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DIRK JOHNSON: NIETZSCHE'S ANTI-DARWINISM¹

Review by Thomas Waterton

Dirk Johnson's newest monograph, *Nietzsche's Anti-Darwinism (NAD)*, presents an adept and original account of the role of Darwinism in Nietzsche's development and thought. Providing detailed insights into the historical and philosophical context of Nietzsche's engagement with Darwin, Johnson shows clearly and persuasively that neither is Nietzsche's philosophy commensurable with Darwin's, nor is his apparent hostility towards Darwin reducible to fundamental misunderstandings. Contrary to such popular conceptions, Johnson's book shows – particularly through its innovative reading of Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals* – that the antagonism between Nietzsche and Darwin is truly philosophical, and that understanding this is of major importance for anyone wishing to understand Nietzsche's philosophy as a whole.

NAD is a book of two halves. The first part is devoted to making clear Darwin's 'pre-eminence' (p. 1) in Nietzsche's philosophical development as a whole, and the second to providing a detailed interpretation of *GM* as first and foremost a theoretical attack on Darwin, and one whose arguments only truly make sense and reveal their hidden meanings in their function as polemic' (p. 7). In other words, *NAD* presents both a general developmental account of Nietzsche's thought and a more focused exegesis aimed at showing in detail the culmination of this development.

¹Dirk R. Johnson, *Nietzsche's Anti-Darwinism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Concerning his first objective, Johnson pulls no punches. Darwin, he writes, 'represented the absolute starting point and unspoken framework for all of Nietzsche's subsequent investigations from the middle period on' (p. 3). Furthermore, unlike John Richardson's view in *Nietzsche's New Darwinism* (to which *NAD* is, in part, a response), he does not believe that Nietzsche's disagreements with Darwin are based on fundamental errors.² Johnson readily accepts the unlikelyness of Nietzsche having read Darwin first hand, but makes a convincing case for the scholarly accuracy of the sources through which he would have encountered him. From the period of the *Untimely Meditations* onwards, Johnson's Nietzsche is concerned with Darwinism's attempts to describe the natural origins of man's beliefs and interpretative apparatus; he is not concerned with the 'ape-genealogists' who emphasise the evolution of man *qua* physical organism. The developmental story of *NAD* begins with the 'early Darwinism' (p. 15) of Nietzsche's essay on David Strauss and his engagement with the French *monistes*. Nietzsche's relationship with Darwinism then undergoes a critical transformation in the middle period – a transformation which is particularly visible in his increasing scepticism regarding the altruism-egoism distinction. Darwinism is further and more directly rejected and radicalised in *Z*, concerning which Johnson provides intriguing (if brief) analyses of passages such as the prologue and 'The Convalescent' as revaluations of the notion of 'wills competing in nature' (p. 106). Finally, he provides an insightful exegesis of the explicitly anti-Darwinist passages in Nietzsche's later works (such as *TI* and *AC*), providing a portrait of a Nietzsche whose own thought is defined by a fundamental antagonism with Darwin.

It is in Johnson's discussion of the mature Nietzsche – both in *GM* and elsewhere – that his book really shines. Despite having some appreciation for the value of naturalism due to its role in discrediting philosophical idealism, Johnson's mature Nietzsche is not another 'clear-eyed' (p. 8) naturalist. However, neither is he the 'pure' systematic philosopher found in, to use Johnson's examples, Heidegger's or Deleuze's accounts. The Nietzsche of *NAD* occupies a subtle space between these 'two dominant traditions' (p. 9); he is both positively influenced by and deeply critical of nineteenth-century scientific discourse. This Nietzsche is a 'biological perspectivist'

(p. 103), concerned with analysing and evaluating the ways that actually existing biological types interpret phenomena without appealing to totalising perspectives, scientific or otherwise. Such a reading is informed by Johnson's understanding of the will to power as natural, interpretative self-affirmation, and his critical adoption of Deleuze's terminology of active and (re)active will. Johnson's understanding the Übermensch and the 'anti-faith' (p. 72) of the eternal return is derived from this.

While many of Johnson's interpretations of specific texts are original and persuasive, the part of his work likely to be of most scholarly interest is his reading of *GM*, which takes up the entire second half of the book. The subtitle of Nietzsche's text – 'A Polemic' – is taken seriously, with Johnson treating *GM* not as the appearance of a positive genealogical method *à la* Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, but as a destructive enterprise. The targets of this polemic are the '*Genealogists of Morals*' (p. 88), i.e. Darwin and his followers, who attempt to account for the origins of morality and other cultural practices through evolutionary narratives. Drawing attention to the 'English psychologists' of Nietzsche's preface, Johnson's approach is a refreshing departure both from the simplistic anticlericalism of some naturalist readings, and from the theoretically brilliant but interpretively dubious approach of the aforementioned Deleuzian/Foucaultian school. Also commendable is Johnson's emphasis on *GM*'s structure and holism, with each of the essays standing as a separate prong of a single argument which reaches its culmination in the third essay's conclusion against the Christian asceticism of nineteenth-century science.

GM's first essay, Johnson argues, is concerned with undermining the alleged 'impartiality' of Darwinian conceptions of 'nature' and 'fitness'. This is done through showing that the Darwinist idea of nature – nature as totalised, competitive 'playing field' in which power struggles against power – was itself a (re)active interpretation imposed on the world by weak 'priestly' types unable to endure the active self-affirmation of strong-willed 'aristocratic' types. The second essay attacks what Nietzsche sees as the quasi-teleological narrative linearity of Darwinists' descriptions of morality's origin (for example, in the 'instinctual sympathy' of the *Descent*). Nietzsche, against Darwin, describes two separate but simultaneous histories of morality, the first moving 'almost miraculously' (p. 147) from the practices of punishment and custom to the breeding of a superior sovereign individual,

²John Richardson, *Nietzsche's New Darwinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

and the second resulting in 'bad conscience' as a contingent response of one race to their conquest and enslavement by another. Finally, the third essay describes the process by which the (re)active wills of the first two essays took the form of nineteenth-century science, epitomised in (Darwinist) science's status within the most perverse form of the inherently perverse ascetic ideal: the nihilistic will to truth of 'scientific atheism'. Johnson's analysis concludes with an elaboration of what Nietzsche expects from his 'philosophers of the future', who, once liberated from these toxic interpretations, will be able to project will to power affirmatively in the spirit of the Greek *agôn*.

Johnson's reading of *GM* is remarkable in its subtlety and originality. As well as providing a coherent, holistic account, it also gives clear exegesis of many aspects of the text that have been diminished or overlooked by commentators. Among these are his analysis of the notoriously enigmatic opening sections of the second essay, his consistent mindfulness of Nietzsche's psychologism, and his attention to Nietzsche's discussion of an 'honest, unconditional atheism' (p. 199) that goes beyond the will to truth itself – an aspect of the text he shows to have been lost in Kaufmann's translation, which associates it with the 'modern scientific atheism' (p. 198) of the ascetic ideal. Even if one were unsympathetic to its anti-Darwinist orientation, these insights alone would make Johnson's analysis essential reading for any student of *GM*.

Despite this, however, there are some significant flaws with Johnson's analysis – flaws which at times leave the status of its conclusions vague, and at times seemingly unwarranted. Chief among these is Johnson's emphasis on the historical Darwin, whose role is emphasised in Nietzsche's development both above other Darwinists that Nietzsche might have been more aware of (such as Paul Rée), and above the philosophy of an 'ideal' Darwin (i.e. Darwinism). Despite admitting that 'Nietzsche does not appear to have read *The Origin of Species* (1859) or even *The Descent of Man* (1871)' (p. 3), Johnson refers to these and other works by Darwin frequently. This can be excused to a certain extent by his – in themselves persuasive – accounts of the accuracy of Darwin's German reception. However, at times this explanation is not sufficient. For example, Johnson refers in a substantive sense even to the text of Darwin's *Autobiography*, which had only just been released in English at the time of *GM*'s publication. He also occasion-

ally references sections which would have been completely unavailable at Nietzsche's time, such as those which were excised from the *Autobiography*'s original publication by Darwin's wife. For a book which is supposedly concerned with the development and articulation of Nietzsche's philosophy, Johnson's frequent discussion of such passages is confusing at best.

Also confusing is Johnson's lack of attention to the work of other Darwinists that Nietzsche was familiar with. Most glaring among these is *The Origin of Moral Sensations* by Paul Rée, which, despite being explicitly discussed in Nietzsche's preface to *GM*, only receives a single passing reference in the second part of Johnson's book as 'just one single Darwinian hypothesis' (p. 154).³ This is particularly egregious since Rée's *Origin* discusses several of the main topics of *GM* – for example, punishment and 'innate non-egoism' – which, for Johnson, are included as responses to Darwin's work.

Such objections put Johnson's claim that it is not the case 'that Nietzsche misunderstands specific points of Darwin's arguments' (p. 10) in a different light. For while it is true that, for example, Darwin locates the source of morality in 'instinctual sympathy' in the *Descent*, it would be controversial to imply that similar errors are fundamental to Darwinism *qua* evolutionary theory. Johnson's apparent inclusion of non-developmental claims about Nietzsche's relation to Darwin – that is, claims about their antagonism beyond what Nietzsche could have known – appear to have a straw man as their target. For while it is true that the second essay of *GM* throws doubt on Darwinian 'instinctual sympathy', one would now be hard-pressed to find an evolutionary biologist who accepted such an explanation for morality in the first place. When it strays from the developmental picture, Johnson's account is persuasive but often trivial – sure, Nietzsche provides resources for undermining Darwin, but evolutionary science has been doing the same thing for 150 years. As for his more generally applicable critiques of biological science, they rely on an understanding of biological perspectivism which is shown to be a persuasive reading of Nietzsche, but not one which Johnson argues for in its own right.

Finally, Johnson's 'first objective' – 'to argue for the pre-eminence of Darwin for the development and articulation of Nietzsche's philosophy' (p.

³Paul Rée, *The Origin of Moral Sensations*, in *Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Robin Small, bk. 2 (Chernitz, Ernst Schmeitzner, 1877; Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

1) – risks coming off as too ambitious. While his account of Nietzsche's development and philosophy is internally consistent and generally true to the spirit of Nietzsche's work, it does not rest on a huge amount of textual evidence. Some readers may be left unconvinced that Darwin 'quite simply represented the absolute starting point and unspoken framework for all of Nietzsche's subsequent investigations from the middle period on' (p. 3). By insisting that Nietzsche's antagonism with Darwin was primary for his development (rather than simply important), and by turning his relationships with Wagner and Schopenhauer to into mere responses to this 'unspoken framework without significant engagement with the literature on this topic, Johnson risks distracting his readers from his otherwise excellent scholarly work.

It should be emphasised, however, that when Johnson's book is considered as a whole, his scholarly work is indeed excellent. Despite the aforementioned flaws, the picture of Nietzsche's engagement with Darwin given in *NAD* is a persuasive and illuminating one: the self-described 'main thrust' of his work – 'to point out the *antagonistic* character of their relationship' (p. 1) – is extremely persuasive. Johnson's adept grasp of Nietzsche's style and thought puts a lot of pressure on those who wish to depict Nietzsche's philosophy as commensurable with Darwin's, even if his claims about Darwin's fundamentality for Nietzsche are less convincing. With his subtle and discerning analysis, Johnson has not only set the bar high for future discussions of the role of Darwin in Nietzsche's philosophy, but also provided valuable insights concerning the broader questions of Nietzsche's naturalism and the reading of *GM*. Even in the face of its flaws, *Nietzsche's Anti-Darwinism* is likely to shape these aspects of Nietzsche scholarship for years to come. And, indeed, it deserves to.

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