

Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals: Critical Essays*

Edited by Christa Davis Acampora

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Reviewed by Daniel Blue

Christa Davis Acampora's new book, *Nietzsche's On The Genealogy of Morals: Critical Essays*, might appear to limit itself to what the title predicts: a set of papers devoted to a single text by Nietzsche. The anthology doesn't disappoint on that score. As executive editor of *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* and co-compiler of an earlier anthology, *A Nietzschean Bestiary*, Acampora has assembled pieces by some of the brighter lights in current Nietzsche scholarship. (A full list of authors and articles follows this review.) Nonetheless, her new book is greater than the sum of its parts. As the reader moves from one essay to the next, some of the most frequently claimed attributes of *On the Genealogy of Morals* begin to seem questionable, and the contest among its contributors tells us more than expected about tensions in contemporary Nietzsche studies.

It bears saying that the essays assembled here are varied, both in perspective and style, and this presents a problem: how to organize them and elicit at least an appearance of coherence. Acampora chooses a four-part structure: 1) "On Genealogy," which focuses on that much-discussed method; 2) "Reading Nietzsche's *Genealogy* — Focused Analyses of Parts and Passages," which centers on the actual text; 3) "Critiquing *Genealogy*," which discusses certain post-World War II readings, notably by Habermas, Derrida, and the later Deleuze; and 4) "On Politics and Community," a section of essays, each of which explores a different social aspect raised by Nietzsche's book.

Her second structural move is to place essays consecutively so that the thematics or approaches proposed in one are resumed by those which follow. Thus a piece by

Acampora herself is trailed by a paper by Paul S. Loeb which extends her findings in a wholly new direction. A selection by Jürgen Habermas is succeeded by a riposte from Gary Shapiro. A paper by Alexander Nehamas comparing the *Genealogy* with Nietzsche's essay, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," follows on the heels of David Owen's comparison of the *Genealogy* with *Daybreak*. Babette Babich's contribution, which, among other matters, discusses the way the Nietzschean aphorism "implicates the reader in the reading," is followed by Ken Gemes's suggestion that the entire book is a snare designed to lure the reader into confronting unexamined ideals. Similarly, while not immediately consecutive, essays by David Owen and Aaron Ridley echo one another as each examines the argumentative strategies of the *Genealogy* and whether these will convince those who do not share Nietzsche's vision of the world.

While the book contains many striking articles, one of the more challenging is by Acampora herself. Entitled, "On Sovereignty and Overhumanity: Why It Matters How We Read Nietzsche's *Genealogy* II:2," it takes the much cited notion of "the sovereign individual" and claims that this figure neither represents Nietzsche's ideal nor the peak of humanity in his view. At stake here is the sort of sovereignty Nietzsche might approve, and whether the new humanity which he invokes at the end of *Genealogy* II is the individual apostrophized earlier or someone quite new. Also, given the sovereign individual's position in *Genealogy* II, Acampora's reinterpretation inevitably carries implications for understanding other Nietzschean topics such as the value of memory and conscience. Just as important, for Nietzsche studies at least, is the immense amount of recantation which will be necessary if Acampora is correct, for virtually everyone who has written on Nietzsche and ethics has assumed that the sovereign individual presented

in *Genealogy* II:2 is a touchstone of probity and achievement. If Acampora's interpretation prevails, then many a book and essay, including several in this volume, will have to be rewritten.

While there is not space here to discuss all the articles collected in this anthology, mention might be made of Robert B. Pippin's "Lightning and Flash, Agent and Deed (*GM I*: 6-17)," in which he addresses an apparent inconsistency which has perplexed other readers of the *Genealogy*. On the one hand Nietzsche attacks the notion of a subject behind the deed. In his view this idea is not only false, but pernicious, leading to the ascription of free will and thereby responsibility to those who do not observe the slave code of values. In Nietzsche's well-known example, the lambs blame the eagles for not behaving like lambs, as though it lay in their power not to act like the eagles that they are. As against this theory, Pippin observes that all of us (Nietzsche included) distinguish between a mere movement and a deed. Clearly, some notion of intentionality and subject seems to be called for here. Beyond this, Nietzsche's account of the slave revolt necessarily devolves upon an unspoken overlay of intentions. The slaves see themselves as operating by one set of motives (humanitarian values) while in fact enacting another (displacing the nobles). How can such divided purpose be possible without introducing some entity in addition to the deed itself? Pippin finds an answer in a theory of expressivity already available in Hegel whereby the doer is "in" but not "behind" the deed.

Although the book contains numerous other essays as interesting and important as the two just mentioned, it presents something of an embarrassment of riches. Anthologies are inevitably double-edged because, by definition, their contents are heterogeneous.

Positively, they provide a sort of one-stop shop where one can find assembled articles which would otherwise have to be searched out in multiple journals. The negative is obvious to anyone who tries to read one from cover to cover. While a work written by a single author allows readers to pick up the ground rules — range of vocabulary, modes of argumentation — right from the introduction, an anthology starts fresh with every entry. The effect can be something like encountering a smorgasbord where one is expected to sample every dish. Each looks tasty, but the overall prospect can overwhelm.

The problem is acute in this collection because the articles are so varied, not just in conclusion but in approach. David Owen, Aaron Ridley, Babette Babich and Ken Gemes all discuss the strategies Nietzsche uses to overcome readerly resistance, but they make quite different assumptions as to his procedures. The former pair construe his attempt in terms of logic and argument, whereas the latter view the book as an exercise in seduction, where personal involvement of the reader is as important as validity of proof. To choose another example, Babich, in a discussion of how aphorisms are ingested, cites the ways a Christian anti-Semite who reads *Genealogy* I might be “hooked,” then undone. Yirmiyahu Yovel, discussing the same passages, takes Nietzsche at his word and devises a tripartite categorization to accommodate the apparently anti-Jewish strictures in that section. Ken Gemes proves helpful here by making a distinction between manifest and latent content. Babich has arguably chosen to emphasize the latent, Yovel the manifest content of Nietzsche’s work. (Of course, Babich might claim that her focus is on process, not content, but it is content which baits the hook for the anti-Semite.)

A similar contrast can be found between Gemes’s own article and a paper by Daniel Conway. Gemes who, like Babich, favors latent content, interprets the *Genealogy*

as a kind of psychological labyrinth whereby Nietzsche cites anthropological narratives less for their intrinsic truth than to lure the reader into a maze leading to self-awareness. Conway, by contrast, views the book's characters and types, particularly the "beasts of prey," as actors in a narrative meant to be factual or, at least, coherent on its own terms. He therefore interprets *Genealogy*, not from the point of view of a reader engaging with the text, but "objectively," as proposing a history of humankind, a version of how we became a moralized species.

Daunting as such variety can be, it is arguably built into the book from the start, and not just because this is an anthology. In her introduction Acampora moves through the German title of the work — *Zur Genealogie der Moral: eine Streitschrift* — and finds every word, except for the two articles, difficult to translate. Should "Zur" be rendered "On the" or "Toward the"? At issue is not just the finality of Nietzsche's contribution to his project but the extent to which he believes humanity's history is itself defined as well. In other words, does the *Genealogy* reveal, "How We Have Become What We Are," the title of Conway's paper? Or does Nietzsche consider (as Paul S. Loeb contends) that a new turn in the road is possible and imminent, bringing with it a fresh definition of the human animal? This too would have implications for the translation of "zur."

The second term of the title, "*Genealogie*" might seem more straightforward but, as Acampora reminds us, it devolves on three other words, "*Herkunft*," "*Ursprung*," and "*Entstehung*," each of which translators tend to fudge. Nonetheless, these three words suggest three decidedly different ways we could construe Nietzsche's task. Is his purpose to propose a descent (*Herkunft*) as in "descent of man," or is this a story about "original condition" (*Ursprung*), wherein the latter, like Eden, enjoys some primal value?

Alternatively is Nietzsche giving us a naturalistic account of the emergence (*Entstehung*) of morality among human beings? And what of “*Moral*,” which might mean “morals” (as in one unique set) or “morality,” a broader term which encompasses not only the intrinsically normative rubrics by which humankind has disciplined itself but the moral enterprise altogether? As for “*Streitschrift*,” is the book a polemic directed against Nietzsche’s contemporaries or is it a contest of voices within itself?

Acampora’s exploration of the title’s ambiguities exposes a theme never made explicit but discernible in many of the twenty essays gathered in this anthology. *On the Genealogy of Morals* is popular in part because it seems comparatively tidy and unitary among Nietzsche’s works. Unlike those which range over an apparent miscellany of issues — theories of knowledge, politics, history, the sexes, the arts, academia, Germany — the *Genealogy* is distinguished by simplicity of form: three parts, each devoted to fresh and provocative exploration of specific moral concepts. In fact, of course, it is riddled with eruptions of contested meaning which, like each of Nietzsche’s other works, makes any attempt at summation hazardous to attempt. Such approaches have been tried (brilliantly in Aaron Ridley’s *Nietzsche’s Conscience*, somewhat more ploddingly in Brian Leiter’s *Nietzsche on Morality*), but several essays in Acampora’s anthology (most notably Gary Shapiro’s) suggest that such ambitions might be misguided.

This is not to say that they are not useful. To extend a suggestion made elsewhere by Babich,ⁱ we might divide contemporary philosophers into two camps: those who seek solutions and those who seek questions. The former set up standards of evidence and argument and seeks to settle issues definitively. They want to “get things right.” The essays by Ridley, Owen, Conway and Yovel would fall into this category, as would,

arguably, the essays by Pippin, Acampora and Loeb. The second group prizes freshness and inventiveness of thought as well as a certain indeterminacy in language commensurate both with humility (there is much we don't know) and the mysteries of experience. While not necessarily hostile to the tidy and closed, one suspects that this group's collective heartbeat quickens, not when a problem is solved, but when some deep-seated ambiguity, either of doctrine or structure, is exposed. Babich's and Shapiro's articles would fall under this heading. So, for that matter, would Acampora's introduction, which suggests that she manages to inhabit both camps.

Both approaches are essential to a healthy intellectual life. The explainers run the danger of reducing texts to pedantic summations. The questioners can fly into a neverland of vapid speculation. At their best and held in dynamic tension, each informs the other, the definers acting as a constraint on the questioners, the questioners stimulating the definers by their bold reconsiderations. In Acampora's anthology both are at play, and while neither has the last word, both display their specific strengths, broadening our vision of the *Genealogy* even as they home in and illuminate the exact meaning of specific texts. One conclusion, however, is guaranteed. Anyone who reads this book will find their vision of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* expanded and enriched.

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ⁱ Babette E. Babich. “On the Analytic-Continental Divide in Philosophy: Nietzsche’s Lying Truth, Heidegger’s Speaking Language, and Philosophy” in C.G. Prado, ed. *A House Divided: Comparing Analytic and Continental Philosophy* (Amhearst, NY: Humanity Books, 2003), pp. 63-104, esp. pp. 64-65. In Babich’s article, the contrast is between continental philosophers who prize questioning and analytic philosophers who try to resolve traditional philosophic issues into pseudo-problems.