

READING NIETZSCHE

An Analysis of
Beyond Good and Evil



DOUGLAS BURNHAM

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An Analysis of *Beyond Good and Evil*

Douglas Burnham

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In memory of my father, Hugh Danner Burnham

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Preface

Beyond Good and Evil is among the most comprehensive of Nietzsche's works. No significant themes are missing, and the discussion of many topics is much more extensive (and often more "philosophical") than is found elsewhere. *Beyond Good and Evil* (let us just say *Beyond*) is thus an ideal setting off point for understanding Nietzsche's thought in general. Moreover, its structure demands that we attempt to understand connections that are not always apparent in other works, and thus are often overlooked even in the literature on Nietzsche. I refer to the hidden relationships that run between Nietzsche's treatment of metaphysics, psychology, philosophical methodology, style, the project of a history and physiology of value, and political and social analysis. However, that *Beyond* is an ideal starting point for studying Nietzsche does not necessarily mean that it is the easiest of Nietzsche's books to understand; indeed, Nietzsche represented his own next book, *Genealogy of Morality*, as a "clarification" of *Beyond*. *Beyond Good and Evil* thus contains in miniature the considerable problem of reading Nietzsche in general: namely, reading him as *at least akin* to a systematic philosopher.

This book has two main aims. First, to be a helpful guide and introduction to Nietzsche, and particularly helpful for someone attempting to read *Beyond Good and Evil*. With it, readers should be able to "raise their game" and thus be able to approach both *Beyond Good and Evil*, and other books by Nietzsche, with perception and well-informed judgement. Secondly, it aims to be a *contribution* to the contemporary philosophical study of Nietzsche. This contribution lies in part in several careful analyses of individual concepts but, more important, in laying out how, across and

throughout the compositional strategies of a single text, ideas and inter-connections are elaborated. The result is not so much a commentary as the synthetic construction of Nietzsche's philosophical thought through a close reading of this great book.

This book aims to do just that: to provide a guide to the reading of a rich and complex text, while at the same time making the connections, and pulling out the key ideas and arguments, that will provide an excellent introduction to, as well as an analysis of, Nietzsche's thought as a philosophical whole. *Beyond Good and Evil* will serve as a pivot point, so to speak, around which we can usefully construct that bird's-eye picture of Nietzsche's work.

It should also be admitted that I am here completely indifferent to the *truth* or *validity* of Nietzsche's arguments or ideas. This is not because I think truth or validity are unimportant in philosophy; far from it. Nor is it because I simply agree with everything in Nietzsche. Rather, it is because of a preliminary task. Relatively few readers reach the point where such a judgement of truth or validity would be possible, for its precondition is that one understands the arguments and ideas, as well as the significance of how Nietzsche expresses them and what he might expect or hope that we *do* with them, in all their considerable richness and complexity. It is to this understanding that this book will be a contribution. Similarly, I have resisted the temptation as far as possible to update or rewrite Nietzsche's thought in a different philosophical language or system of thought, for example, the philosophical perspectives of anti-realism, moral naturalism, existentialism, "postmodernism", Bergsonism, and so on. Again, this is not because I am opposed to this kind of work; it is one of the key ways in which philosophy advances creatively. Rather, until one has reached the level of understanding described above, it seems essential to think using Nietzsche's own concepts and forms of expression.

Accordingly, this book has a straightforward structure. It proceeds through all the Parts and sections, in order. In order to ensure that the result is less Byzantine than Nietzsche's original, there are a number of additional elements. First, there is throughout considerable cross-referencing, which should help a synthetic image of the work to emerge. Secondly, a number of sections are picked out as appropriate places for a considerably more sustained and philosophically productive discussion of a particular theme; for example, near the beginning, the notions of perspective and interpretation. These sections are listed in the contents. Thirdly, I have introduced one piece of terminology – "realignment" – to stand for a notion that is present in Nietzsche but for which he does not have a consistent word. Fourthly, there are outside the main text items of textual apparatus (such as a short glossary) integral to the introductory side of this book's purpose.

Again, *Beyond* is very comprehensive, and I therefore wish to let it speak for itself, rather than provide here a large introduction or overview of Nietzsche's life and works. However, Nietzsche is a very easy philosopher to read poorly, and singularly difficult to read well. Because of the ease, his writings have been bestsellers for more than a century; but because of the difficulty, misconceptions or oversimplifications about Nietzsche have also been bestsellers. So, let us begin by rehearsing a few of these.

1. Without a doubt, decades after his death, Nietzsche was taken to heart by National Socialism. To do so, however, the Nazis had to edit out or simply ignore the many passages where Nietzsche pours scorn on both German nationalism and upon anti-Semites.
2. Again, Nietzsche is often considered an advocate of a radical individualism in the same mould as popular existentialism. To read him in this way, one has to ignore passages like §17 in the present book where Nietzsche argues that the "I" or the individual thinking and acting subject is not fundamental in his philosophy, but is rather a derivative effect.
3. Often, too, Nietzsche is identified as a relativist – that is, any belief in the sphere of morals (and perhaps even knowledge) has validity only for the individual or historical group that holds it. But then on what grounds could Nietzsche meaningfully espouse or repudiate aspects of ancient Greek society, or of contemporary society in Russia, France or England?
4. Nietzsche is widely thought to be thorough in his rejection of religion in general and Christianity in particular. There may be some truth to this, but it remains the case that the first two Parts of *Beyond Good and Evil* pass with hardly a mention of religion. The Part that follows is explicitly about religion, but is hardly "thorough" in its rejection. It includes extravagant praise of the Old Testament, at least (§52), and of the love of man (§60); moreover, it is only within this context of religion that Nietzsche is able to express the "new ideal" of the philosopher of the future (§56).
5. Often Nietzsche is identified as a nihilist, completely sceptical of all values, authorities, concepts or beliefs; and likewise sceptical about the effectiveness of existing institutions or efforts to change matters. Nihilism thus advocates the utter destruction of religions, states and ideologies. However, readers may have missed the fact that nihilism is generally the butt of Nietzsche's jokes, and in §10 we read that nihilists are "puritanical fanatics of conscience" and "nihilism . . . [is] the sign of a despairing and desperately weary soul".
6. Finally, there are two common and directly opposing characterizations of Nietzsche overall. First, Nietzsche is an unsystematic thinker who is (at best) "postmodern" or (at worst) careless, impressionistic, merely

“literary”. Secondly, Nietzsche is actually a rigorous epistemologist and/or moral philosopher who, unfortunately and irritatingly, just happens to write in a literary style. Here, we shall not be arguing for a sitting-on-the-fence position between these two extremes. Rather, there is something about Nietzsche’s philosophy which demands that rigour and seriousness be pursued, in part, by way of the “literary”.

Each of these misconceptions contains at least an element of validity. To take two examples, Nietzsche does talk in some worrying ways about race. Also, he does speak of himself as a nihilist in a note from 1887, but much more consistently continues to critique it as, at best, a transitional pathology, which is parasitic upon previous beliefs rather than liberated from them. These elements of validity are why the misconceptions are so stubborn. This book, in carefully reading *Beyond* and thereby providing important critical tools, will help the reader to judge such misconceptions, in *Beyond* but also in the other works of Nietzsche.

We should also, for the reader entirely new to Nietzsche, locate him historically. Friedrich Nietzsche was born in Germany in 1844, and died there in 1900. Most of his work was written in just under two decades of the 1870s and 1880s, for Nietzsche had a mental collapse in Italy in January 1889 and spent the last decade of his life in care. The historical period is important because much of Nietzsche’s work is a direct or indirect commentary on his time. So, the rise of German nationalism, which led to the unification of the German state, is discussed often. Similarly, Nietzsche turns frequently to the dominance in German music by Wagner, of whom Nietzsche was at first a devotee. Other contemporary ideas or movements that either influenced or informed Nietzsche’s work include Darwinism, utilitarianism, Marxism, revolutionary nihilism in Russia, the introduction of Eastern thought (e.g. Buddhism) into Europe. We will remark on all of these as they appear in the text.

Nietzsche’s father, who died when Nietzsche was young, was a Lutheran minister. Rather than entering the clergy, as his family expected and hoped, Nietzsche studied classics and in particular philology (comparative and historical study of language). His early promise in this field earned him an appointment to the University of Basel at the age of 24, and a professorship shortly thereafter. Nietzsche’s ill-health, however, meant that he had increasingly frequent leaves of absence from the university and eventually left altogether in 1879. During this period he met and became, until the mid-1870s, a member of Wagner’s circle of admirers. He also published his first and most consistently well-known work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, which used a highly speculative account of the growth and decay of classical Greek tragedy as a mirror to understand contemporary German problems and solutions. The book was heavily influenced by the ideas of Wagner and

especially Schopenhauer, but in its synthesis original. It is written in an energetic and certainly not academic style, and its preoccupation with the relations between culture, metaphysics, art and mythology remains with Nietzsche throughout his more mature work. In this early book, the figure of the Greek god Dionysus is prominent, and significantly the god returns at the end of *Beyond Good and Evil*.

For the decade of his life before his collapse, Nietzsche travelled widely and continually, spending a few weeks or months in a variety of places, many in Southern Europe. From 1883 to 1885 he wrote *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; in a mock biblical and prophetic style, the book narrates a period in the life of the prophet Zarathustra (who is reimagined as a Nietzschean). Nietzsche generally considered it his masterpiece, both in the sense of being an original and successful stylistic experiment in writing philosophy, and in the sense of being the definitive statement of most of his key ideas. Whether *Zarathustra* is quite this successful, in either sense, can be debated. Certainly, it contains some of his most brilliant writing, but also some of his most bombastic and cryptic. In any case, Nietzsche wrote *Beyond Good and Evil* shortly thereafter and, in a letter to his friend Burckhardt, suggested that *Beyond* was a stylistically different recapitulation of the philosophy contained in *Zarathustra*.

After *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche commenced three furious years of writing, producing among other things, *The Genealogy of Morality* and *Twilight of the Idols*. His work gradually became known in the years before his death, and by the first years of the twentieth century he was one of the most widely read and influential of recent thinkers. After his death, his notebooks were edited by his sister and selections from them are published as if they formed his last book, the systematic *The Will to Power*. In fact, the selections were chosen and organized so as to suggest a simplified and highly partisan version of Nietzsche's thoughts. For years, the English translation of *The Will to Power* was the only access a non-German reader had to Nietzsche's unpublished writing. So, despite its dangerous flaws, it was useful. Now, several other more scholarly collections of notebook entries have emerged, and *The Will to Power* has probably outlived its usefulness.

It remains to me to thank my family, students and colleagues both for the space and time to produce this book, and also for many helpful comments and suggestions in class or, indeed, in the pub: in particular, the participants on "Foundations of Modern European Philosophy" in the Autumn term of 2005, and Jon Egan, Catherine Burgass, Martin Jesinghausen and David Webb. Moreover, Staffordshire University funded a sabbatical at exactly the right time to make the underlying research possible.

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I Nietzsche's Title and Preface

The title

The full title of Nietzsche's book is *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. As with most book titles, what is being referred to will not become clear until we are into the main text, but a few brief observations are in order.

First of all, the title is deliberately provocative. There is something sinister looking about going "beyond good", even if the title also says "beyond evil". Moreover, so much of philosophy, theology and political, social and psychological thought concerned itself with the nature of Good and Evil, that to sweep it all aside with this "beyond" must have seemed a staggeringly broad and high-handed gesture. It is as if Nietzsche is saying: you have all simply been asking the wrong question. In fact, this is *exactly* what Nietzsche is saying. Finally, the "beyond" and "future" introduces an element of *history* to subjects (good and evil) about which the reader might not be accustomed, or willing, to think in historical terms.

The first part of Nietzsche's book is on the "Prejudices of the Philosophers", and above all Nietzsche is criticizing the late-eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Therefore, it is not surprising to find in Nietzsche's subtitle a subtle and joking reference to the title of a famous little book by Kant. Kant's title is *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Step Forward as a Science*. Just as Kant's book was an attempt to restate in a more accessible way what he had said in the huge *Critique of Pure Reason*, so Nietzsche evidently saw *Beyond Good and Evil* as a differently expressed version of his philosophy in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Notice, though, that Kant's title seems to speak of a philosophy in the present

that determines what can be “scientific” in the future, whereas Nietzsche’s subtitle refers to a philosophy that is in the future, not here yet. We shall have much more to say later on the far from simply antithetical relation between Kant and Nietzsche.

Preface: the task of “we good Europeans”

Nietzsche’s Preface begins with the famous sentence: “Presupposing that truth is a woman – what? Is the suspicion not without grounds that all philosophers, in so far as they were dogmatists, were amateurs about women?” We must start by considering a few things about this sentence.

First, let us think about what is often most difficult to ascertain: the tone. We need to get this problem right up front because it is so important for Nietzsche, while being so unimportant for most other philosophers. Nietzsche, here, is playful, almost vaudevillian: the “– what?” is the equivalent to a double take, or a sarcastic taunt. The author pretends to have just noticed (and perhaps to be shocked by), after a well-timed delay, the implications of what has just been said. In various ways, Nietzsche employs this little gimmick often; indeed, the “– what?” occurs often enough to be a catch-phrase (e.g. §15 or 56).

The tone is important because it is often one of our only clues as to how to “take” a certain statement: is it a joke, a seriously meant claim, gentle mockery or a vicious and spiteful provocation? Here, the playful tone is tinged with the faintest hint of venom. “*Das Weib*” [woman], for example, is not a perfectly neutral term but *can* have pejorative meanings. This hint of the pejorative introduces a misogynistic theme that becomes far from subtle, for example at the end of Part 7, although even there one must be constantly aware of Nietzsche’s famous irony. There is a much more pronounced pejorative in the term “dogmatists” – one has the feeling, and quite rightly, that Nietzsche has in mind any number of philosophers who would not consider themselves dogmatists. The assumption is also that all these incompetent and unthinking dogmatists were and must be men – so in any case neither gender escapes Nietzsche’s venom.

A second thing to notice about this sentence is that it involves a pun. The last phrase reads “. . . *sich schlecht auf Weiber verstanden?*” [which I have translated as “were amateurs about women?”]. The verb means “to be expert or proficient concerning” and this is not simply negated but modified by “*schlecht*” [bad]. The suggestion is of bumbling or cack-handed. However, the core of the verb is “*verstehen*” which means, simply, “to understand”. Significantly, this is a *philosophical* term (as in the faculty of understanding, in Kant). So, it would be difficult for a German reader of philosophy not to read this as *also* meaning “had an insufficient understanding of women”, and thus “of truth”. Accordingly, this is also a jibe at

the way philosophers think about understanding and truth. Now, this is not a particularly sophisticated or clever pun (there are better ones to come), but it contains a double meaning that carries significance. That is, the doubleness of the meaning itself means something, suggesting something complex, subtle or hidden in the midst of the apparently straightforward. In brief, it is not just the case that dogmatists are sexually inept, in some way, and that they had an inadequate philosophy of truth, but that *these two claims are intrinsically linked*. Nietzsche's puns are frequently charged with meaning in this way. We will return to this particular double meaning, and what light if any it sheds on Nietzsche's notorious writings on women, in our discussion of §§231–9. For it turns out that here in the first sentence, in what looks for all the world like a light-hearted and mildly offensive joke, Nietzsche is introducing one of his most central philosophical ideas.

Significantly, the sentence is also impossible to translate in such a way as to capture all its nuances. There are many translations of Nietzsche's book, all are fine, intelligent, professional; and they all translate this sentence slightly differently, putting a different spin on the idea. So then, if the idea turns out to be so central, we already have proof that Nietzsche cannot be as straightforward to read as, to many, he appears.

Thirdly, this trope of truth as a woman is already a complex internal and external reference. A variation shows up in §220, first of all. Also, to an educated German reader, it would likely be reminiscent of the last lines of Goethe's *Faust* II, which Nietzsche quotes much later in §236. But, it is certainly an echo of the trope of woman as wisdom in *Zarathustra*, Part 1, "On Reading and Writing" ("Brave, unconcerned, mocking, violent – thus wisdom wants us: she is a woman and always loves only a warrior"); and that very passage is used, slightly revised, as an aphorism to start off the third Treatise in *Genealogy of Morality*. In this book it would be quite impossible for us to track all of Nietzsche's allusions and cross-references; in any case the translations generally list many in footnotes or endnotes. However, we should certainly be aware of how Nietzsche's book, from its opening sentence (to the closing stanza of the final poem), is self-knowingly immersed in a pre-existing fabric of texts, thoughts, histories and beliefs, both personal and global.

A fourth observation is that the sentence begins as a hypothesis: *if* we make a certain claim, *what* then follows? Nietzsche frequently constructs his thoughts in this form. Later in the Preface, for example, he will make plentiful use of suggestive questions, "mights", "maybes" and "perhaps". This "hypothetical" way of working has a distinguished history in philosophy and science. For example, in philosophy we encounter it in the idea of a thought experiment that helps us to analyse the content of our concepts. John Locke (I have in mind especially the discussion of personal identity in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*) was particularly

adept at such thought experiments. What, we might ask, are the consequences for our concept of a person's *identity* if he or she loses all memory, swaps bodies with another person, or whatever? In modern science, a different hypothetical form of working has become dominant. One hypothesizes some X in order first to analyse what empirical consequences it would have, and then to devise and perform an experiment to test for the presence of just these consequences. The presence of consequences does not prove X, but the absence of the consequences proves not-X. Finally, in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, he describes a set of "ideas" that cannot constitute knowledge but only "regulate" it. That is, interesting insights might be had if we think of the observable world "as if" such ideas have objective reality.

Nietzsche's hypothetical method has something in common with all three of these, and especially the first and third form, but there are important differences. First, as here, the tone is often playful or mocking. And this suggests that the hypothesis might have a different purpose from Locke's serious attempt to explore particular abstract concepts. Secondly, Nietzsche's hypotheses typically do not target a specific concept but rather a particular *way of understanding* something. That is, they seem to be interested in opening up or calling into question a "world-view". So, here, Nietzsche is targeting a way of thinking about philosophy and the methods it employs to discover the truth. (Moreover, less directly, the targets here include the way in which philosophers think about gender in an ethical, biological or social way, as well as the general capacity to understand.) In respect to the implicit reference to Kant's notion of regulative ideas, we will have much to say later about notions in Nietzsche that seem to function not so much as straightforward truth-claims, but rather as provocations to thought or initiations of long-term projects (the famous idea of eternal recurrence might be one of these).

"Speaking seriously", Nietzsche continues. This confirms the jokey status of the first sentences, certainly. But there is also a kind of contradiction here. The "seriously" [*ernstlich*] echoes the "horrible seriousness" [*schauerliche Ernst*] earlier. The idea of seriousness becomes important later in the book. Already, though, we have a suggestive contrast. A contrast between, on the one hand, a seriousness linked to horror, and associated with dogmatists who may be nearing their "last breaths" and, on the other, a seriousness to be found in jokes and puns, associated (as we will soon see) with all that is living. Nietzsche wants to be taken seriously, on these *latter* terms.

"Speaking seriously", then, philosophical dogmatizing should be seen as childishness, no matter how "elevated" it may seem. For it is based upon superstitions or word play, the "seduction by grammar", or even upon a generalization of some particular human fact (e.g. a foible of the philosopher). Two things are to be noticed here. First, briefly, we have yet another inversion of the contrast discussed above: here, Nietzsche is being "serious"

about childishness and play. How is such play to be distinguished from the jokiness characteristic of much of Nietzsche's writing? The obvious answer, and one we will see Nietzsche returning to, is that the play of the dogmatic philosophers is self-deceptive, not recognized for what it is.

A second thing worth noticing is the parenthetical comment on the "soul superstition" and associated concepts. This is an important theme for Nietzsche. He is here referring to the idea that the location of human identity is in an immortal and independent soul; that the soul is the seat also of consciousness and will, and thus (ideally at least) in control of the body, action as well as thought. These are indeed historically important ideas within the history of Christianity and philosophy (especially moral philosophy). What we need to notice is that, uncritically assumed, these certainly may be dogma or superstitions. However, they are also topics within philosophical metaphysics. That is, the truth or falsehood of the claim that the soul exists, and has such and such properties, is not always just assumed by philosophy, but *argued for*. If Nietzsche's claim that these are just superstitions is to be upheld, then he will have to demonstrate that all such metaphysical arguments are not neutral attempts to establish truth, but partisan attempts to give to prejudice the appearance of reason. So, at stake in Nietzsche's book are not just the particular claims philosophy has made (about the soul, for example), but the methods (such as rational argumentation) that philosophy has used to try to establish these claims.

We will skip quickly over the next couple of sentences, only making two quick observations: first of all, we have the "monstrous and terrifying grotesques [*Fratzen*]" as which "great things" must first stride the earth in order to "inscribe eternal demands into the heart". The image puts one in mind of primordial mythic beings (for example, the Titans in Greek myth). The next sentence makes clear, though, that Nietzsche is referring not to mythic figures so much as ideas, grossly and grotesquely distorted, that gradually become accepted as something like common sense. This introduces the theme of the *historical* origins of basic principles and laws – often, for Nietzsche, a historical origin that appears to be quite different to the character of these laws. If a basic principle is historical, in this sense, then it is also not "basic" in a traditional philosophical sense: it is not *a priori*, for example, nor an "eternal truth". And yet, just such a principle might be *taken to be* basic for some broad and comprehensive world-view (not just a philosophy, but a religion, a culture, a science, a way of life). Secondly, notice that this history and its contemporary effects is not something to be simply despised and abandoned (even were that possible), but is to be met "not without gratitude". But why gratitude? That is the topic of the rest of the Preface.

The last topic of the Preface begins by asking us to recognize that the most fearful and indeed dangerous "grotesque" was precisely an error of a

dogmatic philosopher: Plato's "fabrication" [*Erfindung*] of the pure spirit and the Good as such. Nietzsche means the ideas of a spirit or mind that is able to purify itself of any engagement with the world of appearances and of human desires, and of an absolutely universal Good, that exists in itself independently of human affairs. Nietzsche explains that such fabrication meant "standing truth on its head" and "denying *perspective*, the basic condition of all life". We will return to these ideas later.

But now, Nietzsche says, "Europe breathes a sigh of relief from this nightmare and at least can enjoy a healthier – sleep". Again, this is a common form of joke in Nietzsche: the unexpected completion of a sentence with the long dividing dash to indicate comic timing. (We get another joke structured in this manner in the parenthetical comment about gunpowder and the printing press towards the end of the preface.) The overcoming of Plato's thought has not led to wakefulness, awareness, clear-sightedness, but just to deeper sleep. (See also *Zarathustra*, Part 1, "On the Teachers of Virtue".) Notice also that the sigh of relief echoes the "last gasps" of dogmatism. It is as if one way of thinking or living (dogmatism) has been suffocated so that now another (whatever is characteristic of recent, sleeping, Europe) can breathe while sleeping.

But, Nietzsche continues, this process of overcoming this error has also "cultivated" an enormous reserve of strength [*Kraft*]. And, "we *whose task* [*Aufgabe*] *is wakefulness itself*" are "heirs" to this strength. This idea of a reserve of strength is elaborated a few lines later with the "magnificent tension [*Spannung*] of the spirit". Attempts have been made to hide or remove this tension, this built-up strength – Nietzsche names Jesuitism and democracy as two. The latter might even be working, the spirit might no longer experience itself as "need". But "we" still feel, the "whole need of the spirit and the whole tension of its bow".

At the moment, it is impossible for us to investigate what Nietzsche might mean by this strength or tension; by the "task of wakefulness"; what it might mean to attempt to remove the tension through Jesuitism or democracy and a free press; or even what is the "need of the spirit". All these themes we will return to in the course of our discussion. It remains for us to notice the pronoun "we". We "free spirits", or "we good Europeans". (Certainly not "we Germans"; here, briefly and jokingly and later in a much more sustained manner, Nietzsche is always critical of the cultural and political state of his native country.) Nietzsche is addressing his readership as partners or potential partners in a future philosophical (and ultimately also moral and political) enterprise. His book, then, is not meant for just anyone, but for those who already feel this need of the spirit. This, in itself, is a curious idea. We tend to think of philosophical texts (and others too, such as scientific writings) as essentially open in the sense that given a certain degree of background knowledge (which is again openly available)

anyone can read and understand them. Nietzsche's "we" suggests that his book is not open; there will be some people who are not meant to read it.

The Preface has introduced many of the major themes of *Beyond Good and Evil*, such as the nature of truth and appropriate strategies for "winning" it; the problem of establishing *historically* how ideas and, more importantly, ways of living arise; considering what might now arise to replace them; and the idea of perspective. It has also shown us several of Nietzsche's typical ways of working: the hypothetical mode of writing, for example, and the jokes and puns that are intended to be serious but not "clumsy". We have also observed how Nietzsche's writings participate in a pre-existing web of textual references. It is important to add that this is not just a fact about, or a strategy of, writing, but is also a philosophical theme. Again and again Nietzsche will tell us how the philosopher cannot separate herself from or even fully come to understand the conditions within which she works. This idea is part of the meaning of concepts like "going down", "entanglement" or the "untimely" (see §§ 26, 56 and 212 respectively). It appears in Nietzsche's Preface also in a subtle joke. The first syllable of the book is "Vor" meaning pre- or before, and this is said of suppositions. Before the book can even begin, Nietzsche tells us, we already find ourselves in a field of embedded suppositions.

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2 “On the Prejudices of the Philosophers”: *A Critique of Metaphysical Ground* (Part I §§1–23)

After the Preface, Nietzsche’s book is divided into nine major Parts. These Parts are, by and large, of similar length. Each of the major Parts, however, consists of numbered sections that vary dramatically in length, from a single sentence to several pages. (Here, we shall reference these sections with the symbol § rather than referring to a page number. This is merely a matter of convenience; and it involves an irony Nietzsche might have appreciated, since the §-sign is so often associated with scientific or systematic philosophy, such as Kant’s.) Now, this way of writing should be familiar to anyone who has read Nietzsche before. Most of his other books, although they may not have “major Parts”, are certainly written as a series of variably short sections. This has a mixed effect upon us as readers. On the one hand, it makes Nietzsche eminently readable: he is brief, pithy, apparently without long arguments or developments to follow. On the other, though, this readability has a cost: it is more difficult to see, and thus all too easy to forget about, the relationships between sections. The reader struggles to understand how Nietzsche’s writing comprises more than a series of observations. The only way to answer this is to go through the text patiently, looking for the links that turn a series of observations into a sustained philosophy.

§1

Part 1 is, in brief, a critique of a handful of basic metaphysical positions which Nietzsche sees as having a controlling influence in the history of

philosophy, and which stand in the way of asking a *new* set of questions. One such new question given in §1 is *what is the value of the will to truth?*

Nietzsche, therefore, is picking up immediately on what was also the first theme of the Preface: truth. However, there is a small but all-important difference. Whereas in the Preface it appeared as though what was at issue was the nature of truth, the question now is of the “will to truth” and, in particular, of its value. The former is a fairly traditional question within philosophy; the latter, however, is not. Nietzsche is explicitly asking: why do we pursue truth, why do we think it is important? Let us put this way of thinking to the famous beginning of the Preface, “Presupposing that truth is a woman”. Now the question of “why pursue truth” becomes “why (do men) pursue women?”. Well, no doubt there are many and complex reasons for this! But *one* reason is of course: “to propagate the species, to continue life”. This gives us our first clue to how Nietzsche will address the problem of the value of the will to truth: not truth itself, but this will *forms part of the conditions of life*, something without which life would be impossible. We have already seen, in the Preface, this notion of “condition of life”. Whether by this Nietzsche means all life, life in general, or particular forms of life (e.g. the human), or something even more particular than that, is not yet clear. It will turn out that Nietzsche, depending upon context, can mean any of these three things by “life”: there is an analysis of life as such, of human life, and of different peoples or cultures as essentially different “types of human life”.

Since the title of the book so clearly references *morals*, and this section has introduced the notion of *value*, we should pause to consider in a preliminary way the difference. The question of the value of the will to truth is one of a series of such questions; another is the value of morality (this is stated very clearly in *Genealogy*, Preface §5). By this is not, evidently, meant the morality of morality. By a “value” Nietzsche means: something in the service of a particular mode of life; or, more or less equivalently, in the service of the will to power of a dominant drive. So, as we have just seen, the general answer to the value of the will to truth is: it is a condition of life. By “morals” or, more generally, the whole phenomenon of “morality” he means something much narrower. A morality is a value that expresses itself universally, as a command for all (and thus in terms of the language of virtues, vices, duties, rights, goods, evils, etc.), and also which is not transparent, not aware of itself as value (and thus cannot recognize the possibility of other legitimate values). We will return, on many occasions, to Nietzsche’s analysis of both of these notions.

The dominant image of §1 is the Sphinx, a figure in Greek (by way of Egyptian and Near Eastern) mythology who asked unlucky travellers a

riddle, and killed them if they failed to answer. The tragic hero Oedipus answered the riddle correctly, and in fury the Sphinx destroyed itself. The Sphinx, for Nietzsche here, is the will to truth: questioning and demanding answers. Significantly, within Greek myth, the Sphinx is always female. This metaphor thus, unsurprisingly, echoes the metaphor of truth as a woman from the Preface. However, although there is clearly a connection of some kind between these two metaphors, it is not so clear what it is, because here again what is at issue is the *will to truth*. In any case, figuratively, the problem of the value of the will to truth is to *put questions to* the Sphinx. Nietzsche ends the section by testifying to the "risk" of such a question: in the myth of the Sphinx, either the questioner or the questioned is always destroyed.

However, to ask the question of the value of the will to truth – however new, disturbing and risky this question may be – is nevertheless to ask a question. It is to demand an answer, a truth. Thus, Nietzsche's new question at least *appears* to be another manifestation of the will to truth. He wants to know, to discover the truth of, the value of truth. Is the question of the value of this will (Oedipus posing a question to the Sphinx) *included within* the general problem of pursuing truth (the Sphinx asking questions)? Thus the confusion over roles: "Who of us is Oedipus here? Who the Sphinx?" This is a general problem in Nietzsche. One of the most common conceptions of Nietzsche is a philosopher who denies the possibility of truth as the history of philosophy has defined it. From this first section it is already clear that Nietzsche is more complex than that characterization might suggest.

The first section to each of the nine Parts of the book is generally a statement about methodology, or at least a discussion of the difficulties involved in the particular enquiry. Nietzsche has told us that the problem of the value of the will to truth will be his theme; he is also telling us, by way of the metaphor of the sphinx, just what a difficult and dangerous question this is. However, the confusion over roles returns as a theme of masks, which as we shall see is in part an issue within methodology. Moreover, the implication that the questioner is also the questioned is a methodological point. This latter looks familiar: after all, did not Descartes begin by asking questions of his own mind, its contents and activities? Already in §3, it will become clear that Nietzsche's version of this structure is quite different from Descartes's. In short, although it doesn't look like it, here in §1 Nietzsche is setting out key aspects of his philosophical method. (In parallel, the last few sections in each Part often comprise a summary statement, draw conclusions, or move into another, deeper level of questioning – in any case they have the function of a climax and transition.)

§2, and discussion of perspective and interpretation

(Our discussion of this topic continues in §22.) Section 2 begins with another common device in Nietzsche: the false quotation. There is no attempt to deceive us, but Nietzsche is simply imagining how a previous philosopher (most likely one of the dogmatists from the Preface) would state and defend a position. In this case, the position is what Nietzsche calls the “faith in opposite values”: that something which is described as X can have no relation (other than that of opposition itself) to not-X. This is assumed true of things that are obviously values, e.g. selfishness and selflessness. But it is also assumed true of things that have an apparently value-neutral status, for example the transitory (constantly changing) and intransitory (unchanging). While we are at it, we may note a few other opposites that are of particular importance in Nietzsche: good and evil, obviously; truth and falsehood; freedom and necessity; consciousness and unconsciousness or instinct; fact (value-neutral or free) and value.

Why does Nietzsche, so early on in his book, latch on to the problem of opposites? Most obviously, to explain further the “beyond” of the title: to be beyond good and evil is to be beyond thinking them as exclusive and all-encompassing opposites. Equally obviously, Nietzsche sees the structure of oppositions as a basic type of rational thinking as in the logical truth “It is not the case that A and not-A”. Accordingly, a critique of oppositional thinking might serve also as a critique of a traditional understanding of rationality. Moreover, in the content of these oppositions – that evil is fundamentally different from good, time from eternity, truth from deceit – are encoded dominant metaphysical or moral beliefs. These beliefs, Nietzsche argues, then organize all our more particular beliefs about what is good or what is truthful.

But there is also a general methodological point being developed here in the account of opposites. It leads us to an important distinction within Nietzsche. On the one hand, Nietzsche will often present us with arguments that are designed to show the impossibility of certain traditional philosophical ideas (for example, concerning the nature of truth), or the validity of others. He is, in other words, engaging in a perfectly straightforward manner with philosophy. Section 16 below is an example. On the other hand, Nietzsche also provides analyses of a broadly historical type concerning the origin of certain ideas. The origin may be psychological (e.g. fear or revenge), or it may be linguistic (we have already seen him speak of a “seduction by grammar”), or perhaps physiological (e.g. racial traits), social or political (e.g. class), or in the case of individual philosophers it may be some small twist of fate. There may be a necessity claimed for what is discovered in this analysis (that is, Nietzsche is not usually analysing in terms of historical contingencies), but it is not the logical necessity of an