, which is our concern here.

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Lampert (2001) does. This would make *BGE* the book to which Nietzsche referred a young American journalist as his most “far-reaching and important.”³

But whether or not it includes *GM*, there are two major problems facing those who accept this judgment concerning *BGE*’s importance, especially if they also judge Nietzsche to be an important philosopher. The first concerns its form. The book itself (i.e., apart from *GM*) contains nine major parts (as well as a preface and concluding poem). Each part is titled and subdivided into consecutively numbered sections or “aphorisms” (the traditional term). These sections, which are usually untitled, vary in length from a sentence to a few pages. The problem is that little seems to hold these elements together. Rolf-Peter Horstmann’s (2002: xxii) description of the book captures the impression *BGE* often makes on readers: “*Beyond Good and Evil* . . . looks like a collection of impromptu remarks . . . numbered and loosely organized into topic-related groups. . . . The impression is of an apparently arbitrary compilation of notes which are . . . presented in an artful though idiosyncratic way.”⁴

No one who takes *Beyond Good and Evil* to be an important work of philosophy can remain content with this view of it. But although Walter Kaufmann warned us years ago against reading *Beyond Good and Evil* as a mere “collection of aphorisms for browsing,” it has evidently been difficult to resist the temptation. Interpreters tend to mine the book for whatever they can use for their own purposes, showing little concern with how to read the work as a whole. Alexander Nehamas’s striking characterization of the book as a work of “dazzling obscurity” is meant to suggest an explanation: *BGE*’s memorable lines – for example, “Christianity is Platonism for the people” – dazzle us with their brilliance, blinding us to the less striking surrounding material. This brilliance makes it easy to

³ Nietzsche’s actual claim was that *GM* and *BGE* counted as his “most far-reaching and important” books. This was in 1887, before he wrote his last five books. But none of these matches *BGE* as a candidate for Nietzsche’s *Hauptwerk*, as we argue specifically about *Twilight* in our previous note.

⁴ Note that *BGE*’s title does not really tell us what it is about, and its chapter titles often do not tell us what they are about either. In this sense, *BGE* differs substantially from Nietzsche’s other nine-part work, *Human, All Too Human* (*HA*). There the title does tell us what the book is about – as Nietzsche put it later: “Where you see ideal things, I see what is human, alas, all too human” (*EH* III: *HA*). And the titles of its parts inform us as to that part’s subject matter. So the second part of *HA* is about the moral sentiments, just as its title suggests. But *BGE*’s second part, “The Free Spirit,” is not about free spirits. If the title is appropriate, it must be because it is addressed to free spirits. But this does not help give us a sense of its unity.

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overlook issues concerning how the book is organized and how its sections are interconnected. The upshot, according to Nehamas (1988: 46), is that “we still do not know how to read the book. We simply do not understand its structure, its narrative line. Indeed we do not even know whether it has a narrative line at all.”⁵

The second problem concerns *BGE*'s content, much of which seems both too crude and too badly supported to count as good philosophy. This includes, for instance, its derogatory comments about women (*BGE* 231–239), the English in general (*BGE* 252), and Darwin, Mill, and Spencer in particular (*BGE* 253). One might be inclined to dismiss these as peripheral to *BGE*'s main concern, especially if it were clearer what that concern is. But such dismissal is impossible in the case of its equally harsh criticism of democracy, which runs throughout the book. Of course, one might sympathize with the criticism. But sympathy is difficult to sustain when one recognizes that the critique is connected to a number of problematic elements. These include a dream of philosophers who will “create” or “legislate” values (*BGE* 213); a denigration of ordinary human beings, who are said to exist and to be allowed to exist only for service and the general utility (*BGE* 61); and a criticism of religions for preserving too many of those who should perish (*BGE* 62). If similar-sounding points can be found in other writings Nietzsche published, it is almost always in much milder form.⁶

This contrast is also true of *BGE*'s apparent assault on truth, which begins in the preface and continues at least throughout Part One and into Part Two. In no other published work do we find such strong denials of both the possibility of attaining truth and the value of doing so. But this seems to be the stuff of freshman relativism. It may now be accepted as obvious by postmodernists throughout the academy (though not as true, of course, once this concern is pushed). But philosophers typically reject such postmodernist skepticism about truth, judging the arguments taken to ground it to be both wrongheaded and superficial. Clark (1990) claims that Nietzsche himself came to share this judgment. According to her account, Nietzsche was the first to see through the postmodernist position

⁵ Nehamas goes on to offer an account of *BGE*'s structure, to which we will return.

⁶ Likewise, the cutting comments about women that can be found in Nietzsche's other books (although, like the notorious comment about the whip, often not in Nietzsche's own voice) are no match for *BGE*'s extreme statement that a man of depth and benevolence “must think of woman as *Oriental*s do: he must think of woman as a possession, as property that can be locked, as something predestined for service and achieving her perfection in that” (*BGE* 238).

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on truth after having proclaimed it himself in his early work. But he does not reject the postmodern position until *GM*, written after *BGE*. If Clark is correct, Nietzsche's later work can be saved from the charge that it remains committed to a problematic and superficial position on truth, but *BGE* cannot. This failure adds to the difficulty of counting *BGE* as the most important statement of Nietzsche's philosophy, much less as the work of an important philosopher.

And then there is the fact that the notorious doctrine of the will to power has such a central presence in the book, much more so than in any other. That he called attention to the importance of power relations in human life is certainly to Nietzsche's credit. But the doctrine put forward and defended in *BGE* is that life, human psychology, and perhaps even reality itself are fundamentally to be understood as will to power, and this claim has done little to enhance his reputation among philosophers. Nietzsche's reputation continues to grow among serious philosophers, but always in spite of the doctrine of the will to power, never because of it.⁷

1.2 TWO STRATEGIES

One therefore comes to *BGE* with the reasonable expectation that it is Nietzsche's most important work, only to find what appears to be a loosely connected set of thoughts, many of which range from the puerile to the nonsensical. What are the defenders of the book's status to do? One option is to accept the book's apparent features as its actual ones but to argue that Nietzsche is putting them to an important philosophical *use*. This strategy is taken most influentially by Alexander Nehamas and more recently by Rolf-Peter Horstmann. Nehamas and Horstmann both explain the form of *BGE* and at least some of its problematic content in terms of its helpfulness for communicating a philosophical position that cannot be presented effectively using more traditional philosophical resources. This position is Nietzsche's notorious perspectivism. Although Nehamas and Horstmann interpret perspectivism somewhat differently, they both attempt to interpret it so that it does not entail the problematic postmodern thesis that all of our beliefs are illusory or false. They interpret it instead as the claim that truths are always "partial": claims can be true only *from* a particular perspective. Perspectivism consists not in

⁷ For instance, Daniel Dennett refers to Nietzsche's "huffing and puffing about power" (Dennett 1996: 465), and Philippa Foot questions Nietzsche's stature as a psychologist on the basis of this doctrine (Foot 1994: 12–13).

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a denial that one's beliefs are true, according to Nehamas (1985: 33), "but only in the view that one's beliefs are not, and need not be, true for everyone." However, as Nehamas himself explains, this position is difficult to defend.

The problem is that "simply by virtue of being offered," any view "is inevitably offered in the conviction that it is true. But then, despite any assurances to the contrary, it is presented as a view which everyone must accept on account of its being true." Nehamas (1985: 131) concludes from this that "every effort to present a view, no matter how explicitly its interpretive nature is admitted, makes an inescapable dogmatic commitment," by which he means a commitment to the truth of the view "full stop." Accordingly, Nietzsche must count as a dogmatist or antiperspectivist anyone who puts forward a claim as true, or even puts forward the claim itself. So how can Nietzsche take a stand in favor of perspectivism and against dogmatism without turning his own position into a dogmatic one? Nehamas sees in *BGE* an "unprecedented solution" to this problem, for which traditional philosophical means – the presentation of views and argument – are unsuitable. If one tries to avoid dogmatism by simply saying "but this is only an interpretation," the reader is likely to disregard either the view (because you have implied that you can give no reason for others to accept it) or the qualification (if they are independently attracted to it). Either way, one fails to communicate the perspectival (or interpretive, as Nehamas uses these terms) nature of the views one is putting forward. The alternative is to largely avoid "describing, supporting, and articulating" one's views and to exemplify them instead. According to Nehamas (1988: 63), this is the "main reason why *Beyond Good and Evil*, like so many of Nietzsche's works, is so short on argument." Nietzsche embodies his views and attitudes toward life in the work itself (in the narrator he forces the reader to postulate), thereby offering them "for his audience's inspection," and "commending them, of course, simply in virtue of having chosen to offer them." However, by not arguing for them, he avoids implying that they are to be accepted by everyone. And *BGE*'s apparent lack of organization is just an absence of the strict logical connections between claims and ideas that we find in more traditional works of philosophy. But there are connections, Nehamas claims, precisely of the kind one finds in a good conversation, where one topic gives way to another not because it is logically connected but because of a looser kind of connection that reminds one of the participants of it. *BGE*'s form is therefore that of a monologue, which is perfectly suited to what Nehamas takes to be Nietzsche's project in *BGE*: that of presenting us

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with a person, a philosophical character, whose views he himself merely presents for our examination but for which he does not argue.

This is an ingenious reading, and we agree with Nehamas that Nietzsche does find the traditional form of philosophical writing problematic. But in the end his account of *BGE* cannot claim to be a very plausible one (although we can show this only by providing the alternative account our book offers). It attempts to salvage *BGE*'s status by putting it in the service of a philosophical position; the problem is that the position itself is a problematic one. It just is not clear what sense can be given to the notion of a "partial truth," of a claim's being "true from a perspective." If this view immediately leads one into paradoxes of self-reference, as Nehamas admits, it just is not clear what reason Nietzsche would have had to accept it or therefore to try to present it for his readers' consideration. And, in fact, Nietzsche never says that truth is perspectival but only that knowledge is (e.g., *GM* III: 12).⁸ At the very least, one wonders whether there is an alternative account of *BGE*'s philosophical importance.

Laurence Lampert has supplied such an account. Whereas Horstmann and Nehamas see in *BGE* a repudiation of the task and methods of traditional philosophy, Lampert (2001: 2) thinks that *BGE* aims to show that philosophy in this sense "is desirable and possible" – hence, "that there are plausible grounds for the mind's assent to a particular interpretation of the whole of things and plausible grounds for the mind's embrace of that interpretation as a teaching to live by." The book as a whole is "a coherent argument that never lets up: what is discovered about philosophy and religion, about what can be known and what might be believed, necessarily assigns to the philosopher a monumental task or responsibility with respect to morals and politics" (Lampert 2001: 7).

Lampert admits that one cannot read this "coherent argument" off of *BGE*'s surface: to the uninitiated reader, the book seems characterized by disunity, even randomness, and lack of argument.⁹ He explains the gulf

⁸ See Leiter 1994 and Clark 1998a for accounts of perspectivism as a claim about knowledge rather than as a claim about truth.

⁹ Two of Nietzsche's letters suggest to Lampert that this cannot be the end of the story. One, to Georg Brandes (8 January 1888), (*KSB* 8: 228) comments on readers' failure to recognize that "they are dealing [in *BGE*] with a long logic of a completely determinate philosophical sensibility and *not* with some mishmash of a hundred varied paradoxes and heterodoxies"; a second, to Jacob Burckhardt (22 September 1886) (*KSB* 7: 254) tells us that *BGE* "says the same things as my Zarathustra but differently, very differently." It seems clear that no mere collection of aphorisms could express "a long logic of a completely determinate sensibility" (*KSB* 8: 228) or say differently what is said by the unified narrative of *Zarathustra*.

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between this appearance and the reality of Nietzsche's text by claiming that *BGE* is written in view of the distinction between the "exoteric and the esoteric" (Lampert 2001: 4). This distinction does not come out of nowhere. Nietzsche himself tells us that it was recognized by philosophers, "among Indians as among Greeks, Persians and Moslems, in short wherever one believed in an order of rank and *not* in equality and equal rights" (*BGE* 30). Many readers may find it implausible that Nietzsche is not actually saying (is not committed to) what he seems so obviously to them to be saying in *BGE*. But given what he says about the distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric, it is more implausible that *BGE* is not written in view of that distinction – hence, that there are not quite different levels of access to the content of *BGE*. According to Lampert, the view of the text as random and disorganized is the exoteric view. Nietzsche writes in a way to encourage reading it this way because, "given the sway of the irrational, making a place for the rational in the midst of the irrational requires strategic finesse: it is a task for an artful writer who knows his audience and knows how to appeal to them" (Lampert 2001: 1). Lampert thus claims that the disorganized, exoteric text is precisely the one that will initially appeal to Nietzsche's readers. In contrast, the esoteric text is the "coherent argument that never lets up," which begins to appear to readers as they are educated by *BGE* itself.

1.3 OUR PROJECT

In this book, we offer support for Lampert's *general approach* to interpreting *BGE*. In particular, we provide evidence that *BGE* is deliberately written in view of the distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric. We also provide evidence that the problems concerning the form and the content of *BGE* can be solved by recognizing that the problematic material shows up as such only when the text is read exoterically. This material is not part of the esoteric text that appears as we begin to follow Nietzsche's plea to "*learn* to read [him] well" (*DP*: 5). But we do not argue for this approach in the way that Lampert does, and our claims about the *details* of *BGE*'s esoteric text differ very significantly from his.

Although mentioned by Nietzsche, esotericism has become part of contemporary intellectual culture by way of Leo Strauss and his followers. The main source of the differences between our approach and Lampert's is that the esotericism we find in *BGE* has little in common with the Straussian variety and was not discovered under Strauss's influence (or Lampert's for that matter). Lampert no longer counts himself a follower

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of Strauss, attempting to distance both himself and Nietzsche from “noble lying” (2001: 4). In Chapter 2, we argue that his interpretation nevertheless reads too much of Strauss into *BGE*. Our approach differs radically from the one we associate with followers of Strauss, which involves two related features that make it objectionable. First, their approach seems designed to appeal to an in crowd of those in the know at the expense of public disclosure of grounds for interpreting texts as they do. Second, the attitude toward contemporary analytic (Anglo-American) philosophy, including its work in the history of philosophy, borders on contempt. In contrast, we offer no special “method” or manual for cracking Nietzsche’s “code.” As far as we can tell, there is no such code, and the only “method” that we recommend – and attempt to practice – for appreciating the “esoteric Nietzsche” is that of trying to make the best sense of what he actually says in the most rigorous possible way. And we find analytic philosophers scorned by Straussians and modern philosophers ignored by them (especially Hume and Kant) particularly helpful for doing so.

We nevertheless agree with Lampert that it is necessary to distinguish an exoteric from an esoteric level on which *BGE* is written and can be read. We deny that the form and unity of the work, and therefore its philosophical content, can be adequately appreciated without recognizing that its surface meaning differs substantially from what Nietzsche actually argues in it. The latter is simply inaccessible to readers without a significant overcoming of their initial impressions. And so *BGE*’s status as Nietzsche’s masterpiece and a work of great philosophical depth depends on recognizing this distinction.

In particular, we contend that the book is written so as to make it natural and very plausible to read it in a way that we might characterize as crudely naturalistic. This reading supports naturalist and empiricist trends in philosophy at the expense of more traditional philosophical concerns, especially normative ones. The esoteric reading we defend grants that Nietzsche is a naturalist in an important sense. But it insists that he does not turn his back on the normative aspirations of traditional philosophy. In particular, contrary to Brian Leiter’s influential reading of Nietzsche as a naturalist, he does not claim that philosophy should follow the methods of the sciences. We explain this point in detail in Chapter 5. Our point here is that *BGE* offers an account of philosophy that shows much more sympathy for traditional philosophy than many have supposed.

We attempt to demonstrate this largely through a detailed reading of the preface and first part of *BGE* (its first twenty-three sections or

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aphorisms). We call the latter “*BGE One*” to distinguish it from its first section, *BGE 1*. It turned out to be impossible to give an account of the entire book once we found out how much there is in *BGE One*. This is perhaps as it should be. As Julian Young (2010: 411) writes, *BGE* is “really . . . two books of unequal size, one concerned with ‘theoretical philosophy,’ the other with ‘practical’ philosophy, ‘ethics’ in the very broadest sense of the word. The first is largely, but by no means exclusively, to be found in Part I, the second in the remaining eight parts.” This is exactly what we discovered as we worked on the book. *BGE One* offers a deeply connected set of variations on traditional philosophical themes, ones concerning the history and nature of philosophy, and the nature of the human soul and will. These provide the theoretical foundation for the book’s practical philosophy, which is found in the reflections on ethics, politics, and education, to which the rest of the book is devoted. We cannot show that in the present book, because we cannot deal with all of that material. But the Conclusion offers the beginning of our account by showing how Nietzsche’s understanding of the soul is the foundation of the educational project to which we think the rest of the book is dedicated. And Young is correct to note that the philosophical foundations of *BGE* are not found “exclusively” in its preface and *BGE One*. This is why we do not confine ourselves to these sections but also discuss in detail a few particularly relevant sections of *BGE* that are not contained in its first part (e.g., *BGE 36*). We do the same with several sections of two other works that Nietzsche wrote within the year of completing *BGE*, *On the Genealogy of Morality* and the second edition of *The Gay Science*. One could find in the preface and *BGE One* what we find there without consulting these sections, but we think that they make a substantial contribution to seeing what is there.