Reading Nietzsche

Nietzsche does not write as other philosophers write. This poses a challenge to interpreting and criticizing his philosophy. Nietzsche is not a source of philosophical theories. The way the text is written demonstrates his resistance to systematic thought, and as we will see, it is almost impossible to give a systematic exegesis of it that could amount to a 'theory'. Unlike other chapters in this book, which are able to move methodically from one part of a text to another, this chapter jumps around the text, trying to bring together the places in which Nietzsche returns to this or that theme.

Nietzsche said that he wanted to express in a page what it would take someone else a book to express (and even then, they wouldn’t succeed). But for this very reason, reading Nietzsche can be tiring. The diet is too rich for the digestion. A good approach is to read through quickly, noting sections that make a particular impact, and returning to these.

Nietzsche often says that his books are not for everyone; his insights should sound foolish, or even criminal, to those for whom they are not intended, to people who are not ‘constituted’ to hear them (§30). He was absolutely serious about this, and it is a key implication of his views. But it impacts on his style. On the one hand, he wants his readers to be able to respond to mere hints; on the other, he knows – from the response his works received – that we are deaf to his message and that he has to spell things out. The result can be a compromise, or subtle comments alternating with loud declamations.

Nietzsche’s underlying position is that the last 2000 years have been marked by fundamentally mistaken ideas, both philosophical and religious, and we are living in the last throws of these ideas. Unless we, the human race, radically change direction and make a fresh start, we are doomed to mediocrity, never to achieve greatness. The challenge human beings face is suffering – if we truly understand our existence, how can we make it bearable? Religion and philosophy have tried to give a meaning to suffering, especially a moral meaning, e.g. that our suffering in this world prepares us for an afterlife. This kind of solution, says Nietzsche, denigrates this life and this world, not redeeming it from within but by relating it to something beyond it. He asks us to consider a different response to the misery of existence, one affirms this life and seeks nothing beyond it.

Furthermore, Nietzsche does not try to be compelling, at least through rational argument. As Bernard Williams expresses it, it is better to see him as appealing to an experienced, honest, subtle and unoptimistic observer of human beings ('Nietzsche’s minimalist moral psychology'). It is better to see his 'claims' as urging us to ask something, and in a deeper way than we are used to. He aims to transform his reader’s consciousness, to show that our usual concepts and ways of thinking are inadequate to becoming all that we may be capable of.

For all these reasons, assessing Nietzsche requires great care, and quite a different approach than the one taken towards other texts.
In addition, many of his claims are historical and psychological, so if we know little of human beings and their history, we will not know how to assess these claims, and may be convinced by his rhetoric too soon. To complicate matters further, when interpreting such historical and psychological claims, we should note that Nietzsche is more concerned with movements, ways of living, types of psychology than he is with individuals or specific historical events.

Finally, when interpreting and assessing Nietzsche, we must also note the subtlety of his response to other positions. He often agrees with some aspect of another philosophy, that of Plato or Kant, say, while disagreeing with another; he often disapproves strongly of some idea or event, e.g. the beginning of Christianity, and yet simultaneously praises it. This, again, is part of his philosophy, his attempt to go beyond our usual ways of thinking.

In responding to Nietzsche as philosophers, we can what we can do with his ideas. And perhaps the main thing we can do, as we shall see, is to press philosophy, especially moral philosophy, on whether it begs its most basic questions, i.e. whether the philosophical endeavour assumes the very things it needs to prove at the very start.