

Modernity in the Mirror:

Nietzsche's Economy: Modernity, Normativity and Futurity,

By Peter R. Sedgwick, Palgrave MacMillan, 2007

Reviewed by Frank Chouraqui, Warwick

As one of its prominent inaugurators, Nietzsche haunts modernity—and us moderns—both backwards and forward. He haunts us like the origin always haunts the present, like the essence always haunts the existent, and like the present haunts the future. Of course, the genealogist in him was acutely aware of the connections between essence, origins and futurity as well as the typically modern fascination with modernity, which now leads us to read him again and again, in an attempt to relieve and satisfy our fascination with ourselves, moderns.

If we read Nietzsche, therefore (that is, if we read him from any other perspective than some narrow antiquarian urge), it is because he is (at least partly) a reflection of our condition. After Nietzsche, 'modernity' denotes the necessary unity of modernity and its own awareness; a subject that doesn't cease to stare at itself in the mirror; a subject who finds its identity in being its own object. For us moderns, part of this staring is achieved in reading Nietzsche.

As an author who understands Nietzsche's standing as a point where modernity meets the discourse about itself, Peter R. Sedgwick has located the worthy, perhaps even essential task, of elucidating Nietzsche's picture of the modern condition through a concept supposedly discreet in Nietzsche and protuberant in modern life:

economy. As he writes: 'the world of modernity is also the world of economics in its most assertive of historical forms' (Preface, ix). If Nietzsche haunts us backwards, and if modernity is correct to find itself in staring at Nietzsche, it must also find *economy* in Nietzsche. Indeed, the tension between the relative absence of any discussion of economics in Nietzsche's text and its omnipresence in modern life could threaten the general assumption that Nietzsche *must* haunt us, and therefore, that we must read Nietzsche for more than just historical reasons.

It doesn't take long for Sedgwick to relieve this tension. In his first two chapters entitled 'Economy and Society in Nietzsche's Middle Period Works' and 'Humankind, the Measurer of All Things,' he produces ample evidence for Nietzsche's concern for economics. Nietzsche's 'economic talk' is rich, diverse, original, and spreads across many works and several years. The first chapter offers a presentation of all economic themes in the middle period books, laying welcome emphasis on oft-disregarded texts from *Human All Too Human*, *Daybreak* and the *Gay Science* (although inexplicably, much of chapter II—pp. 28-38—is spent discussing aphorisms of book V of the *Gay Science*, added by Nietzsche in 1886—hardly the 'middle period').

In all these texts Sedgwick sees Nietzsche as laying out a certain economical worldview, where human reality is determined by a dialectic of advantages and disadvantages and where the human is defined as he who measures in order to place everything on a scale, thereby laying down a network of equivalences and effectively, inventing money.

Sedgwick's argument begins with an interesting remark on a text from paragraph 6 of the third *Untimely Meditation*, where Nietzsche criticizes modern, 'timely' men, by comparing them with interchangeable, mass-produced coins. Sedgwick disregards the metaphorical nature of this expression, and concludes from this text that society means 'being inexorably subject to the demands of mercantilism' (p. 2). As a result, Sedgwick makes the convincing argument that Nietzsche sees modernity as alienation, and culture and rationality as alienating forces. Then, he furthers this argument with considerations on the nature/culture divide. For Sedgwick humankind introduces economics as a drive for profit, which is not present in nature, because 'nature, in short, does not operate in order to make a profit' (p. 3); he concludes that 'nature and modernity thus stand opposed with regard to their dominant tendencies in Nietzsche's text' (p. 3). This opposition, however, is ambiguous, because, Sedgwick continues, 'there is nothing more natural than the use of money' (p. 6). The link between the two seemingly paradoxical ideas remains implicit, even though Sedgwick does point to the continuum of nature and un-nature established by Nietzsche in *Human All Too Human*, 1 (p. 7). Therefore, Sedgwick concludes with reference to *Daybreak*, 203 by regretting that ranks of money now stand for natural ranks of power, and thus falsify the natural hierarchical order (in the same way, one might add, as ranks of value falsify the natural hierarchy in the *Genealogy*). The consequence of such a monetary world, Sedgwick concludes, is a distortion of the natural power relations as well as a 'reification of subjectivity' (p. 20) where the 'factory slaves' (*Daybreak*, 206) become oppressed not for their lack of *power* (as in nature) but for their lack of *money*.

Chapter II addresses one of the implications of the previous chapter, namely that mankind introduced the economic system to the world, and that it is this 'economic

mode of behavior that constitutes our essence' (p. 66). First, Sedgwick shows how the self-alienation described in chapter I leads Nietzsche to characterize modern men as 'actors to the extent that their self-understanding is unconsciously molded and distorted by the act itself» (p. 30). This is because self-alienation brings about trends, fashions, and in Nietzsche's terms, 'timeliness,' which are just so many illusions. As Sedgwick suggests perceptively, what Nietzsche calls 'timeliness' (transitoriness) is a form of temporality which is paradoxically unable to give birth to any future: 'Ceaseless change at the same time, denotes ceaseless present' (p. 34). There follows a genealogical extrapolation from the opening aphorisms of *Human All Too Human*, in which Sedgwick establishes how Nietzsche regards the human mind as an 'equating' device, and how this equating makes economics possible. As a consequence, Sedgwick offers the reader a profound insight: the transitory aspect of modern life is expressed in terms of a *convertibility* of things and time into money (p. 38); of selves into masks and acts (p. 40); and by extension, of selves into religious and moral values, through sacrifice (p. 46, 52). As a result, mankind must be defined as the measuring species and therefore, as the self-alienating species. Indeed, Sedgwick seems to suggest interestingly that the human as measurer alienates itself *even as* it is involved in the act of measuring because it uses itself as the measure as well as a measurer for things. The human does this, it is implied, by way of language, therefore covering his environment with a web of metaphors, that is to say, a *linguistic* economy.

Having established the omnipresence of economical themes in Nietzsche in his two opening chapters, Sedgwick sets out to give more relief to this omnipresence. Chapter III, entitled 'The Great Economy' explores the theme of economics no longer in anthropologico-historical terms, but in cosmological ones. This gives

Sedgwick his most substantial and successful chapter. First, the discussion moves to the textual context of the later works, by drawing its problematic from Nietzsche's discussion of the 'internalization of man' in *The Genealogy of Morality*, II, 16 (p. 68). Sedgwick regards this internalization as the mechanism that leads from a certain monetary lifestyle to a moral type of trade where sin is paid for with guilt. Sedgwick writes: 'the sense of guilt that is characteristic of bad conscience is a reinterpretation of the creditor-debtor relationship' (p. 70). Further, Sedgwick elaborates on Nietzsche's claim that the 'internalization of man' made man 'more interesting' by giving him a soul to conclude that this transposition of the economic level to the moral level opened the space for a greater economy, which for Sedgwick is 'the seed out of which all human greatness springs' (p. 70) insofar as humans are now 'open to being fashioned' (p. 82).

This means that the economic mode of being of mankind is responsible for its perfectibility. In a broad re-arrangement of the theses presented in an article from 2005,¹ Sedgwick shows how the relations of the drives that make up the human self can be expressed in terms of an economic give-and-take. This, Sedgwick argues, offers a precious chance for a fruitful futurity, because the struggle that defines us can be *optimized* (through breeding, presumably). Sedgwick's insight is that at this stage, Nietzschean virtue must be re-formulated in economic terms: virtues are measured against their economic efficacy, 'the virtues, in other words, receive their *justification* from the notion of economy' (p. 99). The chapter concludes by emphasizing the ambiguity of Nietzsche's position: even as Nietzsche rejects a society and a modernity sold out to 'commercialism,' he employs the same methods as modern capitalism towards the excellence of mankind (p. 109). This, Sedgwick

¹ Peter Sedgwick, 'Violence, Economy and Temporality, Plotting the Political Terrain in *the Genealogy of Morality*,' in *Nietzsche-Studien*(2005): pp. 163-185.

suggests, indicates that Nietzsche's 'great economy' must be recognized as 'the Economy of the Overman.' This is the object of Chapter IV.

There, Sedgwick focuses on an economical formulation of Zarathustra's rhetoric of sacrifice, bestowing and exchange. 'Zarathustra's love of man,' Sedgwick writes, 'is love of its potential' (p. 116) and this means that we must *exchange* the actual man for the potential man. This leads to a reappraisal of the Zarathustran notion of sacrifice: 'the exchange,' Sedgwick says strikingly, 'is one of sacrificing what we are now for what our kind could become' (p. 117). In accordance with the claims of chapter III, the economy that Nietzsche (like Zarathustra) promotes, is *internal* economy. This explains why Zarathustra's speech on the 'three metamorphoses' (which aims at a transformation of the self) insists on acquiring self-possession by becoming able to renounce the past. This exchange is achieved by way of 'forgetfulness' (p. 123). In its opposition to the past, this self-possession is a promise of futurity: it produces a new man through culture. As Sedgwick writes, 'notions of activity and creativity sum up the self' (p. 129) and the self is the currency which Zarathustra wishes us to invest into the future, 'the greater the investment, Sedgwick writes, the greater the future return on that investment' (p. 130). For Sedgwick, therefore, the message of Zarathustra culminates in his rhetoric of redemption, which is best expressed in terms of trade. Therefore 'redemption' is attained through the optimal organization of the self, leading to the 'Gift-Giving Virtue'. Here, the internal economics of the self become correlated to the great economics of world redemption. Sedgwick writes: 'it is only by following the potential endowed to us in the form of our economic nature as primitive exchangers that it is possible to redeem humanity and make sense of its suffering at the hands of the self-imposition of culture» (p. 146). The correlation thus established between the present self and the redemption of the

world means that a possibility for a fertile future is to be found in the self of the promised *overman*.

Sedgwick's concluding chapter, entitled 'Philosophical Temptations: Economy and Futurity' focuses therefore on the possibilities and expectations contained in such a promise. These include the transfiguration of monetary economics into 'spiritual economics' (with philosophy as the new currency, pp. 147-153), and the redemption of the exploitative system described in the *Genealogy* now transformed into an active form of philosophical breeding (pp. 154-161). This maintains mankind in a condition of permanent but fruitful effort and suffering, as it constantly gives birth to the future (pp. 161-180), however, giving birth to this new future (and to the humanity of tomorrow) shall allow us to 'sublimate' ourselves (pp. 180-181). This chapter therefore builds upon the idea found in *Zarathustra* that the great economist trades the present for the future. In this sense, selves are no longer described as the mere meeting point of the present and the future, but within it, of the individual and the social and of the psychological and the historical. Indeed, Sedgwick suggests, the economic picture bestows the present self with the power to redeem tomorrow's society.

Sedgwick's book is clearly successful in pointing out how variations on the theme of trade map out entirely the realm of human existence described by Nietzsche. The question, therefore, is the status of such variations. The greatest achievement in Sedgwick's book is to forcefully establish the omnipresence of economical rhetoric throughout Nietzsche's works. This is achieved in the first two chapters, and sustained throughout the book. No one will close this book (as many of us may have opened it) doubting that any talk of 'Nietzsche's Economy' has any relevance. Yet, there is an intentional and promising ambiguity in the title of the book, which allows

one to expect more: what is the status of the title's genitive? Does 'Nietzsche's economy' refer to the economy *of* Nietzsche's thought, to Nietzsche's theory of economics, or to Nietzsche's economical representation of ideas that may or may not be economical in essence (for example, anthropological or cosmological)? Or is Sedgwick trying to make the deeper point that there is a level where all three are unified? If so, the point, although crucial, is never explicitly made in the book. This leaves us with a certain confusion regarding the book's true focus, and this confusion can only be solved by way of a strong and consistent definition of what exactly Sedgwick (and, if possible, Nietzsche) means by 'economy.' For Sedgwick, economy must be understood as 'the economically inspired notions of exchange, credit, debit, sacrifice, labor, possession, expenditure, surplus, measuring, weighing, evaluation and the like' (Preface, x). In place of a definition therefore, the reader is offered a manifold of notions which are admittedly all related to economics, but are undoubtedly related to other traditional Nietzschean concepts too (for example, power and incorporation) and more importantly, related to economics in several ways, and in diverse degrees.

This has, I think, unfortunate consequences, two of which I will try to detail. The first is the clash between levels of readings of Nietzsche's texts and the second is the refusal to place the analysis at the level of systematic ontology.

By giving himself a non-unified characterization of economics, Sedgwick succeeds in reinforcing his first point, which is that Nietzsche's 'economic talk' is omnipresent since this characterization is broad enough to include a wide variety of expressions. Unfortunately, it makes any unified argument impossible and therefore it hinders his deeper point, which is to provide a *philosophical* account of the importance of

economics for Nietzsche. As a result, the author often appears at best to be jumping from one economic expression (e.g.: measure, exchange, sacrifice) to another, and at worst, to be jumping from one word ('trade,' 'commerce,' but also 'workers,' 'mass culture,' 'modernity' etc...) to another, based on a recurrent assumption that these words essentially belong in the economical realm. This approach necessarily leads to a largely semantic approach to Nietzsche's texts (see esp. pp. 35-42 for an example). To an extent, this makes for a refreshing read when Sedgwick openly takes the time to let the texts linger, and to dwell on oft-neglected passages and formulations (see for example the presentations of *Daybreak*, 183 and 18 on pp. 51-52).

The obvious pitfall however, is to overlook the crucial distinction between *philosophical content* and *metaphor*. Too many times, Sedgwick appears to uncritically bring into his satchel of economic references some of Nietzsche's formulations without assessing which of the *expression* or the *thought* itself is truly economical. In chapter II for example, Nietzsche's rhetoric of hierarchy is interestingly described in economic terms, by way of the concepts of domination, threats and social interaction (pp. 55-64). However, Sedgwick does not provide any argument for his preference for an economical approach rather than, say, a hierarchical, power-based one. Similarly, in chapter III, Sedgwick is content to express 'all manifestations of existence (including the most trivial) *in terms of* the drive for preservation' (my emphasis), and to reformulate this drive as 'the economy of human preservation' (p. 71). Again, it seems that the link is only metaphorical, at least in the absence of any argument otherwise. In chapter IV, Sedgwick quotes Nietzsche 'In general, everything is *worth as much as one has paid for it*² (p. 102; 12:9 [45]). Yet, the context makes it clear that Nietzsche says 'paying' in a non-monetary sense here. Does it

² 'Im Allgemeinen ist jedes Ding so viel werth, als man dafür bezahlt hat.'

mean it is also a non-economical sense? Not necessarily, but the issue certainly deserves discussion, and indicates that in order to understand the text, we must allow for different levels of sense (metaphorical and explicit) within Nietzsche's economic rhetoric. The same goes for the economic interpretation of Zarathustra's gift-rhetoric (p. 115), and Sedgwick's tendencies to express the will to power in economical *terms*, without demonstrating why this is better than the reverse (p. 127). When we express certain ideas *in economic terms*, what is the status of these *terms*? To this reviewer, they are metaphorical, and only thus can we bring cosmological, psychological, monetary and normative economics under the same concept; to the author, they are not, but his argument for this remains missing. As a consequence, some readers may find it difficult to establish to which extent this book is about Nietzsche's thought and to what extent, about his language.

However, rather than denoting a weakness on the author's part, I believe that this ambiguity hints to his philosophical instincts. Among them, a possibly postmodern aversion for definitions and the assumption that there is nothing outside the discourse, that any unification of *terms* under general *ideas* is dangerous (to the point of being sometimes led to mere paraphrase, e.g. p. 36) and above all, a reluctance to do any ontology (resulting in a near-absolute absence of mentions of the will to power). As respectable a philosophical option as this may be, it is this reviewer's opinion that Nietzsche's talk of economics, if it is to be built into a full-fledged philosophical topic, requires to be analyzed in terms of its philosophical stakes, and that those stakes are best brought to light in an ontological perspective. This is of course not a philosophical discussion to be engaged here, so I shall only limit my argument to one remark based on some texts overlooked by Sedgwick.

In a famous *Nachlass* fragment, Nietzsche says that when faced with the question of who gets to live or die (in the breeding humanity of the future), we really ‘stand before a problem of economics’ (12:10 [59]). This fragment is clearly connected with Nietzsche’s cosmological—if not ‘great’ in Sedgwick’s sense—economy as expressed by the affirmation that ‘regarded mechanistically, the energy of the totality of becoming remains constant; regarded economically, it rises to a high point and sinks down in an eternal circle’ (12:10 [138]). These two remarks combined, I believe, suggest that we must view Nietzsche’s use of economical language in terms of a management of *energy* related only *metaphorically* to human, socio-historical, and capitalistic economy. If this is the case, one may consider that this management of energy is best expressed by Nietzsche’s own hypothesis of the will to power, or as Nietzsche says, of the ‘overall quantum of power’ (11:38 [12]). To be sure, this ‘overall quantum’ establishes in Nietzsche’s cosmology one of the basic principles of economics, the principle of scarcity. As a result of this, in good economics, we must make the most of what we have, optimize power, in Sedgwick’s terms. This optimization is for Nietzsche the very essence of the will to power, whose basic activity is to redirect alien forces into its own direction through incorporation, that is to say, of replacing conflict with mutual reinforcement. Must we, simply because this process may be expressed *in terms of* economics, replace Nietzsche’s concept of power with Sedgwick’s concept of economics? Only the answer to this question contains the final judgment on Sedgwick’s book.

Nietzsche’s Economy is a complete and effective exploration of the economic motif at work throughout Nietzsche’s writings. Not only is the book original in scope and in treatment, it opens a truly refreshing set of possibilities to the Nietzsche scholar, and to us learners of—and actors in—modernity. The primary goal of the book, namely,

to establish the economic theme as a fully relevant domain of Nietzsche's work is successfully reached. Further, and beyond possible debate, Sedgwick's core insight, which is to show how the economic rhetoric in Nietzsche takes place at the level of his critique of both the socio-economic setup of his society and at a greater, cosmological and psychological level, is a welcome contribution to the task of rejuvenating the Nietzsche scholarship.