Thomas Stern, *Nietzsche's Ethics*
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 69 pp.
ISBN: 9781108713320. Paper, $22.00.

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Thomas Stern sets out his approach in this "Cambridge Element" on Nietzsche's ethics in a bold and straightforward way: "My own intention is to stay very close to the texts, to read them in light of what we know about Nietzsche's intellectual background, and to present the philosophical ideas found in them as clearly, neutrally and thoroughly as possible" (3). As a result, Stern guesses, the "Nietzsche on display in these pages may seem, in places, dated, wrong-headed and extremely unappealing." In my case, the guess is mostly correct. Fortunately, there are reasons to doubt that Stern's Nietzsche is also the "real one," contrary to what is claimed. (I don't mean to suggest Nietzsche is never "dated," "wrong-headed," or "extremely unappealing.")

Stern, who focuses on the ethics of the late Nietzsche—roughly, from *BGE* onward—claims it consists of two basic claims. The first claim is a descriptive one—the "Life Theory"—to the effect that striving for power is an essential feature of life as such: "*Living* and *power seeking* cannot be pulled apart" (6). Power seeking, in turn, is manifested in behaviors that could be generically described as aggressive. A suggestive passage: "life itself is *essentially* a process of appropriating, injuring, overpowering the alien and the weaker, oppressing, being harsh, imposing your own form, incorporating, and at least, the very least, exploiting" (*BGE* 259; if not otherwise indicated, Nietzsche's works are quoted from the Cambridge University Press translations). The second claim—the "Normative Command"—is directly derived from the descriptive one: "*it is ethical to further the goals of Life and it is unethical to impede them*" (11). On this reading, Nietzsche turns out to defend a version of metaethical realism: the very nature of (biological) reality gives us an objective criterion for what is ethical. As Stern puts it, "His ethics track what he takes to be a deep, fundamental fact about living things, the Life Theory, which applies at all times and in all places" (23).

In my view, there are many problems with this reading, both interpretive and conceptual. To start with, although Nietzsche often supplies characterizations of life like the one in *BGE* 259, it is not clear that they should be understood as (merely) descriptive. *BGE* 22 makes explicit that a claim to the effect that nature (considered here as the object of physics) is a "tyrannically ruthless and pitiless execution of power claims" cannot count as part of a description of the (physical) world. Of course, Nietzsche is not talking here about life. But that he explicitly classifies a will to power claim as "interpretation," and not as part of (physical) nature's "text," should warn readers from taking such claims to be (merely) descriptive (even if they often look like that)—a point already made by Maudemarie Clark in *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* ([Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990], 222–23). A similar worry also applies to the idea, at the heart of the Normative Command, that life has certain goals. For although there are passages where Nietzsche talks of life's goals, the problem is again whether they are about "goals" that "life" really has. Sometimes Nietzsche writes that nature lacks any goal whatsoever—it is "indifferent without measure, without purpose and regard" (*BGE* 9). And sometimes he writes that goals (and values) are a human product. (See, for instance, *TI* "Errors" 8: "We have invented the concept of 'purpose': there *are* no purposes in reality"; on values, see *Z* I "Thousand and One Goals.") Thus, the very status of Nietzsche's claims about the essence of life and its goals is not as straightforward as Stern suggests.

Another kind of textual evidence points in the same direction. For although it is true that Nietzsche often describes life *as such* as power seeking, as in *BGE* 259, this is not always the case. In the very late writings from which Stern draws a great deal of the textual evidence to back up his reading, Nietzsche identifies "everything strong, brave, domineering, and proud" with "presuppositions of *ascending life*" (*A* 17). Similarly, "success, power, beauty, self-affirmation" are said to represent "the *ascending* movement of life" (*A* 24), while "master morality" is described as "the sign language of a sound constitution, of *ascending* life, of the will to power as the principle of life" (*CW* "Epilogue"). On the contrary, the "overestimation of goodness and benevolence"—typical of Christian morality and slave moralities more generally—is said to be "incompatible with an ascending and affirmative life" (*EH* "Destiny" 4). Indeed, such an "*anti-natural morality*" as the Christian one "is the judgment of a declining, weakened, exhausted, condemned life" (*TI* "Morality" 5). Not only moralities, but

also individuals can be classified as "representing either the ascending or the descending line of life" (*TI* "Skirmishes" 33). Finally, and more concisely, Nietzsche writes, "You give up the *great* life when you give up war" (*TI* "Morality" 3). These passages put pressure on Stern's Life Theory, because they characterize not life in general but only a specific form of it—"ascending," "affirmative," or "great" life—as displaying "the will to power as the principle of life," while describing at the same time a contrasting form of "descending" life. Moreover, they put pressure on the idea that Nietzsche's characterizations of (different kinds of) life are (merely) descriptive. For his language—"ascending" versus "declining" life—seems evaluative. In general, why should we think that a life that gives up war cannot be "great"? The answer cannot be that "war"—taken here as a stand-in for the aggressive behaviors that typically manifest power seeking—is essential to life, for that seems true, by Nietzsche's own lights, only for "ascending" life.

A deep problem also affects the articulation of Life Theory and Normative Command. If life is essentially power seeking, then a Normative Command to the effect that we should promote it and its manifestations (appropriating, injury, etc.) would seem pointless. For if life is essentially power seeking, there can be no instance of life that does not display it and (some of) its manifestations. Relevantly, Nietzsche points out that a view of this sort cannot work. His own example is Stoicism: if the idea is "'living according to life'—well how could you *not*?" (*BGE* 9). Nietzsche's diagnosis is again that the Stoics are bad philologists: they fail to realize that their picture of nature is not a neutral description of the world, but the result of projecting Stoic values into it. That is what philosophy always does as soon as it "begins believing in itself." Isn't Nietzsche also telling us that that is what he is himself doing? At any rate, it seems exegetically unwise to ascribe to him a mistake he so emphatically accuses the Stoics of committing (again, see Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 220–21).

This problem does emerge in Stern's treatment, albeit in a somewhat opaque and contorted way. According to him, Nietzsche pursues two distinct, indeed conflicting strategies in his critique of Christian morality (25–29). On the one hand, and in conformity with the Normative Command, he argues that Christian morality is unethical in virtue of being anti-life (the "Unethical Strategy"). On the other hand, he argues that Christian morality only apparently opposes life's goals, since, given that power seeking is

inescapable, there is simply no way of really being anti-life (the "Impossible Strategy"). Stern is right that there is an irresoluble tension between these two strategies; he calls the infelicitous dialectic ensuing between them the "square circle." This uncomfortable predicament, however, is more the product of his own reading than of Nietzsche's thought. We need only give up the Life Theory to make the claim that Christian morality is anti-life no longer straightforwardly incoherent. (Curiously, Stern affirms that "Nietzsche's writings offer one prominent attempt to confront the square circle by abandoning the Impossible Strategy" [29]. But wouldn't such a "prominent attempt" mean abandoning the Life Theory as well? I will return to this point.)

Perhaps Stern's reading could be rescued by understanding the Life Theory slightly differently, as the claim that power is the essential *goal* of life. The Normative Command would then say that it is ethical to (maximally) realize power. (Stern seems to suggest something along these lines at the end of p. 29—and, maybe, also on p. 51—though I'm not sure.) Given that a living being can have a goal even if it fails to (maximally) realize it, a certain form of life denial would be possible, namely the inability to (maximally) realize life's essential goal. A living being so exhausted that it can at best strive for mere survival would be a case in point: it would behave "unethically" in virtue of being unable to (maximally) realize power. But what Nietzsche attacks for its being quintessentially anti-life—and therefore "unethical," as Stern puts it—is Christian morality, which seems to have sought and achieved as much power as it gets. If something can be anti-life and nonetheless achieve so much power, then either we cannot identify what is ethical with what (maximally) realizes power, or we cannot identify what is unethical with what is anti-life—which means also that the amended version of Life Theory and Normative Command does not work. (Nietzsche affirms that a "struggle for *power*" is usually won "to the disadvantage of the strong, the privileged, the fortunate exceptions," so that "the weak keep gaining dominance over the strong" [*TI* "Skirmishes" 14]. The success of the slave revolt in morality is arguably the most salient example of what he has in mind here.)

As observed above, Life Theory and Normative Command lead Stern to ascribe to Nietzsche a version of metaethical realism according to which the very essence of life provides us with an objective criterion for distinguishing what is ethical and what is unethical—in particular,

whether a certain morality is ethical or unethical. Hence, Stern claims that Nietzsche purports to put forward an evaluative view—"Nietzsche's ethics"—that is essentially different from other moralities. Of course, what is supposed to make Nietzsche's ethics different is that it tracks an objective fact about life as such—the fact supposedly captured by the Life Theory. Stern does not argue for this reading: he simply asserts that it would be wrong to read Nietzsche otherwise (the section on Nietzsche's metaethics is just two pages long [23–24] and may wrongly induce the reader to believe there is no interesting work at all on that topic). The only text he considers is a passage from *TI* (on p. 23) where Nietzsche writes that "*there are absolutely no moral facts*. What moral and religious judgments have in common is the belief in things that are not real. Morality is just an interpretation of certain phenomena or (more accurately) a *mis*interpretation" (*TI* "Improving" 1). The only reason for exempting Nietzsche's own evaluative view from falling afoul of the claim that "*there are absolutely no moral facts*" is, as Stern puts it, that Nietzsche takes it to be "firmly based in reality" (24)—that is, in the Life Theory. But I have already provided reasons to doubt that he holds that view. (Of course, that Nietzsche does not take his evaluative view to track some essential feature of reality is compatible both with his holding it to be superior to that of other moralities as well as with his criticizing some of these because they presuppose a completely imaginary psychology.)

To defend his reading, which entails that values "are there to be found in nature," Stern also argues that Nietzsche never appeals to the "creation of fundamental *values*," but only to some sort of "self-creation of a limited kind" (58). But Nietzsche explicitly says that philosophers' real task is "to *create values*" (*BGE* 211). Stern suggests that *BGE* "might best be read as transitional in that regard" (58); but that would mean confining Nietzsche's mature moral philosophy to the writings composed in the last months of his intellectual life, given the tight theoretical link between *BGE* and *GM*. Indeed, *GM*'s critique of science's ascetism culminates with Nietzsche's arguing that science—arguably, the cognitive activity that helps us to discover what is "there to be found in nature," to use Stern's phrase—"is itself never value-creating" and thus requires a "value-ideal, a value-creating power in whose *service* it *may believe* in itself" (*GM* III:25, trans. Clark and Swensen).

As we saw, Stern is aware that his reading attributes to Nietzsche a view that is philosophically unattractive. Given that the professed aim

of his book is to get Nietzsche right, and not to fabricate some fashionable version of his thought, this need not be a problem. However, the way in which Stern proceeds is especially frustrating, as he typically shrugs off the philosophical difficulties he encounters. Regarding the Life Theory, he writes that "we need not pretend that the theory is free from ambiguity, nor that it is given adequate philosophical or empirical support in his texts," arguing that "questions about the theory's finer details, and about how he [Nietzsche] supports the theory, are less pressing than the question of what he needs it for and what he does with it" (7). (For a better articulation and defense of the kind of Life Theory reading defended by Stern, see Nadeem J. Z. Hussain, "The Role of Life in the *Genealogy*," in *Nietzsche's* On the Genealogy of Morality*: A Critical Guide*, ed. Simon May [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011], 142–69.) Concerning Nietzsche's talk of life's "goals," Stern recognizes that "naturalizing Nietzsche's language of goals and commandments would not be easy," but nonetheless assures the reader that "we don't need to worry about this" (8). (For an attempt to "naturalize" Nietzsche's talk of life "goals," see John Richardson, "Nietzsche on Life's Ends," in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. Ken Gemes and John Richardson [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], 756–83.) Similarly, when discussing the possible tension between Nietzsche's so-called perspectivism and the privileged status that he (Stern) ascribes to the Life Theory, Stern simply claims that "we need not explore or propose a philosophical solution to this dilemma" (55). Of course, it is part of being an introductory work that details are left out and claims taken for granted. But it seems to me that addressing the philosophical problems raised by a certain reading of a work—at least, those raised by *one's own* reading of it—belongs to the task of elucidating that work, even if only in an introductory fashion. (To be fair, Stern does confront one serious philosophical problem raised by his own reading, namely what to make of Nietzsche's supposed "square circle" [51–53]. However, his discussion of it seems confused to me, for he ends up admitting that what Nietzsche cares about is not life in general, but "Life-at-its-best" [51], without recognizing that this clashes with the Life Theory reading defended throughout the book. It is therefore unsurprising that Stern finds no way out of the "square circle.") Stern writes that "if some readers imagine that fidelity to the text and context produces a very different result from the one presented here . . . at least we can be assured that our disagreement is genuine" (3). With that I agree.