Truth and Science Reconsidered

An Encounter with:

Paul Franco. *Nietzsche's Enlightenment: The Free-Spirit Trilogy of the Middle Period*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011. 280 pages.

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An important current in contemporary Nietzsche Studies is the attempt to rehabilitate Nietzsche for philosophers more at home in Anglo-American traditions, many of whom have found it too easy dismiss Nietzsche as irrational and unimportant. Central to the rehabilitation effort is a renewed focus on the works that comprise Nietzsche's so-called middle or "positivistic" period: *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (1878); *Morgenröthe* (1880); and *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882).¹ It was during this time that Nietzsche was most friendly to science and most concerned with truth as an object of philosophical pursuit, and so perhaps most amenable to what has become the Anglo-American tradition.

Paul Franco's book, *Nietzsche's Enlightenment: The Free-Spirit Trilogy of the Middle Period*, aims to enter this conversation through a close study of the middle period works, revealing a Nietzsche attentive to the concerns that motivated the European Enlightenment. Franco references in his title. Franco aims to show that these concerns with science, reason, and truth remain important to Nietzsche in his post-*Gay Science* works. That is, although Nietzsche is most at home in the Enlightenment tradition during his middle period, he never abandoned this aspect of his thought for a wholesale rejection of science, human reason, and the possibility of

truth, as some readers of Nietzsche suggest. Franco offers that the free spirit ideal that animates the middle period remains a vital element of Nietzsche's thought throughout his mature work, indelibly marking the ideals expounded there.

Franco has at least three audiences in mind with this work. First, those interested in gaining for its own sake an understanding of Nietzsche's middle works. These works have been largely passed over by Nietzsche's commentators, receiving little attention relative to the mountains of material written on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Genealogy of Morals* and other of Nietzsche's mature works. Franco seems right to suggest that though writers have sometimes raided these works for isolated aphorisms, little systematic scrutiny has been devoted to showing them as coherent, important works in their own right (ix). Franco devotes the bulk of the book to just such scrutiny.

Franco wants not just to offer a careful study of the middle works but to put that study to work in service of a particular understanding of Nietzsche's oeuvre. His second audience is the reader of Nietzsche who holds a developmental account of Nietzsche's career. At least since the appearance in 2000 of *Nietzsche's Middle Period* by Ruth Abbey, whom Franco takes as an interlocutor, a developmental account of Nietzsche's work has been popular. On this reading, the concern with science, reason, and truth apparent in the middle period is overtaken in *Zarathustra* and beyond by the development of an irrational celebration of unreason, deception, and untruth. Nietzsche's science-friendly period can and should be clearly isolated from the rest of his work. Calling into question this developmental account, Franco argues that although Nietzsche's thought surely develops, he never completely loses his respect for truth and reason, and so seekers of a Nietzsche friendly to these themes need not dismiss his mature works.

Finally, Franco sometimes seems to be addressing himself to those readers of Nietzsche from continental traditions of thought who point to Nietzsche as an unflinching critic of science, reason, and truth. Franco mentions Heidegger, Deleuze, Derrida, Kofman, and Blondel as offering exaggerated postmodern claims culled too often from unpublished notebooks, leading to a type of “interpretive nihilism” in which the very possibility of taking a position is ruled out, and with it the possibility of attributing to Nietzsche any coherent set of views (xiii). Franco wants to point to aspects of Nietzsche’s work that highlight the importance of clarity, intellectual honesty, and truth as a way to win back Nietzsche from this “French and deconstructionist” school of interpretation (xiii).

Franco does a very good job of addressing himself to his first audience, those seeking for its own sake an understanding of Nietzsche’s middle works. He methodically and insightfully explores the central themes interesting Nietzsche at this point in his career. To the second audience, Franco’s project is a valuable work, though not without some interpretive difficulties. However, to the reader from the third audience, Franco’s engagement is often polemical and too seldom productive. The spectre of a French nihilist remains just offstage, a useful foil never invited into the conversation—just where a better engagement would contribute most to our thinking about Nietzsche.

Franco’s book is divided into four chapters. He devotes one chapter to each of the three middle period works, and a final chapter discusses themes in *Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Book V of *The Gay Science*, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and the various prefaces for second editions of his works that Nietzsche prepared in 1886. In chapter one, entitled “Human, All too Human and the Problem of Culture,” Franco organizes the ostensibly disparate themes of Nietzsche’s nine-part text around concerns with the foundations of a healthy culture. “Daybreak

and the Campaign against Morality,” Franco’s second chapter, sees these cultural themes supplemented by a more stringent and direct critique of morality. The third chapter, “The Gay Science and the Incorporation of Knowledge,” explores the partial and tentative turn from the positivism of the middle period towards its problematization in Nietzsche’s mature works, that is, from science to “gay science.” In the fourth chapter, “The Later Works: Beyond the Free Spirit,” Franco tries to make good on his promise to show the themes of Nietzsche’s middle period still animating his mature thought.

Each chapter begins with some biographical context from Nietzsche’s life along with material from his concurrently written letters. We read that in 1876, as Nietzsche begins writing what will become *Human, All Too Human*, he has fled Richard Wagner’s Bayreuth Festival in disgust, poised for his final break from the composer whose ostensible cultural promise had influenced Nietzsche in important ways throughout the early 1870s (1). We also read that Nietzsche begins *Daybreak* just when his health moves him to resign his professorial chair at the University of Basel—so it is as he himself becomes nomadic that his thought first approaches the mobile, aphoristic style for which he would become known (57). In a letter written as he prepares for the publication of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche distances himself from the free spirit ideal that has occupied his thinking for much of the previous six years, setting the stage for Franco’s discussion of what sort of boundary *The Gay Science* represents in Nietzsche’s thought (161). More than a stylistic device, the attempt to ground Nietzsche’s thought in his life and letters serves as an initial signal of Franco’s approach. This is a careful study that moves slowly through the months, drafts, and developing ideas. Perhaps obliquely responding to the problematization of the author/text relationship in the continental school of interpretation from which he has

already distanced himself, Franco sets as the context of his study Nietzsche's concrete life of travel, friendship, reading, and thinking.

More substantially, Franco makes artful use of Nietzsche's notebooks and reading habits in his explication of the published works. The notebook material is used judiciously to supplement and clarify published remarks rather than as a substitute for them. For example, that Nietzsche's 1880 notebooks are full of negative references to Herbert Spencer helps us to understand the bent of Nietzsche's criticisms of English morality that would appear in *Daybreak* and *The Gay Science*, even where Spencer is not named (59). Or that Nietzsche returns to the theme of incorporation of knowledge again and again in his notes as he writes *The Gay Science* helps us to understand the place of that theme when it does appear in print (101). Franco also makes frequent mention of Nietzsche's reading habits, pointing insightfully to places where whomever Nietzsche is reading at the time figures importantly in what he writes. So Nietzsche's 1878 remark that "everything *essential* in the development of mankind took place in primeval times" (Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* 2) echoes a claim made by Walter Bagehot, whom Nietzsche read in 1874 (18). Nietzsche's engagement with Kantian metaphysics is read in light of the former's 1873 reading of the Ukrainian neo-Kantian Afrikan Spir (20). And Nietzsche's criticisms in *Daybreak* of Darwinian approaches to morality are read in light of the anthropological literature of Nietzsche's day, writers such as Bagehot, Lubbock, and Tylor (63). Of course, scholarly use of biographical information, letters, notebook material, and reading habits are not new. Yet they are rarely taken up methodologically in Nietzsche Studies, wherein it is more common to offer close readings that divorce the text from any context other than the general one that formed Nietzsche's body of work as a whole. In this regard, Franco's method is fresh and effective.

In the three chapters devoted to the middle period works, Franco moves slowly, studying Nietzsche's aphorisms in the order they appear with an eye to showing their underlying organization, turning to Nietzsche's own question: "do you think this work must be fragmentary because I give it to you (and have to give it to you) in fragments?" (*HH* II 128; Franco 14) Franco's thesis is that, taken together, the three works of Nietzsche's middle period are explorations of the intertwined ideals of the free spirit and culture, including the question of how a culture suitable to the free spirit might appear. In *Human, All Too Human*, culture is "the axis around which all the other reflections found in it—on metaphysics, morality, religion, and art—revolve" (Franco 16), a point that Franco is careful to emphasize in order to trace its development. It was this concern with culture that motivated Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, the question of what can ground a culture anymore, and what can serve as its material. In *Tragedy*, Nietzsche highlighted the power of myth and music to bring a people together. In *Human, All Too Human*, Franco suggests, Nietzsche begins to explore the possibility of a culture founded on knowledge, a culture that in pursuing truth finds itself and so is most at home in the experimental methods of science, reflecting an Enlightenment faith in humanity's ability to order its own affairs (23). It is the free spirit who most embodies the possibility of such a culture, a figure who transcends the prejudices of morality, metaphysics, and religion, whose faith in science is a faith in the value of experimenting with human beings so as to lay the foundation of their future (23). Nietzsche's criticisms of romantic art, traditional metaphysics, and religion are all meant to clear the ground for a new type of culture, wherein "the free-spirited knower replaces the artist-priest as the bearer of higher culture" (54).

Franco moves in his discussion of *Daybreak* to exploring the respects in which the ethos of *Human* is carefully but significantly altered. Nietzsche's tone in *Human, All Too Human* is

cool, moderate, plodding. In *Daybreak*, the more mischievous Nietzsche familiar to readers of his mature works begins to appear. Franco does a good job of highlighting the many cases in *Daybreak* where ideas that are to become central in Nietzsche's mature period are first broached in embryonic form. For example, Nietzsche begins to criticize the utilitarianism of English moralists, presaging his approach in *On the Genealogy of Morals*; he starts to speak of the *value* of morality, carving out the conceptual space he will later call beyond good and evil; he laments the softening of humanity, here called sand but later to be named the herd; and he inaugurates his exploration of the aesthetic theme of self-creation that will dominate *The Gay Science*. Separating *Daybreak* from *Human*, and pointing towards Nietzsche's problematization of the will to truth in *Beyond Good and Evil*, the will to knowledge begins to be described as one passion among others, rather than as cool and detached as it had been conceived in *Human*. Through all these changes, however, Franco suggests that we can still read *Daybreak* as revolving around the twin pillars of the free spirit and the problem of culture. Franco sees Nietzsche as suggesting that the free spirit's celebration of science's piecemeal experimentation and gradual accumulation of knowledge could serve as the foundation of a cultural project that gives significance to human life (98). Free of the illusions of metaphysics, morality, and religion, the free spirit now has time for "error, for experimentation, for accepting provisionally," not just for personal edification but for "tasks of greatness" that will found a new culture (Nietzsche, *Daybreak* 50; Franco 98).

With *The Gay Science*, Franco argues, Nietzsche reaches the limits of his free spirit ideal (104). He begins to understand the free spirit as itself implicated in morality insofar as it holds up a world of truth against a world of error, a paradigmatically ascetic expression of world-denial (127). Not just science, then, will set us free, but a particular science, a gay one, one that pays

heed to the artfulness of truth, the dynamics through which truths emerge and pass away. Franco shows a Nietzsche in transition, whose ideal of the free spirit is already pointing towards the figure of the new philosopher of *Beyond Good and Evil*. For the first time, the free spirit does not just discover truths, he creates them through legislation, painting the world with his own colours (147). Yet here too, the familiar themes of the free spirit and the problem of culture, understood now as a question of our culture's response to nihilism after the death of God, serve for Franco as unavoidable touchstones of Nietzsche's thinking.

Although rich with detail, Franco's first three chapters lay out a picture of Nietzsche's middle period that we have seen before in Anglo-American treatments of the philosopher. Perhaps the more important contribution of his study comes in the final chapter, where Franco attempts to trace the influence of the middle period on Nietzsche's mature thought. Franco wants to show that Nietzsche's concern with truth, science, and reason survives in these later works, and so moves through *Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, the various prefaces Nietzsche wrote during this time for new editions of his previous books, and Book V of *The Gay Science*. Franco attempts throughout this chapter to outline the relationship between the free spirit and the ideals that supersede it. Needless to say, this is a great deal of territory to cover in one chapter, and so at times Franco moves too quickly through difficult material. Since in this final chapter Franco attempts to defend the claim that is most at issue in the book as a whole, more needed to be done to demonstrate that the ideals of the middle period continue to operate in important ways in the mature works.

Franco considers the overhuman of *Zarathustra*, the new philosopher of *Beyond Good and Evil*, and the criticisms of morality in the *Genealogy*, rooting his analysis on two claims. First, he argues that the free spirit ideal, although superseded, remains important for Nietzsche

since it continues to function in his new ideals for the philosophers of the future. Second, the continued relevance of the free spirit helps to show that the free-spirited quest for truth remains a valuable goal for Nietzsche throughout his mature period. On the first point, Franco argues that the free spirit's work is important in its preparatory character: "The free spirit is good at stripping away comforting illusions, exploring possibilities, and experimenting with ideas, but in the end it is unable to provide new goals, create new values, or assume the role of commander" (169). So although Nietzsche will begin to champion the creation of values, creation needs material and the free spirit provides such material (226). Likewise, the new philosophers of *Beyond Good and Evil* are legislators, but their legislation requires the philosophical labours of the free spirit, and so their activity "is not to be divorced from the knowledge acquired by the free spirit" (187).

Insofar as the free spirit's respect for truth is subsumed within, rather than replaced by, Nietzsche's mature ideals, Nietzsche cannot be understood as rejecting truth, science, and reason outright. Franco sees Nietzsche not as celebrating "untruth" in his later works, but making again a claim already made in *The Gay Science*: although there might not be truth in a superlative metaphysical sense, we can strive for a "more complex understanding" of reality (Franco 182). Our knowledge of the world can be "greater or lesser, richer or more impoverished" (Franco 183). Nietzsche complicates his story about truth, but doesn't abandon it as a worthy object of pursuit. Although the world we come to know will always be a human, all too human world, there are better and worse ways of understanding it. Hence, Nietzsche's enlightenment extends into his mature period.

Franco succeeds in showing that the free spirit ideal survives in some form in Nietzsche's mature thought; however, it remains unclear whether Franco successfully demonstrates that its place remains important enough to justify his claim that truth and science remain valuable ideals

for Nietzsche. The developmental account of Nietzsche, which holds that as his career progresses he gradually distances himself from the free spirit ideal, does not in fact need to show that the free spirit ideal disappears completely, only that as Nietzsche's thought develops the views of his middle period are gradually superseded. In the 1887 preface to *The Gay Science*, for example, Nietzsche denigrates what he calls "Egyptian youths," who insist on getting to the bottom of things and to dispelling all illusions; instead he holds up as exemplary those who celebrate "the surface, the fold, the skin, who adore appearance" (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 4). In a notebook, Nietzsche now writes: "One should value more than truth the force that forms, simplifies, shapes, and invents" (Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* 602). Franco is right to point out that truth is not ruled out as impossible, but it becomes something dull when set against the acts of creation that found it—and that this is all the developmental account needs to show in order to establish that Nietzsche's thought develops in important ways out of and away from the views of his middle period. Perhaps because he is moving quickly, Franco does not do enough to settle this critical point.

Franco also could have clarified how his view is a response to the views of the continental figures he sets as foils. Franco wants to show that continental interpreters have gone too far; accordingly, he argues that Nietzsche does accept some accounts of the world as better than others and that Nietzsche upholds that science can contribute usefully to our understanding of reality, thus defending the philosopher against charges of bottomless relativism. Although Franco points to continental readers such as Foucault and Deleuze as "relativistic or unconstrained," he never engages their work and so we simply have to take his word for it (226). My concern is that when we do look at such readers of Nietzsche, we do not find a facile relativism or the dismissal of any and all truth. Instead, we find the very spirit that Franco

himself recognizes: an understanding that there are truths, there must be truths, but that that truth is always particular, always human—and we also find an acute attention to what is most important or most interesting for Nietzsche in his conception of truth: what is alive in a truth, what type speaks through it (Deleuze 94-97, Foucault 79-86). Consequently, it remains unclear to whom Franco is responding. One is reminded of Richard Rorty's direct criticism of this approach: "‘relativism’ is the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about *any* topic, is as good as every other. No one holds this view" (Rorty 166).

Franco's lack of engagement with one of the two schools of interpretation he chooses as interlocutors is unfortunate, not least because the book is nuanced, interesting, and scholarly in the best sense of the term, and so a more meaningful conversation with the views he criticizes would doubtlessly have been productive. As an example of a missed opportunity in this regard, Franco's focus on Nietzsche's theme of incorporation of truth and knowledge in *The Gay Science* could have set the stage for an interesting discussion of different directions in understanding Nietzsche's biologicistic metaphors in particular, as taken up by interpreters as diverse as Heidegger, Deleuze, Brian Leiter, Alexander Nehamas, and Robert Pippin. Are these metaphors evidence of naturalism? Of a phenomenological approach? Of an aesthetic-metaphorical account of self-creation? Because so much of this book is well-done and interesting, the absence of this type of engagement is felt.

Nietzsche's Enlightenment is a good book well worth reading: Franco's approach is clear, well researched, organized, and meticulous in its conscientious presentation of Nietzsche's middle period. Although I have pointed to some features that I see as flaws, these are important only against the backdrop of a study that is effective in many other ways. The lack of serious attention to continental interpretations means that this book will not be the last word in the

Nietzschean rehabilitation effort, but it nonetheless remains a valuable contribution. Nietzsche is a great philosopher and so there is more than enough of the enigmatic in his thought to support a healthy debate about its general character—but that debate should take place in the open, out of the interpretative shelters that are making it too difficult for readers of Nietzsche to talk to each other.

Note

¹ These works have been translated under various titles in English: *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* as *Human, All Too Human*; *Morgenröthe* as *Daybreak, Dawn*, or *Dawn of Day*; and *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* as *The Gay Science* or *The Joyful Wisdom*.

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