

*Nietzsche and Theology: Nietzschean Thought in Christological Anthropology*

David Deane

Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007

Reviewed by Horst Hutter

The chief virtue of this book is its success in showing how an orthodox Catholic and dogmatic perspective can be reconciled with a Nietzschean anthropology, if, but only if, the latter is interpreted in neo-Darwinian and socio-biological terms. However, this very attempt renders its analysis extremely dubious about Nietzsche, for only a Nietzsche that is completely rethought in the light of recent authors such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett would provide the fit, which the book alleges to exist. As such, the presentation of the arguments of Dawkins and Dennett by Deane provides a welcome insight into how the teachings of evolutionary biology, as reformulated by these authors, may be made congruent with a faith-based view that is today called creationism, with its doctrines of Adamic fallenness and reconciliation in the sacrifice of Christ. But it unnecessarily twists the teachings of Nietzsche in a direction that obscures the real support that a more faithful interpretation of Nietzsche's texts could render to a non-dogmatic vision of the teachings of Jesus.

The central claim of Deane's book is based on the theology of the protestant thinker Karl Barth who asserts that the Biblical fall of man and the reconciliation of an elected and fallen humanity with the creator God through the sacrifice of his Son are not to be thought as two distinct and successive times in human history. Rather, they are to be seen as the eternal co-presence in time of sin and redemption, through a doctrine of "double-predestination" (168). Faith in the "royal man Jesus" would offer to all human

beings the ever-present possibility of redemption from sin. Human sinfulness would thereby have to be rethought as the necessary “other” of redemption, preordained by the Maker of the universe. With sin thus becoming necessary and “behovely”, in the apt phrase of Juliana of Norwich, historical time would no longer be divided into a “before” and an “after”, nor would salvation be available to some, but not to others. As a corollary, revenge phantasies would no longer be able to receive nourishment from the division of humanity into the camps of the elect and the reprobate. This very positive view of human fallenness constitutes, in my view, one of the chief messages of this very learned book. It is odd, however, that this exoneration of humankind from its imagined metaphysical burdens is not brought into closer connection with Nietzsche’s view of the innocence of all becoming, and his radical denial of personal responsibility for one’s character. These themes in Nietzsche clearly invite all, in Nietzsche’s phrase, to “forgive oneself one’s character”. Instead, Deane invokes Nietzsche’s teaching, as augmented by the theories of Darwin, Dawkins and Dennett, merely as the best statement on the condition of human fallenness which supposedly is driven by a “rage for power”, and which is based on an “ontology of violence”.

Much more could have been said about Nietzsche’s Christian heritage and how this background influenced his critique of Christianity. Nothing is made of the fact that Nietzsche’s theories are intimately connected to his personal sufferings and to his view that these sufferings were the consequence of his resentment-based and centuries-old Christian upbringing. Nothing is said about the view of Nietzsche that the whole history of Jesus’ teachings is a history of its distortions through the revenge psychology of Paul.

Indeed, Nietzsche's seemingly very "Christian" political project of willing to redeem humanity from the spirit of revenge, his emphasis on overcoming the negative properties of many Christian souls, such as "unknown envy", and the outcome of organized Christianity as the revealing in our time of its secret nihilism are not discussed. The word resentment is, I believe, mentioned two or three times in the text, but does not figure in the index.

Nihilism is discussed, as if it were a personal choice with everyone free to be or not to be a nihilist, and not, as Nietzsche believed, the inescapable fate of modernity. The author does not see this nihilistic fate as implicit in the very functioning of technological society with its whole-scale rape of nature. Nor is Nietzsche's view acknowledged that Christian metaphysics has given rise to an aggressive techno science, because this metaphysics was from its inception in a Platonic and Paulinian mis-interpretation of the teachings of Jesus distorted into an askesis based in a "mortification of the flesh." This mortification then made possible an aggressive stance toward the natural, which by its very operation also undermined the faith that had produced it. The closeness of Nietzsche, the Christian man, to Jesus, the royal man, by way of a powerful "imitatio" in a way of a life of courageously endured suffering and heroically transfigured misery is thereby obscured. His attempts to heal himself from his decadent Christianity and thereby to show to Christian culture the way to heal itself from the disease of nihilism are never considered. No attention is given to Nietzsche's view that there are two kinds of *askesis*, one employed by weak life forces that result in willessness, a weakening and a greedy selfishness called altruism. This askesis is that which made organized Christianity

powerful enough to define the fate of the planet, and it is now imposed on most humans in the form of punitive moralisms. However, this Christian askesis based in negation, in the view of Nietzsche, was derived from an earlier philosophical and positive askesis in the service of strengthening life, which needs to be revived to reawaken the generosity of soul associated with the gift-giving virtue. Meanwhile, in this period of the transition through nihilism, free-spirited followers of the Joyful Wisdom are called upon to practice an askesis in the service of life and thus to prepare the way for the philosophical founding of a people of humankind.

The author follows Heidegger in regarding Nietzsche as still a metaphysician and not as someone who has overcome metaphysics. Accordingly, the will to power for both Deane and Heidegger is a metaphysical construct, a *hypokeimenon* that underlies the processes of truth formations and truth claims. However, unlike Heidegger, Deane does not see the will to power as the hypokeimenon that has historically structured the entire Platonic-Christian regime of truth, and which now reveals itself in our time as the secret impulse behind our culture. Deane is thus not able to see Catholic dogma as also a will to power. Instead, he sees Nietzsche's perhaps questionable theorem as being advanced as an absolutely held empirical truth claim. He hopes to unmask this claim by using the Neo-Darwinism of Dawkins, Dennett and others as a "Trojan horse" by which he hopes to overpower the fortress of Nietzsche's thought by treachery from within. He aims thereby to involve Nietzsche in the standard contradiction that seemingly afflicts all Skeptical reasoning about propositional truths claims, namely, that, if all truth claims are relative, this truth claim is also relative. However, this does not even begin to approach

the subtlety of Nietzsche's reasoning about truth. Neither the positivistic, nor the pragmatic conceptions of truth would withstand the critique of Nietzsche. This critique is based on the fact that all empirical sentences must involve some form of an understanding of the *adequatio rei et intellectus* and a "corralling of language" into a logic of non-contradiction, and thus have to be formulated in some language, and hence always involve a fictionalization of both signifier and signified. This is even more the case for the propositions of logic and mathematics, and Nietzsche sees it as applicable to everything he says, including the basic concept of will to power. Hence this "Trojan horse" is unable to take this fortress, either by stealth or by force. A better approach to Nietzsche's reasoning about truth would have to begin with a consideration of his consistent belief that a philosophy is always "an involuntary biography of soul" of the philosopher who enters the theater of the human condition as a "tyrant of truth". Thus, the saying attributed to Jesus to the effect that: "I am the way, the life and the truth, and none shall come unto the father except by me", is much closer to Nietzsche's reasoning about truth. (emphasis mine).

This having been said, this is a very learned and ably reasoned book about Christian theology and some of its major exponents, both Catholic and Protestant, and its connection to contemporary life sciences. It is very badly edited, containing many typographical and grammatical errors, such as frequent confusions between "there" and "their" and consistent omissions of commas before and after "however". But these strictures are no argument against the considerable virtues of this book.