

Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's 'Genealogy'*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. xi + 284.

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This is the penultimate draft.

Christopher Janaway's *Beyond Selflessness* is a fourteen-chapter study of Nietzsche's philosophical thought, focusing on the *Genealogy of Morality*. It is an exceptionally clear work, full of valuable insights, helpful reconstructions of arguments, and intriguing readings of some of Nietzsche's most important claims. The fourteen chapters treat a variety of themes, including the nature and role of genealogy, the sense in which Nietzsche is a philosophical naturalist, Nietzsche's account of the self, guilt, bad conscience, freedom, the will to power, the ascetic ideal, the values that Nietzsche critiques, and the ideals that Nietzsche proposes. In addition, several chapters offer extended, illuminating treatments of Schopenhauer's and Paul Rée's influences upon Nietzsche. As this list may indicate, this is a very rich book: although billed as a study of the *Genealogy*, it actually touches upon most aspects of Nietzsche's mature thought.

There is no hope of summarizing Janaway's views on each of these topics, so I will focus this review on three points that occupy central positions in his book. These are the connection between Nietzsche's literary style and his philosophical views; the nature of Nietzsche's perspectivism; and the evaluative ideals that Nietzsche proposes.

Nietzsche writes in an unusual way: his books are full of digressions, provocations, flowery and impassioned rhetoric, and personal attacks. Why is this? Why doesn't Nietzsche adopt a more traditional philosophical style? A dominant trend in recent Anglophone work on Nietzsche is simply to ignore Nietzsche's style, treating it as merely ornamental. According to Janaway, this is a mistake: Nietzsche's style plays a "constitutive" role in his arguments concerning the revaluation of values. As Janaway puts it, without Nietzsche's distinctive style, "we would neither comprehend nor be able to revalue our current values" (4).

While this is an intriguing claim, it suffers from an ambiguity: Janaway seems to alternate between two distinct positions, both of which are on display in the above quotation. The first position claims that Nietzsche's style is meant to overcome our resistance to *accepting* his novel philosophical views; the second, that the style is necessary for us to *understand* Nietzsche's views.

Start with the first position. Nietzsche's claims about values are shocking and likely to be met with resistance. It is possible that Nietzsche's style is designed to seduce or entice us into accepting these claims. For example, we might be more likely to accept Nietzsche's critique of egalitarian values if he can elicit feelings of disgust toward these values (cf. p. 91). This reading of the role of Nietzsche's style has the advantage of being perfectly sensible, for it amounts merely to the claim that Nietzsche is engaged in a task analogous to that of any orator or rhetorician: he is appealing to our emotions in order to tempt us to his side. Unfortunately, though, this reading does not sit very well with Janaway's claim that the style plays a "constitutive" role, or that it is necessary for us to comprehend Nietzsche's philosophical positions. For on this reading, Nietzsche's style actually is dispensable: his

arguments could be presented in a cooler, more detached style. The only danger is that they would then be less likely to grip us.

This brings us to the second, stronger claim about Nietzsche's style. Janaway sometimes suggests that "unless one becomes affectively engaged by Nietzsche's style, one cannot attain truths about the causal history of one's moral evaluations" (48). In other words, "the very task of arriving at truths about the origin of my values demands the activation of my own feelings" (48). The affects elicited by Nietzsche's rhetoric are necessary in order for us to understand Nietzsche's claims.

This is a very bold philosophical thesis; what can be said in its favor? As far as I can tell, Janaway's argument is simply this: "arousing feelings helps our capacity to identify the true subject matter of the self-scrutinizing genealogical investigation...in order to recognize [the origin of my values and their "cultural-psychological prehistory"], I must recognize what my affects are, to do which, arguably, I would first have to feel them consciously" (49). As he summarizes the argument, "unless we *feel* specific affects we will be unable to identify them as ours, and hence unable to assign them any role in explaining the origin of our own moral evaluations" (49). We might put the point this way: (1) In order to understand Nietzsche's critiques of values, I must identify the affects associated with these values; (2) in order to identify the affects associated with these values, I must consciously feel these affects; (3) therefore, in order to understand Nietzsche's critiques of value, I must consciously feel the affects associated with these values.

Although this argument would make Nietzsche's style crucial, it faces at least two difficulties. First, the *particular affects* that Nietzsche's writings activate do not seem to be the ones that Janaway's interpretation requires. The *Genealogy* argues that the single most important affect involved in the explanation of modern morality is *ressentiment*. On Janaway's reading, it follows that I must consciously feel *ressentiment* in order to understand Nietzsche's explanation of modern morality. But the *Genealogy* hardly seems designed to activate *ressentiment* in its readers; on the contrary, it encourages disgust with and contempt for those who are motivated by *ressentiment*. These aren't the affects that play a role in Nietzsche's story of why I hold my moral beliefs. So something has already gone wrong with Janaway's claim that I must feel affect *A* in order to understand *A*'s involvement in my moral beliefs.

To be fair, Janaway may have a response to this criticism. Later in the book, he claims that the *Genealogy* is designed to generate an ambivalent emotional reaction: the reader will experience a mix of indignation, fear, and admiration for the nobles, while also feeling pity for and disgust with the slaves (100ff.). Perhaps it is the activation of this tangled emotional reaction that is necessary for understanding our values. After all, the indignation and fear that we feel toward the nobles may help us to understand the slaves' *ressentiment*, which leads to our values; and the admiration we feel toward the nobles may help us to understand the features of our values that are in tension with the slaves' values. In short: experiencing these emotions may give us a better grip on what, exactly, it is that we value. If this is what Janaway intends, though, it hardly supports his claim that we must feel a particular affect *A* as ours in order to assign *A* a role in explaining our moral evaluations (49). After all, indignation, fear, and the other emotions mentioned above are at most possible precursors to *ressentiment* rather than full-fledged instances of *ressentiment*. In short: although I fail to experience *ressentiment* when reading the *Genealogy*, it seems that I can nonetheless assign it a crucial role in explaining my moral beliefs. Experiencing the affect therefore turns out to be unnecessary for understanding Nietzsche's critiques.

A second difficulty with Janaway's argument arises when we ask why I must feel specific affects "as mine" in order to assign them a role in explaining the origins of my moral

beliefs (49). Consider a counterexample. I strongly suspect that a feeling of reverence for God played a role in the origins of many of my moral beliefs, in the sense that cultural institutions predicated upon this reverence shaped my upbringing and education. For example, I strongly suspect that many of my moral beliefs about sexuality, marriage, the dignity of persons, and charity were shaped by feelings of reverence for God. But *I*, a committed atheist, feel no reverence for God. According to Janaway's interpretation, my inability to experience that feeling blocks me from understanding its role in the origin of the aforementioned moral beliefs. But why? Haven't I just expressed my understanding of the role of the affect? We would need a substantial argument in order to deny this claim, and Janaway has not provided it.

Given these problems, Janaway's claim that Nietzsche's rhetoric plays a constitutive role in his philosophical positions seems unconvincing. Let's now consider a second major topic in Janaway's book: his analysis of Nietzsche's famous claim that there is only perspectival knowing. Although it used to be fashionable to interpret perspectivism as the claim that all beliefs are mere interpretations, none enjoying any epistemic privilege, Janaway dismisses these readings; as he points out, it is clear that Nietzsche allows some beliefs to be true and others false (203). To elucidate Nietzsche's point, Janaway employs an analogy between knowing and seeing: seeing always occurs via a particular "physical organ which must be situated somewhere in spatial relation to what is seen, and which functions in numerous contingent ways that determine or constrain the way it is seen" (204). In this sense, seeing is necessarily perspectival: "from a specific place, by a specific type of organ," which arose in a contingent fashion. This hardly implies that all seeing is falsifying or that no cases of seeing enjoy any epistemic privilege. Just so, Janaway suggests, for knowing.

Seeing's perspectival nature arises from spatial positioning, ambient factors, and the nature of the visual organ. What are the analogous factors in the case of knowing? One possibility is that Nietzsche adopts a roughly Kantian model, according to which "the human mind actively contribute[s] organizing structures to any data it receives" (205). However, Janaway rejects this idea, claiming that Nietzsche's emphasis is not on "purely cognitive Kant-style features of the mind, but on *affects*" (205). Developing this point, Janaway interprets perspectivism as comprising two theses: "(1) that there is only knowledge that is guided or facilitated by feelings, and (2) that the more different feelings we allow to guide our knowledge, the better our knowledge will be" (205, italics removed).

I have several concerns about this interpretation. First, it is puzzling that Janaway downplays the cognitive aspects of perspectivism. Consider the two moral "perspectives" that Nietzsche discusses in the *Genealogy*: as Janaway himself repeatedly emphasizes, the ancient and modern moral perspectives differ not only in affective respects, but also in the ways in which they conceptualize agency, the self, freedom, and responsibility. Or, to use a broader example: when Nietzsche complains that our grammar misleads us into positing superfluous subjects, reifying causes and effects, and so on (*Beyond Good and Evil* 20-21, *Twilight of the Idols* III.5), he is not making a point solely about affects. It is unclear why Janaway views these crucial matters as tangential; after all, the claim that affects partially constitute our perspectives is consistent with the claim that concepts, too, partially constitute perspectives. It is also consistent with the claim that conscious or conceptual thought plays a subsidiary role in the production of action; affects may well be primary, as Janaway emphasizes throughout the book, but this hardly bars conceptual thought from having significant effects.

Turn now to claim (2): the more feelings we allow to "guide" our knowledge, the "better" our knowledge is. This seems both imprecise and implausible. What kind of

“guidance” is involved here, and in what sense is knowledge guided in this way “better”? Consider an example with some weight: I am serving on a jury and must assess the case against an individual charged with murder. Following Janaway’s claim (2), I attempt to cultivate feelings of rage, indignation, sympathy, desire for revenge, desire for forgiveness, and so forth. Is this emotional tangle really going to help me to adjudicate the merits of the case, weigh the evidence, and achieve “better” knowledge of the arguments on each side? That seems incredible.

It also seems incredible to saddle Nietzsche with such an implausible view. After all, in the passage that Janaway relies upon to develop his interpretation of perspectivism (*Genealogy* III.12), Nietzsche seems more concerned with rejecting the possibility of affect- or perspective-free modes of knowing than developing any definite thesis about the particular ways in which affects bear on knowing. Consider what Nietzsche actually says: “There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival ‘knowing’; and *the more* affects we allow to speak about a matter...that much more complete [*vollständiger*] will our ‘concept’ of this matter, our ‘objectivity’, be...” (*Genealogy* III.12). Nietzsche’s claim, here, is that if all knowing is perspectival, then the more perspectives we bring to bear on a matter the more complete our knowledge of the matter will be. But we can interpret “more complete” (*vollständiger*) not as “better”, but simply as more comprehensive or exhaustive. After all, when the priest interprets the noble through the lens of *ressentiment*, he is introducing a new perspective—but, Nietzsche claims, one that falsifies rather than illuminates. Or, to adopt one of Janaway’s examples, when we construct various kinds of maps of a geographic region—one focusing on topography, another on climate, another on population density, another on political boundaries—we are offering more complete information on the geographic region, but not necessarily *better* information; whether the information counts as better depends on what our purposes are. After all, if my purpose is simply to drive from Boston to New York, supplementing my street map with population density and climate maps may render my information on the region more complete, but hardly seems to *improve* matters.

Moreover, whether additional maps yield better information depends on how faithfully each representation succeeds in its own terms. Even if my purpose is to learn as much as possible about a particular geographical region, it does not follow that each additional map improves my epistemic predicament. If the topographical map is full of errors, then adding it to my repertoire of maps *worsens* my knowledge of the region. Why shouldn’t the same be true of affects? Some affects may accurately represent their subject matter, bringing new or unnoticed aspects to light; others may falsify or distort, worsening our knowledge. *Genealogy* III.12 provides us with no reason to interpret Nietzsche as denying this point, especially given that the *Genealogy* as a whole emphasizes the distorting effects of various affects. So claim (2) seems problematic for both philosophical and exegetical reasons.

So far, I have focused on Janaway’s claims about the relationships between affects, rhetorical style, and knowledge. Let me end by addressing a third point. The title of the book is *Beyond Selflessness*, and this is indeed what Janaway takes Nietzsche’s project to be. Modern morality is defined by its valuation of selfless behavior; Nietzsche argues that this is enervating and proposes, instead, that we erect a new ideal (245-7). Two ideals, actually: self-affirmation and self-satisfaction. Janaway tells us that these are Nietzsche’s alternatives to an ethic founded on selflessness (243-4).

Self-affirmation is “saying yes to one’s life in its entirety and in every detail”; self-satisfaction is “the shaping of one’s character so that every part of it contributes to a meaningful whole in the manner of a work of art” (254). Janaway argues that the two ideals,

so defined, are in tension with one another: self-affirmation requires “acceptance of the whole *truth* of one’s life... [yet] self-satisfaction attained through artistry consists in actively making one’s character pleasing *by falsifying it*” (261, final emphasis added). Janaway canvasses four possible responses to this tension. First, we could reinterpret self-affirmation as presupposing that the life to be affirmed is the one with which one has become satisfied; in other words, the question of affirmation is posed only after the agent has artistically fashioned a self with which she is satisfied. Second, we could treat self-satisfaction as requiring truthfulness about the details of one’s life; that is, self-satisfaction that is based on dishonesty or distortion is unacceptable. Third, we can interpret self-affirmation and self-satisfaction as genuinely distinct ideals that pull us in different directions. Finally, we can argue that self-affirmation and self-satisfaction are somehow united in the “strong character” (263-4).

I have two concerns about these claims. First, the alleged tension between self-affirmation and self-satisfaction is not obvious. Much of it seems to arise from reading self-satisfaction as necessarily attained through artistic shaping of one’s character so that one’s life resembles a work of art (254). *If* self-satisfaction requires artistic shaping of oneself, and *if* we assume that artistic shaping requires falsification, then self-satisfaction will be in tension with the demand that we say yes to every detail of our lives. But neither of these assumptions is obvious. The passage that Janaway cites (*Gay Science* 290) does not argue that self-satisfaction *requires* artistically fashioning one’s life into a meaningful whole; on the contrary, it claims that “one thing is needful: that a human being should *attain* satisfaction with himself,” and it presents artistic shaping as *a* means—not necessarily the *only* means—of attaining this satisfaction. (One might object that this is the only means that Nietzsche mentions in *Gay Science* 290. That is, of course, true. But other means are mentioned elsewhere. For example, Nietzsche often presents the ancient nobles as self-satisfied, but they were hardly engaged in artistic reinterpretations of their lives.) Moreover, the idea that artistry requires falsification is problematic: in what sense does Proust falsify his life by writing *Remembrance of Things Past*? In what sense does Monet falsify the water lilies? Or, to use one of Nietzsche’s favorite exemplars, in what sense does Goethe falsify his life by striving to live it in an artistic fashion? What would the un-falsified version of this life be? Developing a new perspective on one’s life, or a component of it, needn’t involve falsification in any objectionable sense. For these reasons, I am skeptical that there is any real tension between self-affirmation and self-satisfaction.

But this brings us to a deeper problem. What is the normative force of these Nietzschean “ideals” supposed to be? Self-affirmation and self-satisfaction are certainly appealing; I would rather be affirmative and satisfied than negative and dissatisfied. But does Nietzsche really consider these aspirations so important as to legitimate the overturning of egalitarian values, compassion, selflessness, and so forth? Does Nietzsche’s argument really amount to nothing more than the claim that we should abandon democracy because it imperils self-affirmation? If so, his argument is exceptionally weak: most of us care far more about equality and the like than about how self-affirmative we are. Janaway makes it clear that he rejects Nietzsche’s normative conclusions (see esp. 245-6), so he may not view this as a problem for his interpretation. But while Nietzsche’s normative conclusions certainly are disturbing, I find it difficult to believe that they are based on nothing more than an appeal to self-affirmation and self-satisfaction.

Although I have expressed concerns about the details of some of Janaway’s arguments, the book as a whole is exceptionally rewarding. It is a remarkably clear, rigorous,

and well argued interpretation of Nietzsche's mature thought. It is essential reading for those interested in Nietzsche. Readers in ethics and moral psychology will also find it invaluable.

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