

Individual and Community in Nietzsche's Philosophy

JULIAN YOUNG, Editor

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This engaging collection of essays wrestles with the relationship between individual and community in Nietzsche's philosophy. Scholars of Nietzsche have tended to read him as valuing the exceptional or elite individual more highly than the community. While several contributors to this volume have advocated the individualist view, the various contributions advocating a communitarian reading are more interesting.

Julian Young, for instance, argues that Nietzsche adopts and maintains throughout his works a Hegelian-Wagnerian commitment to community as "the essential source of meaningful, flourishing lives" (19). According to Young, Nietzsche thinks that the majority of individuals are incapable of living meaningful, happy lives unless they participate in a community unified by a shared ethos. While it may seem obvious that Nietzsche holds little regard for the majority, which he often disparagingly refers to as the 'herd' or the 'rabble,' Young argues that this could not be further from the truth. Young's Nietzsche does not value the exceptional individual or free spirit over and above the majority; rather, the free spirit is valuable only insofar as "he preserves the conditions in which most people are able to find meaningful, happy lives" (25). Free spirits are the spiritual leaders of the community responsible for ensuring its continued (conscious) evolution. And, according to Young, it is only as leaders of the community that the free spirits live meaningful lives. On Young's reading, then, all roads lead back to the community as being the highest object of value for Nietzsche.

While several other contributors offer compelling versions of a communitarian reading, they all face the same challenge of having to account for the undeniably high value Nietzsche places on the exceptional individual. In this vein, Maudemarie Clark and Monique Wonderly take issue specifically with Young's reading, arguing that, although Nietzsche does in fact value the community, he does so, at least in part, because of the role community has in producing exceptional individuals. In other words, they argue that the community has instrumental value as a means of producing exceptional individuals, who, they claim, have intrinsic value for Nietzsche. They stop short, however, of taking up the opposite position to Young stating that "we cannot infer from the fact that one role of the community is to produce and support exceptional individuals that the community has *only* instrumental value" (134). Indeed, Clark and Wonderly hypothesize that Nietzsche's view may also allow the ideal community to have intrinsic value as a work of art exhibiting a well-crafted "internal hierarchal structure" (136). Moreover, they argue that the exceptional individual may also have instrumental value for the flourishing of the community in addition to its certain intrinsic value. Clark and Wonderly thus leave open the possibility of integrating an individualist and a communitarian reading, something that Christine Swanton argues for in another essay found in this volume.

Perhaps, however, the most interesting approach to this issue is Jeff Malpas' topographical reading, wherein he argues for the centrality of place and the relation to place in Nietzsche's philosophy. Malpas suggests that the various locations in which Nietzsche resided and his relationship to those places is not of mere biographical significance, but is rather intimately connected to his thought. "Nietzsche's thinking," Malpas

writes, “is indeed embedded in his surroundings, and dependent upon them” (203). This is something that Nietzsche was acutely aware of and, as such, Malpas argues, Nietzsche recognized the ambiguity of the distinction between ‘inner’ and ‘outer.’ According to Malpas, Nietzsche does not believe that thought is separable from the object of thought or the environment of the thinker. Applying this insight to the central question of this volume, Malpas suggests that there exists no real contradiction between individual and community in Nietzsche’s writing. “The apparent opposition of individual and community,” Malpas writes, is really “a dynamic interaction, an agonistic play, in which each element is itself determined in relation to the other, but a tension that can therefore never be entirely resolved without loss of the elements themselves” (210). In this sense, it is short-sighted to think of Nietzsche as valuing either individual or community more highly than the other. Malpas concludes that the supposed contradiction between individual and community arises when we abstract from the dynamic interplay of Nietzsche’s thought and instead read his texts in purely propositional terms.

The diversity of perspectives presented in this volume serves to ignite rather than resolve the tension between an individualist and a communitarian reading of Nietzsche. This is a welcome state of affairs, given the dominance that individualist readings have had in Nietzsche scholarship. What this volume definitively demonstrates is that a straightforward individualist reading, which fails to acknowledge the importance of community for Nietzsche, is untenable. For anyone interested in exploring Nietzsche’s social or political philosophy, this book will prove invaluable.

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Thick Concepts

SIMON KIRCHIN (Ed.)

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Thick Concepts, edited by Simon Kirchin, is the first collection of papers on a very important debate in metaethics and normativity. This debate is, firstly, about the relation between *thin* (e.g., good, bad, right, ought, etc.) and *thick* (e.g., brave, brutal, honest, rude, etc.) concepts, and moreover about the difference between these concepts, assuming there is one. The orthodox position in this debate is that thin concepts have only evaluative content, while thick concepts have both evaluative and descriptive content.

Thick Concepts, a collection of 12 papers, plus a very useful introduction written by the editor, not only represents a good introduction to this important debate, it also directs the future of this debate. Rather than introduce all the contributions of the book, I will focus on two questions that flow throughout the book. The first question is about the distinction we should accept between thin and thick concepts, while the second, focusing more on thick concepts themselves, has to do with the possibility of disentangling the evaluative from the descriptive element of thick concepts. These two questions, of course, are interrelated and cannot be isolated.

About the first question, Bernard Williams—a pioneer in the analysis of thick concepts—considered thick concepts as both action-guided and world-guided, while