

Riccardi attributes to Nietzsche is an impressively coherent and comprehensive system. To do this in a way that is at the same time so painstakingly and persuasively grounded in textual and biographical evidence is a major achievement. If we're in the business of systematizing Nietzsche, this is the way to do it.

Robert Guay, *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality: A Critical Introduction and Guide*.

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We are, as Nietzsche tells us in the Preface to *GM*, “strangers to ourselves” (*GM* P:1). The particular shape of this self-estrangement is not, as Nietzsche makes plain, the product of simple neglect; nor is it the result of some lack of ability or competence. Indeed, in Nietzsche’s view, the very disciplines of philosophy, history, and psychology, for example, show us that we are at once eager and capable when it comes to taking ourselves as objects of inquiry. Hence, the aspect of self-estrangement that worries Nietzsche is that the very conceptual and moral framework through which we orient ourselves practically, and through which we measure our praise and blame, remains, itself, stubbornly out of view. Until we can see the extent to which morality exerts its influence upon us, until we can see how the evaluative system shapes our self-understanding, until we can understand why it holds such power over us, and until we can evaluate its cogency, “we *have to*,” Nietzsche warns, continue to “mistake ourselves” (*GM* P:1).

Robert Guay’s valuable book offers a critical introduction and guide to *GM* by arguing that this aphorism, the first section of its preface, “stunningly” “encompass[es] nearly the entire argument of the book,” and does so by situating Nietzsche’s text as a response to such self-alienation (11). This

sharp focus clarifies the aim and structure of *GM*. Nietzsche's work aims to make plain the "deep, unacknowledged failure in self-knowledge and how to address it" (12). Nietzsche's work is thereby structured, in Guay's reconstruction, to achieve such ends in the following way. The First Treatise presents a naturalistic account of the emergence of morality by showing that it is inextricably bound up with the availability of vocabulary and hence with meaning-making (124). That is to say, on Guay's account, the work of the First Treatise is to demonstrate that semantic content (e.g., the conceptual pairings of good/bad or good/evil) shape self-understanding. The Second Treatise demonstrates that such meanings can be understood only in historical terms. Hence, it makes the case for a "historical understanding of morality" (123) by making clearer the "past practices in which the content emerged" and the systems of purposes that they serve (124). Having established the semantic contents and historical contexts of morality, the Third Treatise, then, takes a genealogical approach (190) by "explicating the meaning for us of morality to show where its practices are self-undermining or self-defeating" (191). Taken together, Nietzsche's psychologically rich and historically contextualized accounts demonstrate that our moral concepts shape our practices, unique modes of life, and senses of ourselves, as they also raise the possibility of their refinement or expansion into new practices or new moral vocabularies.

This sharp focus also functions to distinguish Guay's book from the others in the rather crowded field of commentaries on the same text, including Brian Leiter's *Nietzsche on Morality* (London: Routledge, 2002/2015), originally published as the Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to *GM*; David Owen's *Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morality* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007); Christopher Janaway's *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's Genealogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Daniel Conway's *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morals: A Reader's Guide* (London: Continuum, 2008); Lawrence Hatab's *Nietzsche's "On the Genealogy of Morality": An Introduction*, in the Cambridge Introductions to Key Philosophical Texts series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Bernard Reginster's *The Will to Nothingness: An Essay on Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); and Rex Welshon's *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality: A Guide* in the Oxford Guides to Philosophy series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023). Unlike Conway and Hatab, for instance, who offer section-by-section analyses of Nietzsche's text, Guay offers chapter-length, systematic,

and sustained discussions of the preface to *GM* and each of its three treatises. Each chapter is divided into four sections: a brief introduction to the preface or the treatise is followed by an explanatory summary of Nietzsche's narrative and a discussion of the central philosophical arguments as well as a lucid treatment of the methodological and rhetorical issues raised by the portion of text under consideration. Readers relatively new to Nietzsche's *GM* will surely appreciate the inclusion of a chronology of Nietzsche's life and work, a glossary of key terms, and a guide to further reading.

Beyond its clear pedagogical value, there is little doubt that Guay's book also makes a significant contribution to Nietzsche scholarship and may be of particular interest to those focusing their attention on Nietzsche's metaphilosophy, his genealogical investigative practice, and his project of reevaluation. Those already familiar with Guay's work will not be surprised that he defends the claim that Nietzsche's genealogical narratives take the form of an immanent critique (200) that functions to "disabuse us of faulty ways of thinking" that render us unknown to, or otherwise estranged from, ourselves (15). Given that this is the case, and given that it stands to reason that the dominant moral framework is one of our problematic ways of thinking, I would like to delve a bit deeper into Guay's answers to two questions: What is the form of "morality" that Nietzsche critiques? And, further, how does Nietzsche encourage us to give up our reliance on ideals that are so markedly self-estranging?

Guay's answer to the first question is surprising: Nietzsche's "genealogy does not take issue with a particular set of moral imperatives, or even a particular conception of morality" (200). Morality, in Guay's view, is "a complicated set of historically contingent practices for which no coherent definition can be given" (5). Why is this? Why is it problematic to posit a stable account of the form of "morality" that forms the basis of his critique? Guay's answer is that it cuts against and violates Nietzsche's claim that "only that which has no history is definable" (*GM* II:13). Hence, in Guay's reconstruction, "morality, then, is not treated" by Nietzsche "as a single, stable thing, but rather as many interconnected, confused practices of valuing and ways of interpreting ourselves" (200). Even if Guay is correct that, at the highest level of abstraction, we cannot define "morality" as such, I think that it is fair to hold that Nietzsche has, nevertheless, a rather specific target in mind throughout *GM*. We can, for the sake of simplicity, call it "morality in the pejorative sense" (Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality* [2015], 74) and contend that Nietzsche takes issue with this

distinct form of morality on a rather broad range of fronts: the account of moral action as requiring “selflessness, self-denial and self-sacrifice” (*GM* II:18); the very specific account of human agency as marked by freedom of the will and intentional choice (*GM* I:13); the meaning of human suffering it stipulates as punishment for wrongdoing (*GM* III:15); the preponderance and prominence of the feelings of guilt and shame in shaping our affective lives (*GM* III:17; III:28); the univocal and unconditional tenor of its evaluative dictates (*GM* P:6). It is possible, that is, to appreciate that Nietzsche’s accounts demonstrate how disparate evaluative practices come to “[crystalize] into a kind of unity” (*GM* II:13)—such as morality in the pejorative sense, the slave form of moral reasoning—even if one can also appreciate, again at the very highest level of abstraction, that “morality,” when abstracted from those psychological needs and sociopolitical struggles, may enjoy “no coherent definition” (5).

Let us move on to Guay’s answer to the second question: if it is the case, as Guay claims, that Nietzsche’s genealogical accounts function as a form of immanent criticism, we need an account of how that form of inquiry proceeds and how it is up to the task of demonstrating that the very ideals by which we frame ourselves are so decidedly self-undermining and self-estranging (200). One might expect Guay to answer by affirming the widespread view that Nietzsche’s genealogical investigations undercut the epistemic justification for our evaluative practices—and our confidence in these practices—by way of debunking those systems of value. Guay’s key insight is that debunking will not do the trick: debunking is at once, he argues, too much and not enough. More specifically, debunking is too much because morality has already been widely undermined—in losing its metaphysical credentials, for example—and has, therefore, already been culturally and epistemically compromised. Debunking is not enough because the evaluative practices nevertheless still function to meet certain psychological needs and, as such, are broadly insulated: “The falseness of a judgment,” writes Nietzsche, “is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment [. . .]. The question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating” (*BGE* 4). I think that this discussion and these distinctions are very useful. Indeed, as Guay helpfully shows, the immanent critical strategy, if it is to succeed, must address why a conceptual scheme and system of evaluative practices, such as morality in the pejorative

sense, can, in some cases at least, survive epistemic debunking. It must also address what immanent grounds Nietzsche offers his readers to take up the project of reevaluation or otherwise extend their conceptual understanding of themselves.

This, of course, raises a critical question: How does this form of immanent criticism proceed? Guay answers in this way: Nietzsche targets “we knowers,” including us, his readers, and our evaluative standpoint—those for whom the issue of our self-estrangement is readily felt. Nietzsche’s narratives demonstrate, in Guay’s view, that our current conceptual schemes make it “impossible” for us to form a self-image that is not hopelessly confused: “Nietzsche’s complaint against morality,” to put it another way, “is that it fundamentally confuses the task of arriving at a satisfactory self-understanding” (203). Hence, because we are already committed to understanding ourselves, and because morality renders that unachievable and unattainable, we can open ourselves up to the project of creating new concepts and conceptual schemas to redress that condition, that ignorance, when it comes to us.

Here I want to raise a concern. As I explained above, for Guay, an immanent critical strategy must be able to explain why our values can survive epistemic debunking. That is, it must explain why we *need* to hold onto values that distort our self-image, can cause such agony, and make us feel like strangers to ourselves. As I read *GM*, there are a couple of possible answers: morality, as Nietzsche presents it, is terribly effective at warding off feelings of powerlessness, vulnerability, and helplessness (*GM* I:7, III:26) and at preserving a sense of efficacy (*GM* III:15, III:28). If Guay is correct (and I think he is) that epistemic debunking is insufficient in Nietzsche’s view, then I worry that Guay sets up an analogous problem: Is a distorted self-image enough to motivate one to give up the psychologically protective balm of morality, which helps one to feel strong and efficacious? My worry is that it does not. My concern, then, is this: just as Nietzsche makes plain that willing nothing is better than not willing at all, it seems clear to me that a painfully distorted self-image is better than no self-image at all (*GM* III:28). Rather than amounting to a full-throated critique, I hope that my concerns about the targets of internal critique, as Guay presents them, speak rather to the strength of the book, which succeeds, in my view, as a work of pedagogy and as a clear contribution to Nietzsche scholarship.