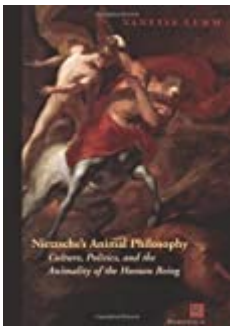
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Vanessa Lemm. *Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy: Culture, Politics, and the Animality of the Human Being.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2009. xiv + 244 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-3027-3; $24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-3028-0.

Reviewed by Christian J. Emden (Rice University)

Published on H-German (February, 2010)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Democratizing Nietzsche?

Over the last ten or fifteen years, work on German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche has undergone a dramatic transformation among philosophers and intellectual historians. One of the effects of the decline of postmodern theorizing, for instance, was that Nietzsche could be taken more seriously as a political philosopher, especially within the Anglo-American tradition.[1] Likewise, the emergence of a more cautious philosophical naturalism beyond the reductionist physicalism that was very much *en vogue* among many American philosophers during the 1980s meant that the biological underpinnings of many of Nietzsche's arguments were taken up by philosophers of science as well as by philosophers who sought to bridge what has become an unfortunate analytical-continental divide.[2] Political theory and philosophical naturalism, then, are the areas in which Nietzsche's work had the most lasting and perhaps most profound impact, continuing to shape, often without being explicitly acknowledged, much contemporary discussion.[3] For Nietzsche, though, the political was always connected to the biological and vice versa.[4] Against this background, it is of no surprise that the growing interest in Nietzsche's writings runs somewhat parallel with the equally growing interest in Michel Foucault's notion of "bio-politics" in his later lectures at the CollÃ¨ge de France.[5] In a certain sense, one could say that Nietzsche and Michel Foucault survived the theory battles of the 1970s to the 1990s better, and more intact than most thinkers, easily being adapted to the context of a new epistemic and political constellation at the beginning of the twenty-first century. To go even one step further, a proper historical and philosophical appreciation of Nietzsche and Foucault could perhaps only gain momentum once poststructuralism and its many epigonal versions in literary criticism had run their course.

Vanessa Lemm's insightful, clearly written book makes a welcome and significant contribution to the ongoing reassessment of Nietzsche's thought. Taking Foucault's notion of "bio-politics" as its starting point and wider theoretical framework, Lemm strongly argues for a new understanding of Nietzsche as a philosopher of culture able to bridge, or rather, undercut, the divide be-

tween the mental and the natural.[6] Lemm elegantly and convincingly shows that Nietzsche's notion of "culture" differs fundamentally from the bourgeois and nationalist ideals of a *Kulturstaat* prominent in imperial Germany. Influenced by contemporary discussions in evolutionary thought–certainly Charles Darwin, but also the German tradition of *Entwicklungsmechanik* represented, for instance, by Wilhelm Roux–Nietzsche's notion of "culture" should also not be understood as an emancipation from nature, but rather as a critical "cultivation of animality" (p. 4). Although Lemm largely refrains from discussing Nietzsche's ideas within the context of the nineteenth-century life sciences–one of the weaker areas of her argument[7]–she shows with great clarity that, seen from the perspective of Nietzsche's concepts of "life" and "culture," human individuals are no special case vis-Ã -vis nature.

Such arguments are always bound up, however, with the question of politics, and while "civilization"–as a kind of negative "bio-politics"–is inevitably connected to violence and domination, Nietzsche's new understanding of "culture" seeks to unearth critically the forces at play here, leading, as it were, to a more positive, or affirmative, "bio-politics" (p. 21). It is in this respect that Lemm suggests a re-evaluation of central concepts within Nietzsche's writings, from his early critique of the correspondence theory of truth to the "sovereign individual" and the "overhuman" that can be found in his later writings from the 1880s. At the center of Nietzsche's political interests, Lemm claims, stands the idea of a "sovereign individual" able to make promises and marked by a "cultivation of individual self-responsibility" along the lines of Foucault's "care of the self".[8] Although Lemm also presents a number of intriguing interpretations of Nietzsche's epistemological reflections on metaphor and language, this political commitment constitutes the most substantial contribution of this book. Most importantly, perhaps, Lemm's focus on Nietzsche's alternative "bio-politics" allows for a translation of the latter's arguments into the present–Nietzsche, certainly, would have appreciated his characterization as a truly untimely thinker.

Despite the considerable strengths of Lemm's argument, however, her discussion of Nietzsche's political thought often proceeds, at times explicitly, against the background of the "ethic of friendship" and "ethic of the other" as these appear in the work of Emmanuel LÃ©vinas and the later Jacques Derrida.[9] While much can be said for such an approach, which tends to situate Nietzsche more firmly in the phenomenological tradition rooted in the work of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, it can also create considerable problems. The theological, indeed quasi-religious, tint of LÃ©vinas's and Derrida's ideas about ethics are not entirely compatible with Nietzsche's position. Most obviously, and most worryingly, this stance leads to a substantive de-escalation of Nietzsche's more controversial arguments. In fact, Lemm presents a highly democratized and strangely egalitarian Nietzsche, whose transvaluation of all values and radical critique of Judeo-Christian moral norms have been dissolved into a kind of neo-Humboldtian educational ideal centered on the aesthetic "cultivation of freedom" (p. 41). Despite the many perceptive interpretations of crucial passages throughout Nietzsche's Åuvre, the implications of Lemm's argument all too often tend to sanitize the more uncomfortable reflections on the nature of the political that render Nietzsche's writings relevant for contemporary political theory in the first place. As a consequence, Nietzsche's "sovereign individual" in *The Genealogy of Morality* (1887), to give but one pertinent example, takes on the influence of a Judeo-Christian humanism that is more reminiscent of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* (1779): "In contrast to the notion that sovereignty in Nietzsche designates an empowerment of the self over others, I argue that sovereignty is an empowerment of the self that results from overcoming the need to dominate others" (p. 40). For Nietzsche, however–and Lemm occasionally recognizes this–the question of the political was always linked to both the question of rule and responsibility, foreshadowing Max Weber and continuing a tradition that leads us back to the Renaissance prince as presented by NiccolÃ² Machiavelli.[10]

Much of Lemm's de-escalation of Nietzsche's political thought, it seems, has its origin in an aestheticized reading of his work, such as the early essay "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense" (1872), the second Untimely Meditation, "The Use and Disadvantages of History for Life" (1874), and his later notebooks. It is, in other words, precisely by attributing to Nietzsche an aestheticization of the historical world and by reducing his epistemological concerns to the artistic power of language, that Nietzsche's philosophical thought, especially his genealogical project, loses much of its critical, and at times tragically critical, potential. What is missing in Lemm's argument, then, is a full recognition that Nietzsche's "free spirits" and his "sovereign individual" are characterized by an "honesty" about the animality of human nature that often crosses into "cruelty."[11] Indeed, Nietzsche's continued relevance is based precisely on the very fact that he continues to pose uncomfortable questions that modern

political theory, as much as contemporary philosophy of science, have to take seriously.

Despite the shortcomings of an approach that is at pains to democratize Nietzsche, however, Lemm's study nevertheless makes a significant scholarly contribution that should trigger discussion about Nietzsche's position in political thought. Its greatest achievement lies in its bringing Nietzsche into the present, even though one can, and should, disagree about some of the wider conclusions Lemm draws from this activity.

Notes

[1]. For the current interest in Nietzsche as a political thinker, see most recently Herman W. Siemens and Vasti Roodt, eds., *Nietzsche, Power and Politics: Rethinking Nietzsche's Legacy for Political Thought* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008); and the new edition of Friedrich Nietzsche, *Political Writings*, ed. Frank Cameron and Don Dombowsky (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). See also Tamsin Shaw, *Nietzsche's Political Skepticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[2]. See, for instance, John Richardson, *Nietzsche's New Darwinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Christopher Janaway, "Naturalism and Genealogy," in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 337-352; and Brian Leiter, "Nietzsche's Naturalism Reconsidered," in *Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. John Richardson and Ken Gemes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2010). See also the recent conference "Nietzsche on Mind and Nature" at St. Peter's College, Oxford (September 11-13, 2009). A selection of the conference papers should be published next year.

[3]. Two exceptions in which Nietzsche is explicitly acknowledged are Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); and Joseph Rouse, *How Scientific Practices Matter: Reclaiming Philosophical Naturalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[4]. See Christian J. Emden, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 229-285.

[5]. See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the CollÃ¨ge de France 1978-1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, tr. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[6]. Lemm is indebted here to Sarah Kofman, *Nietzsche et la scÃ¨ne philosophique* (Paris: Editions GalilÃ©e, 1979), 289-318.

[7]. See instead the precise discussion of this context in Gregory Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology, and Metaphor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and the contributions in Thomas H. Brobjer and Gregory Moore, eds., *Nietzsche and Science* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

[8]. See Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the CollÃ¨ge de France 1981-1982*, ed. FrÃ©dÃ©ric Gros, tr. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[9]. Lemm draws specifically on Emmanuel LÃ©vinas, *TotalitÃ© et infini* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1961); and Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[10]. Although this context is important, Lemm relegates a very short discussion of Weber and Machiavelli to her endnotes (pp. 170-171, n. 11, and p. 196, n. 50).

[11]. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, tr. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), sections 44 and 227.