
Robert Pippin has been writing about Nietzsche for the past thirty years, but *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* is the first unified book-length study of Nietzsche to appear from one of his most incisive, subtle, and important readers. Originally presented as a series of lectures in 2004 at the Collège de France, *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* systematically gathers Pippin’s reflections on one central question that animates and informs his thinking about Nietzsche, modernity, subjectivity, and philosophy over the past decades: why does Nietzsche claim “psychology” is so essential and fundamental to doing what is called “philosophy,” or perhaps to bringing what is called philosophy to an end? The book is organized as an answer to that question in the mode of an attention to four major tropes or literary images or “alternative psychological pictures” (46) that figure consistently throughout Nietzsche’s works: the idea that truth is a woman; the idea of a specifically gay science; the death of God; and the image of lightning being coincident with its flash, or the doer with the deed. Pippin begins, furthermore, not simply by citing these tropes as central points of interest but by asking why it should be at all that Nietzsche would relay or disclose ideas so pivotal to his thinking in the form of literary images and metaphors.

At the heart of *Nietzsche, Psychology, and First Philosophy* is a total reorientation of the way of thinking about Nietzsche’s project in philosophy or, perhaps more appropriately put, Nietzsche’s project in thinking and writing—his doing, what he’s “up to.” Pippin’s thesis is novel: “Nietzsche is much better understood not as a great German metaphysician, or as the last metaphysician of the West, or as the destroyer or culminator of metaphysics, or as very interested in metaphysics or a new theory of nature at all, but as one of the great ‘French moralists’” (9). As particularly relevant for Nietzsche, Pippin singles out among the moralists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Montaigne, La Rouchefoucauld, and Pascal. He also claims that Montaigne, with his combination of deep and consequential skepticism yet cheerful, magnanimous free spirit, acts as a kind of ideal for Nietzsche (one whose peace of mind Nietzsche—with his rantings and shrieks and periodic hysterics—was never quite able to emulate). The “Montaigne problem”—how to remain brave and proud in the face of dismal realities and discoveries, how to live free of the taint of various moralisms, how to undertake a truly “gay science”—thus haunts Nietzsche throughout his career, becomes determinate in his thinking, and internally and necessarily leads him to the specific problems that occupy him in his works.

The most rewarding and penetrating aspects of Pippin’s arguments about Nietzsche’s new psychology have to do with the interrelation he identifies and carefully traces between Nietzschean psychology and the project of genealogy, or between the psyche and historical consciousness. For Nietzsche’s understanding of the psyche’s realities throughout his works, as Pippin points out, is *epochal* and never simply typological or a matter of some
kind of fixed natural instincts. This means that our prereflective horizons of cares, desires, and commitments—our very psyches or souls—for Nietzsche “must be folded into some sort of historical story” (31). Pippin’s account of Nietzsche’s model of psychological dynamics thus has the effect of severing Nietzsche’s thinking almost wholly from ideas about inherent internal drives or from naturalistic accounts of human behavior and motivation. Following Pippin’s suggestive claim, therefore, to call Nietzsche a psychologist is ultimately to call him a historian, a historian and social diagnostician primarily of the spiritually vacant culture and world “we moderns” inhabit.

Pippin’s various close analyses (and much of the reward of this book lies in its newly illuminating rereadings and reinterpretations of very well-known images and passages) thus focus on this problem of spiritual and cultural death or collapse, or of nihilism, a phenomenon that Pippin interprets not as a failure of knowledge, courage, or strength but as a failure of desire and love—a deficiency that Nietzsche repeatedly couches in specifically *erotic* terms. Pippin understands one possible form of prevailing over nihilism as what Nietzsche famously called self-overcoming, a concept deeply linked for Nietzsche to his very characterization of “psychology,” self-consciousness, and self-dissatisfaction. Pippin puts the problem of self-overcoming in recognizably dialectical terms: how can a subject have or be in a negative relation to itself? And how is this kind of self-negation also the greatest form of self-affirmation (59)? As Pippin notes, the historical overcoming of our modern skepticism, world-weariness, and boredom thus has to involve a distinct tension (as in a taut bow) between contempt and affirmation, “a generally negative as well as positive stance toward some current set of standing attitudes, commitments, and ideals” (112). In the final chapters of the text, Pippin suggests that this paradoxical and complex psychological self-relation lies at the heart of Nietzsche’s uncommon conception of freedom.

What is most refreshing and valuable about Pippin’s approach to Nietzsche in this book is that he disregards the avenues paved for him by the signposts set up by the traditional philosophical divide almost entirely. It is not simply that Pippin’s study straddles in some way the two sides of the analytic/continental divide but, more significantly, that he effectively is able to ask questions and to interrelate questions that have traditionally belonged to different *kinds* of readers of Nietzsche. For example, he is able to combine a precision about epistemological questions with a continuous awareness of the problems raised by the unconventional, elliptical, and even odd form of Nietzsche’s writings and their utter resistance to assimilation by standard philosophical theory. In other words, Pippin’s awareness of the interpretive paradoxes opened up by Nietzsche’s texts does not compromise his own commitment to a lucid, intelligent, and insightful account of the very problems involved in reading a philosopher so fixated on confusing, alarming, amusing, shaming, and inspiring his readers.

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