
Maudemarie Clark’s *Nietzsche on Ethics and Politics* is a collection of eleven previously published papers and three unpublished conference papers. These papers were published or presented over the course of almost three decades (1987-2014).

By way of introduction, a bit of context: I think it’s fair to say that, during the 1980s and early 1990s, the literature on Nietzsche was rife with philosophically unsophisticated interpretations and rather crude exegetical work. It was common for a work on, say, Nietzsche’s epistemology to proceed in apparent ignorance of central topics, arguments, and distinctions in epistemology. It was likewise common for textual exegesis to consist of nothing more than a haphazard collection of disconnected quotations, with little attention to their original context or their interaction with other claims in Nietzsche’s corpus. Things have improved tremendously since then, and Clark deserves a significant portion of the credit for this. Her work is textually meticulous, always careful to avoid interpretive errors. Her arguments are always clear and often compelling. Her discussions of Nietzsche’s philosophical thought are informed by careful study of the relevant literature. She is one of a handful of figures who set a new standard for Nietzsche scholarship.

Precisely because her work has been influential, many of the discussions that were sparked by the papers collected in this volume have moved on, growing in sophistication, delving deeper into the conceptual landscape. Thus, the moves that Clark makes in the first several papers are by now familiar to anyone who studies Nietzsche. However, this is not the case with all of the papers: some originally appeared in edited collections and relatively obscure journals, and were not easily accessible. As a result, some of them received less attention than they deserved. For example, Clark’s piece “Nietzsche’s Antidemocratic Rhetoric” is in my judgment one of the best articles on Nietzsche’s political philosophy, but, as far as I can tell, in the seventeen years since its publication it has received only eight citations. This collection does readers a real service by bringing these neglected pieces together in one volume, where they may attract more attention.

The volume opens with a series of five papers grouped under the heading “Ethics.” These papers wrestle with central questions about Nietzsche’s critique of traditional morality. How does Nietzsche conceive of morality? And what, exactly, are his objections to morality so conceived? Clark proposes that Nietzsche’s *Genealogy* analyzes morality not as a unified thing, but as an agglomeration of particular conceptions of “justice, universal values, freedom, guilt, duty, and obligation” (4). Part of Nietzsche’s critique of morality involves showing that widely held conceptions of justice, value, freedom, and so forth are flawed, erroneous, or even contradictory; thus, he aims to replace these traditional conceptions with improved versions. But, Clark points out, Nietzsche’s critiques do not end there. In addition, he argues that traditional morality fosters nihilism, in the sense that it simultaneously discredits its own values through an emphasis on the unconditional value of truth and undermines the possibility of developing new systems of values by insisting that all legitimate values must enjoy features such as universality and attitude-independence. Moreover, Nietzsche claims that traditional morality is originally developed in order to limit or at least redirect aggressive drives, but that it ends up magnifying aggression by fostering
pathological configurations of affect. Clark’s discussion of these points, pursued throughout the first four papers in this volume, is illuminating. Each of these claims picks out an important strand in Nietzsche’s ethical critiques; though the general points are by now familiar, and though we might quibble with the details, there’s no denying that these are Nietzsche’s central concerns.

The final paper in this section, “Nietzsche on Moral Objectivity,” is co-authored with David Dudrick. It argues that Nietzsche is committed both to a version of non-cognitivism and to the idea that “claims about what one has reason to do can be objective” (98). I found this paper less helpful than the others, for the attribution of non-cognitivism to Nietzsche seemed undermotivated. In most of the passages that Clark and Dudrick cite in support of non-cognitivism, Nietzsche evinces no concern whatsoever with the meaning of moral statements; he is instead making claims about what values are or what justifies evaluative claims.

The “Politics” section contains five more essays. The section begins with a paper on Bloom’s reading of Nietzsche, which critiques certain kinds of esoteric readings of Nietzsche’s texts. It is followed by an interesting piece examining Nietzsche’s attitude toward women. Clark makes a heroic attempt to show that Nietzsche’s apparently misogynistic claims about women are actually designed to serve a deeper purpose: uncovering contradictions in the nineteenth-century idea of the feminine. Anyone who hopes to find something of value in Nietzsche’s claims about women should read this piece. Next up is a conference paper arguing that Nietzsche was sympathetic to homosexuality; it engages with some postmodern readings of Nietzsche, and will be useful for those with interests in the topic.

More substantial, in my view, are the next two papers. “Nietzsche’s Antidemocratic Rhetoric,” which I mentioned above, is a seminal paper. It argues that Nietzsche is not committed to antidemocratic practices. There are passages in Nietzsche’s texts that suggest that he wants some select group of Übermenschen or higher men to enslave and impose their values on the “herd,” whose sole value lies in serving the exceptional individuals. Clark argues that Nietzsche’s talk of slavery and ruling should be understood differently: what Nietzsche actually says is that exceptional individuals will rule in the sense that they will create new values or ideals that grip the masses. So the rulers that Nietzsche has in mind are more like Nietzsche or Goethe than Stalin or Kim Jong-II. In particular, Clark argues that Nietzsche’s praise of aristocratic societies is not directed at aristocratic political institutions, but rather at the “order of rank” present in those societies—the sense that certain individuals live better or more valuable lives than others. In other words, exceptional individuals aren’t supposed to be politically exceptional; they are supposed to be, as Clark puts it in another paper, “exemplars of superior modes of being” (199). Importantly, Nietzsche’s claim is not that certain individuals are more valuable than others in light of heredity, class, race, or gender. Rather, Nietzsche’s view is that exceptional individuals realize values that are inaccessible to—and, in some cases, unrecognizable by—the masses. Clark relates this point to Nietzsche’s critique of democracy: on her reading, Nietzsche’s central objection to democracy is that it debases our standards for greatness and thereby threatens the possibility of exceptional individuals. This is a superb paper; everyone with an interest in Nietzsche should read it.
“The Good of a Community,” coauthored with Monique Wonderly, is a more recent (2014) attempt to address related issues. Nietzsche’s florid praise of great individuals can distract us from the fact that he is pervasively concerned with flourishing and degenerate culture. One of the most heartening trends in recent Nietzsche scholarship is the increasing recognition of the importance of culture. But many commentators endorse overly simplistic views. Take Julian Young, the focus of Clark’s essay: Young claims that flourishing culture is Nietzsche’s highest value, and that exceptional individuals have merely instrumental value (insofar as they promote flourishing culture). Clark and Wonderly point out that this is flatly inconsistent with a number of passages in Nietzsche’s texts, in which Nietzsche instead maintains that the value of the culture derives from its role in promoting the exceptional individual; Nietzsche tells us that the exceptional individual is the “meaning and highest justification” of culture, that we “misunderstand great human beings” if we merely “look at them from the pathetic perspective of public utility” (Twilight of the Idols IX.50). Although this sounds like the exact opposite of Young’s reading, Clark and Wonderly complicate matters. They suggest that both the individual and the community can have value “in virtue of the harmonious and productive functioning of the elements of his [or its] internal hierarchical structure” (200). So individual and community can each be valuable in themselves, rather than merely as a means to the other. (Clark and Wonderly say in a footnote that it may seem strange to attribute both instrumental and final value to the same thing. But this isn’t strange at all; there are plenty of examples of things with both types of value. Health is valued for its own sake, but also for what it enables; intellectual inquiry can be valued for its own sake, but also for what it produces; and one could go on and on.)

Although this paper certainly succeeds in showing that Young’s reading is mistaken, the positive proposal—that individuals and communities alike are valuable insofar as they exhibit a particular internal structure—needs more defense. There are interesting puzzles that go unaddressed here. To mention just the most obvious ones: why should we care whether the “internal hierarchical structure” is harmonious? And what constitutes harmony?

The “Metaphysics” section contains four papers. The first paper is a useful discussion of the way in which Nietzsche rethought the metaphysics of his first book, the Birth of Tragedy. The second paper is a study of Nietzsche’s attempt to reconcile a form of empiricism with a version of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics. The third offers an overview of the changes in Nietzsche’s views on metaphysics from his early to his late works.

The final paper, “Nietzsche’s Philosophical Psychology,” is coauthored by David Dudrick. It critiques my own reading of Nietzsche on drives. I’ve defended the idea that Nietzsche’s philosophical psychology is based upon a distinctive type of motivational state that he calls drive (Trieb). I offer a characterization of drives as dispositions that induce a certain kind of affective orientation in agents, and that admit a distinction between their aims (the processes of activity which the drive motivates) and their objects (the immediate ends of these processes of activity). So, for example, the Nietzschean aggressive drive is a disposition that induces a configuration of affects inclining the agent to engage in aggressive activity; the agent in the grip of this drive is motivated not to achieve anything in particular, but simply to express aggressive activity (the drive’s aim); and this aggression will be directed toward someone or something (the drive’s object).
As far as I can tell, Clark and Dudrick accept all of this. But Clark and Dudrick think they need to introduce another layer of complexity in order to account for the fact that Nietzsche treats drives as explaining the agent’s values. As they see it, Nietzsche treats some—but not all—drives as expressing the agent’s values. Thus, they ask, “why should the viewpoint of these drives…count as the person’s viewpoint, and therefore as her values, while the viewpoint of those drives…counts only as the viewpoint of the drives, and therefore as mere desires?” (266).

I don’t like the way Clark and Dudrick frame this question (drives don’t have viewpoints, people do). But, setting that aside, we can reformulate their question this way: given that Nietzsche thinks that values are just configurations of affect, what makes some drive-induced configurations of affect count as values while other drive-induced configurations don’t? I’ve argued that Nietzsche answers this question by appealing to a notion of agential unity: when the drive-induced affects are unified, in Nietzsche’s technical sense, then they count as the agent’s values (see Paul Katsafanas, The Nietzschean Self: Moral Psychology, Agency, and the Unconscious [Oxford University Press, 2016] for the details).

But Clark and Dudrick prefer a different solution. They argue that drives “engage each other politically” (275), “commanding and obeying” one another (275). So “the drives that constitute the person’s point of view are not just those that happen to be strongest; they are the drives that are accorded legitimacy by the other drives, the drives that have been granted a right to speak for the whole” (277). In short, the drives that represent the agent’s values are the drives that have been accorded legitimacy or authority by other drives (note: not by the person, but by other drives). Frankly, this strikes me as bizarre: recognizing and responding to commands and conferring authority requires consciousness, and drives aren’t conscious. If the only way to account for Nietzsche’s connection between drives and values were by appealing to conscious drives, then perhaps we’d take this route; but it isn’t, so we needn’t.

I’ve only addressed a few of these essays in detail; all deserve careful reading. Clark’s virtues are on display in these essays. They are for the most part models of clarity—no small feat when discussing Nietzsche. Her responses to critics are often convincing; she patiently collects textual evidence that undermines competing interpretations, revealing the one-sidedness of many flawed interpretations. She reveals a Nietzsche who, rather than embracing the jejune views with which he is often saddled, is a subtle and sophisticated thinker.

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