

Thomas Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Ethics of Character: A Study of Nietzsche's Ethics and its Place in the History of Moral Thinking*. Uppsala: Department of History of Science and Ideas, Uppsala University, 1995. 350 pp. ISBN 91-506-1099-6.

Book review by Yunus Tuncel, Ph.D., The New School

Thomas Brobjer's *Nietzsche's Ethics of Character* is an in-depth, comprehensive, well-researched study of Nietzsche's ideas on morality and its relationship to the three major moral theories in philosophy, namely, virtue ethics, deontology, and utilitarianism. Contrary to many readers of Nietzsche's works and despite Nietzsche's own open hostility to any moral system, Brobjer claims that there is an ethics in Nietzsche, but an ethics of a different kind which he calls "ethics of character." The book presents many convincing ideas to support this claim and offers a detailed comparative analysis between Nietzsche and each of the three moral theories, as it also presents Nietzsche's critique of each of these theories. This part makes up almost half of the book.

It is not difficult to read Nietzsche as a thinker who does not fit into the history of moral philosophy: he rejects all conventional morality, general principles, and anything that is unconditional; in his way of thinking there are no moral principles that are universally true and applicable. Moreover, he characterizes himself as an 'immoralist' and his way of doing philosophy as 'extra-moral' as though he were entirely outside the framework of moral thinking. And starting with *Daybreak*, he considers his task to undermine morality, to destroy morals or all values hitherto upheld as true. Brobjer does not dismiss this critical aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy; he claims, however, that along with this criticism there is also a constructive work in Nietzsche. Both of these aspects show themselves in Nietzsche's frequent references to and in his engagement with moral ideas and philosophers. Brobjer concludes that Nietzsche is concerned with the problems of morality and that he is a moral philosopher.

If there is another kind of morality in Nietzsche, what is it and what are its constituent elements and sources? The investigation of these questions takes up a considerable portion of the book. According to Brobjer, Nietzsche is in favor of a "heroic morality" that is similar to the moral

thinking of the presocratics, and its important aspects are nobility, aristocracy, activity, strife, and self-affirmation. (p. 14) The determining criteria of value according to this morality are not principles, but persons and character. Brobjer calls it “an ethics of character.” In this ethics, character is above all, it is even above works, and there is a close connection between the two. Some aspects of character are self-development, style-giving, virtue as our own invention, employment of one’s genius for oneself, and striving. (pp. 22-23) Nietzsche’s reflections on men worthy of veneration, his constant occupation for strife for greatness, and his *ad hominem* statements demonstrate his prioritization of character over everything else.

However, Nietzsche is not primarily concerned with what is on the surface in human character, as Brobjer observes. Therefore, ego, free will, and consciousness are often rejected by Nietzsche as primary ingredients in the formation of character or as primary agents in human conduct. They are not causes but rather epiphenomena. What he proposes as the primary forces instead are the unconscious forces, the unconscious instincts and drives, all of which are usually referred to as the self, Nietzsche’s new re-construction of the self. According to Brobjer, Nietzsche read extensively from the psychological and physiological works by his contemporaries (a list of these works is provided in the footnote 4 on pp. 54-55), and both psychology and physiology play important roles in his philosophy, including his moral philosophy. He also lists authors who write with psychological introspection, such as the aphorists, as influences on Nietzsche.

Brobjer goes further in his speculation on the question of character in Nietzsche and “divides the field of investigation into four levels of psychological abstraction:” (p.56) physiological, psychological, sociological, and metaphysical/idealist. The first two levels are the most unconscious and can be described as “constituting the most obvious parts of character or personality” (p. 57); the third level corresponds to communication and is related to language and consciousness; and the fourth level consists of higher degrees of abstraction as in ideals and utopias. Nietzsche’s analysis or his culture critique often starts from the fourth level of abstraction, the problem itself, and goes deeper into the other primordial levels.

After exploring other character-related issues such as the free will, the (un)alterability of character, the old ego/self and the new ego/self, the animal and the human, Brobjer concludes

that the concept of character is central to Nietzsche's thinking. (p. 70) Not only the recurrence of the concept throughout Nietzsche's works (some examples are given in footnote 82 on p. 71), but also his frequent Pindarian call to "become what you are" and his emphasis on strong individuality are proofs for its centrality. And finally "the importance of character for Nietzsche is even more obvious in his critique of lack of character and of ideologies and cultures which favor depersonalization." (p. 71)

Another area in which Brobjer examines Nietzsche's ethics of character is the question of virtue. He shows that Nietzsche uses the word 'virtue' (*Tugend*) frequently and his uses are neither simple nor consistent. Although Nietzsche uses the word 'virtue' in a negative sense as often as he uses it in a positive sense, Brobjer's concern is with the latter, and he proposes nine preconditions that are necessary to understand how Nietzsche uses virtue (pp. 77-78) all of which strip Nietzsche's conception of its metaphysical underpinnings. What is more thought-provoking, however, is the use of the word *Virtù* (*Tüchtigkeit*) in Nietzsche (footnote 36 on pp. 80-81), which is closely related to the ancient Greek *arête* and also to how it was used in the Renaissance style, as Brobjer brings it to our attention. *Virtù* is moraline-free virtue, it is excellence, proficiency, and fruitfulness; it is not contentment but more power, not peace but war; it is to nourish oneself to attain one's maximum of strength. With this conception of virtue, Nietzsche comes close to the Homeric and presocratic culture of virtue as it was a lived reality among the striving equals rather than a mere philosophical discourse. Brobjer also ties this *Virtù* to the gift-giving virtue (as in Zarathustra), which he claims to be the basis of all virtue.

After showing how Nietzsche retrieves the ancient Greek (presocratic) virtue out of its idealistic mold and after establishing a general framework for virtue, Brobjer discusses Nietzsche's evaluation of specific virtues, an area fraught with difficulties, as he acknowledges. Nietzsche's irony notwithstanding, the difficulty resides in a discussion of specific virtues in the abstract, detached from the persons who may possess and display them, a difficulty though not mentioned in the book, but is in agreement with its spirit. Here the list of virtues includes courage, wisdom, *sophrosyne*, justice, honesty (pp. 84-90), all of which are also ancient Greek virtues, and friendship, playfulness, intellectual conscience, solitude, *amor fati*, creativity, hardness and

unyieldingness, cleanliness and sympathy (p. 91) most of which are either unique to Nietzsche's works or are re-formulated by him.

In his discussion of Nietzsche's relation to ancient virtue, Brobjer sees a close affinity between Nietzsche's ethics and the presocratics and exposes how Nietzsche is critical of Socrates' and Plato's view of virtue. By way of summary, he lists five important points that set Nietzsche apart from the classical (i.e., Socratic) concept of virtue: 1) Nietzsche assumes a very large number of virtues, 2) for Nietzsche, overfullness is the source of all virtue (in contrast to the primacy of reason), 3) for Nietzsche, there is a continual struggle among all virtues (not a harmony), 4) Nietzsche is skeptical about learning and teaching virtues by way of reason, and 5) for Nietzsche, virtue and vice are connected. In this section, Brobjer rightly emphasizes the significance of the epochal shift from the presocratic to the Socratic age within the context of ethics.

In the second half of Part II, Brobjer embarks on a comparative study between Nietzsche's ethics of character and three major theories of ethics, utilitarianism, deontology, and virtues ethics (Chapters 6, 7, and 8 respectively), as he also presents Nietzsche's evaluation of these theories. These three chapters present the following type of information: how many times Nietzsche refers to the philosophers of these theories both in his published works, in his letters, and in his *Nachlass*; what works by these philosophers he read and what literature on their works he studied; his *ad hominem* statements about them; how he evaluates their moral theories; and in what ways his ethics of character resembles or differs from them. What follows below is a brief review of each of these three chapters with their highlights.

Out of the four utilitarian philosophers, Helvétius, Bentham, Mill, and Spencer, Brobjer's research indicates that Nietzsche most likely had not read Helvétius or Bentham, although he refers to them in his works. However, he had read Mill and Spencer, the former extensively, contrary to the common assumption that Nietzsche had only superficial and limited knowledge of Mill's works. Nonetheless, "many of the 23 references to Mill are in part or wholly *ad hominem*." (p. 139) As for Mill's philosophy, Nietzsche refers to it as Christian and egalitarian and it values pity. As for Spencer, again Nietzsche makes many *ad hominem* comments about

him and considers him a moral philosopher, and he is associated with altruism, the origin of morality, and utility, topics that Nietzsche subjects to critical scrutiny.

In the following sections on Nietzsche and utilitarianism, Brobjer shows the development of Nietzsche's relation to it as he examines it within the three periods of Nietzsche's works: Early, Middle, and Late. The Early Nietzsche disagrees with utilitarianism (and there is less concern for morality in this period). In the beginning of the Middle Period, in *Human, All Too Human*, there is a brief rapprochement; according to Brobjer, Nietzsche accepts some of the fundamental ideas of utilitarianism around this time: pain and pleasure (as the sole ground for human action, motives, and values), utility, and progress. (pp. 154-155) However, Nietzsche quickly moves away from utilitarianism when he reads Mill and Spencer, which is around the time of *Daybreak*, and he upholds heroic morality and does not accept happiness as important and such feelings as altruism and sympathy (or pity). Finally, the Late Nietzsche sharpens his critique of utilitarianism and brings out his general disagreements with it, all of which are summed up in six points: 1) we cannot know the consequences of acts, 2) pleasure and pain are not primary, 3) happiness is not a goal, 4) greatest number is not a valid criterion, 5) utility is not of primary importance, and 6) altruism is not good.

In the second section of Chapter 6 of Part II, Brobjer presents a detailed comparative study between utilitarianism (more specifically Mill's version) and Nietzsche. Without being repetitive, the following points can be added to the list above for their disagreements: Nietzsche finds utilitarianism too objective, views suffering as an integral part of self-development, places far more importance on the unconscious and the instincts than utilitarianism, holds individuals (i.e., great individuals) over society, does not consider pain and pleasure as heterogeneous (a point that needs more explanation by Brobjer), does not believe in progress, and does not accept the golden rule or the principle of equality. Finally utilitarianism bases its ethical theory on acts, whereas for Nietzsche character is central, and utilitarianism claims to provide a tangible mode of deciding moral questions, whereas for Nietzsche, no such claim is credible. As for the few agreements between Nietzsche and Mill, Brobjer lists their emphasis on education (although they have different conceptions), and their rejection of transcendental reality, freedom of the will and social contract.

The next ethical theory Brobjer discusses in relation to Nietzsche's ethics of character is deontology. Although the deontological tradition is traced back via Christian ethics to the Stoics, this chapter deals primarily with Kant. According to Brobjer, Nietzsche not only read Kant's important works and discussions of Kant in other works, but he is also the fifth most referred to author in all of Nietzsche's works. Although Nietzsche of the Early Period is very interested in Kant, this interest starts waning around 1872, and starting with *Human, All Too Human* Nietzsche becomes gradually hostile to Kant along with Schopenhauer and Wagner. Parallel to this, many of his *ad hominem* statements on Kant in the Late Period are hostile and severely critical. As for the central concept of Kant's moral philosophy, namely the categorical imperative, Nietzsche raises many arguments: it is naïve and not beneficial; it is selfish, cruel, anti-natural, Christian, universal, unconditional, abstract; it has no regard for the preconditions of culture, or for the individual, or for nature; and finally, it presents no understanding of self-knowledge or action.

Brobjer then presents his comprehensive comparative analysis between Kant's and Nietzsche's ethics: Nietzsche does not accept Kant's non-naturalism (his twofold worldview of nature vs. freedom), does not share his non-historical approach, and unlike Kant questions the value of morality. Moreover, Nietzsche does not emphasize reason but rather connects morality with instincts, is opposed to the concept of duty because of its unconditional aspect (and the equality assumed by the categorical imperative and duty), rejects the fact that acts must be done according to laws and principles, not passions and emotions, rejects the concept of good will, and denies the role of intention in morality (because intentions like consequences are unknowable). Finally, Nietzsche does not share Kant's idea of personhood due to its emphasis on equality, its separation of person and morality, and its axiomatic acceptance of the value of every person; nor does he agree with the existence of an objective moral law and with the connection between the autonomy of the will and the universal law in Kant. The final discussion in this chapter is on Nietzsche's critique of duty and rights in Kant, where Brobjer claims that "as positive concepts rights and duties play a very minor role in Nietzsche's philosophy and ethics." (p. 221) Instead of rights, Nietzsche proposes treaties and agreements, directly related to power, on which rights

are always dependent. Not only does Nietzsche reject the concept of right as false and abstract, he also dismisses the whole natural law tradition.

Despite the validity of most of these points Brobjer raises, one may argue that there is a certain kind of Kantianism in Nietzsche, perhaps at a more subtle level, the Kantian Nietzsche of the Early Period who establishes his philosophical task to be that of a physician of culture. Where Kant's concern was to understand the conditions of possibility of human experience, whether that experience is scientific, moral or aesthetic, Nietzsche's concern as a physician of culture is to understand the conditions of possibility of human experience within the larger field of culture. In this sense, one can claim that Nietzsche amplified the Kantian project. And even the Middle and the Late Nietzsches are still concerned with the same task of understanding what culture is and what value is. If one accepts the Kantian Nietzsche, then one would be puzzled by the absence or the underestimation of Kantianism in Brobjer's Nietzsche.

The third and the last ethical theory that is discussed in relation to Nietzsche is ancient (Greek) ethics under which Aristotle and Homer are listed. After establishing the fact that Nietzsche was always interested in the ancients, Brobjer shows that Nietzsche had read both Homer and Aristotle extensively with references to what Nietzsche read and may have read from their works. As for Nietzsche's *ad hominem* statements about Aristotle and Homer, there are only very few of these, and they are mostly praise. And Nietzsche has some differences and some similarities with Aristotle. Nietzsche does not accept Aristotle's view of virtue, his teleological assumptions, and his emphasis on reason; they do share, however, an aristocratic and naturalistic ethics where free will is unimportant and virtue/excellence plays a primary role, and they both deny the body/soul division. In relation to Homer, on the other hand, only the similarities are listed: they are both immoralists; the good and the bad belong together; great men are skeptics; misdeeds of mortals are foolishness, not sin; happiness and suffering belong together; and there is less emphasis on reason and consciousness. This brief comparative study allows Brobjer to rightly conclude that "for the question of influence on Nietzsche, Homer's is likely to be much greater than Aristotle's." (p .239)

After establishing an interesting correspondence between ancient ethics and Nietzsche's ethics of character by way of their building blocks (where he indicates, for instance, the connection between tragic destiny and *amor fati*) and after showing the proximity of Nietzsche's ethics to the ancient paradigm rather than to the modern one, Brobjer discusses the concept of "greatness of soul" (*megalopsychia*) in Aristotle and Nietzsche. Although the term was used in Greek literature before Aristotle, it appears many times in his works, especially in his ethical works. According to Brobjer, Nietzsche has knowledge of Aristotle's use of the term and uses it or similar terms frequently in his writings (footnote 65 on page 243 lists some of these terms).

Having demonstrated the connection between Nietzsche and Aristotle in the use of *megalopsychia*, Brobjer moves on to making a detailed comparison between their ethics, as he presents this as a dialogue between the two rather than a critique of Aristotle by Nietzsche. What brings them together are the following character traits: magnanimity that consists of pride and self-love, courage, emphasis on hierarchy and agon, rank of values, openness in hatred and friendship, the importance of friendship, the absence of resentment in great men, the importance of style and grace over utility; additionally, they both use such terms as honor, noble, and aristocratic frequently. As for their differences, Aristotle's good is an objective that is not accepted by Nietzsche; Aristotle offers a notion of static goodness whereas for Nietzsche the superior person is dynamic and creative. Finally they both have a list of exemplary, historical figures who represent the highest human ideal. At the end of this comparative analysis, Brobjer rightly concludes that the general similarity between Aristotle and Nietzsche is not due to a direct influence, but due to a general Greek/Homeric influence on Nietzsche. In the remaining pages of Chapter 8, Brobjer surveys some of the contemporary literature on Aristotle and Nietzsche.

Despite many passages in the book where Brobjer indicates Nietzsche's closer affinity to the presocratics than the postsocratics, his statements where he suggests or directly claims a kindred bond to exist between Aristotle and Nietzsche are debatable. "He [Heraclitus] belongs together with Aristotle, Homer, Aeschylus and Thucydides with the Greeks that Nietzsche praised the highest and most frequently." (pp. 236-7) He also claims that there are good reasons for emphasizing the similarity between Aristotle's and Nietzsche's ideal and suggests that

Nietzsche's ethics is closer to that of Aristotle than to those of Mill and Kant (p. 258). It is either that Brobjer would like to leave it a question what Nietzsche's relationship to the ancient Greeks is (whether pre- or postsocratic)—he is more consistent, for instance, when he lists, in Table 2 at the end of Chapter 5 of Part II, Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato under “varying” for Nietzsche's evaluation of ‘moral thinkers’—or he does not share Nietzsche's sensitivity to the Socratic epochal shift. On a final note on this complex question, one may say that Nietzsche does not consider Aristotle a “worthy enemy” to whom he feels so close and against whom he must constantly fight; hence the scanty references (even fewer personal references) to Aristotle in his works, as Brobjer himself observes (p. 235). Despite all the similarities between the two that remain on the surface, Nietzsche at best shows indifference to Aristotle.

In the third and the final part of the book, Brobjer examines three important concepts in Nietzsche, namely *Bildung* (education/formation), *Übermensch* (overhuman), and *Umwertung* (revaluation), dedicating one chapter to each, and shows their inner connection and how they fit into his ethics of character. In the first chapter of this part, Brobjer rightly stresses the centrality of education in Nietzsche's works, not only in his early works (including his public lectures), where there is much explicit attention given to the topic, but also in his later works, for education has to do with the overall self-development of the individual. According to him, Nietzsche's view of education is conventional to some extent, where Nietzsche claims that it is centered on language and antiquity, involves personality, relies on examples, is non-utilitarian, aristocratic and for the few; it is less conventional insofar as Nietzsche declares all idealistic forms to be problematic, emphasizes the importance of the body in education, and is critical of superficial, decorative education. Brobjer further claims that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* can be read as a *Bildungs*-text, since it deals with self-development, teacher-pupil relationship, overcoming, virtue (in the Zarathustrian sense), and gift-giving where bestowing is centered around the giver, all of which are *Bildung*-themes that are consistent with an ethics of character.

In the second chapter of Part III, after tracing the use of the word *Übermensch* in ancient Greek literature and in German literature prior to Nietzsche, Brobjer offers his reading of it: there is no meaning in nature or cosmos, there is no *telos*, God is dead; now men must strive to become gods. Nietzsche's descriptions of the Greek gods coincide with that of the *Übermensch* who now

replaces the dead God. Brobjer then moves on to presenting the evolution of the terms *Übermenschlich* (which appears before and is used more often than *Übermensch*) and *Übermensch* in Nietzsche's works. According to him, the *Übermensch* must be read within the larger context of Nietzsche's philosophy (he critiques Kaufmann's reading in isolation to other related concepts), and as a plural concept (he disagrees with Lampert's reading that takes it to be a single concept). Parallel to these criticisms, Brobjer reads the *Übermensch* within the context of Nietzsche's other concerns, such as great men, greatness, and strife for greatness, all of which have an immediate relation to the question of character. Finally, Nietzsche's rare use of the term in his late (i.e., post-TSZ) writings is not an indication that he has abandoned the idea of greatness that is embodied in it. On the contrary, the idea persists in a variety of ways including in the uses of Dionysus and the Dionysian; in agreement with Brobjer, one can also add "master morality" and "nobility" as embodiment of the idea of greatness.

The third chapter of Part III is concerned with the revaluation of all values. After discussing the importance of this topic in Nietzsche's works and showing how Nietzsche, in *Ecce Homo*, regards it as the heaviest demand that has ever been made on mankind, Brobjer presents and discusses four possible meanings of the revaluation: 1) transvaluation of old values to something new, fundamentally different from the ancient/Christian values (the position of utopian Nietzscheans), 2) the questioning, the examining, and the diagnosis of values, critical interpretation (the position of soft Nietzscheans like Kaufmann), 3) reversal of values (the position of hard Nietzscheans), and 4) *re*-valuation as going back to earlier ancient values (a supplement to 1 and 2, he calls this "dichotomy interpretation"). This last meaning, according to Brobjer, is superior to the other ones and the most compatible with Nietzsche's statements. No doubt, all four readings have to do with transformation of one's self and one's values and, therefore, the revaluation of all values in any sense is an integral part of Nietzsche's ethics of character. By way of summary, Brobjer tries to demonstrate that the dichotomy interpretation is superior to the others by emphasizing Nietzsche's affinity to the ancient (presocratic) Greek world.

In addition to these many thought-provoking ideas and detailed comparative studies in the book, there are two other merits of the book worth mentioning: the presentation of Nietzsche's

knowledge of books (as pertinent to the topic) and the tables at the end of some chapters. Brobjer has extensive lists, both in the footnotes and in the tables, on the books Nietzsche read (there are five such tables throughout the book); these are books by the authors in question and books on their lives and works. Brobjer indicates not only when Nietzsche possessed copies of these books in his personal library and when he borrowed them from other libraries but also how extensively he read these books, how many times he read them, what markings he made in them, and, when he did not read certain books, through what secondary literature he had knowledge of them. All of this is indispensable information for any scholar doing research in this area.

Other than the tables of books Nietzsche read, Brobjer provides tables called “Nietzsche’s Evaluations” of other thinkers (there are four such tables throughout the book and two at the end in Appendices 2 and 3). Although these tables are highly subjective and Nietzsche’s assessment of many of these thinkers is very complex, they do reflect a more or less accurate portrayal of his relationship to them and to the extent to which his views of these thinkers are positive or negative. Nonetheless, I would use these tables with caution. They are based on the number of references Nietzsche makes to authors (mostly moral thinkers) and to their works in his published and unpublished writings (there are five such tables throughout the book). Even so, these tables can be useful for research on Nietzsche and his relationship to any of these authors.

I recommend Brobjer’s book highly to anyone who is interested in Nietzsche’s works, his “ethics of character,” and its relationship to some of the major moral traditions in Western philosophy. Brobjer’s in-depth analysis of ideas and his comparative studies provide many questions and food for thought for any inquisitive reader and researcher.