

Lacan's Ethics and Nietzsche's Critique of Platonism

Tim Themi

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Review by David Mathew

Enthusiastically brave in both its conception and its execution, immaculate in its research and its attention to detail, and intellectually stunning (in both senses of the term), this book is a triumph. While it is fair to say that the complex title constitutes a reliable syllogism for the fecundity of thought within its 196 pages, the book is nonetheless approachable, if far from straightforward. The following is a fairly typical example of what the reader encounters:

'And this for Nietzsche is what Plato did with his idea of the Good, he substituted an imaginary for the real, which, as Lacan also says in the pejorative sense of Plato, relegated what is actually real to "no more than an imitation of a more-than-real, of a surreal," "since for him everything that exists only exists in relation to the idea, which is the real".'

This book might be described as a collection of lenses – and of the images that these lenses develop and warp. (In fact, there are so many lenses that the reader starts to wonder if there is any such thing as purity of vision.) Although the overall work is Themi's (naturally), in the course of the argument he shows us Plato through Nietzsche's eyes and Plato through Lacan's. He shows us Nietzsche and Lacan, teaming up to bully Plato, no less; and in so doing he reveals areas in which their thought overlaps and where it also rides (brilliantly) solo. For example, in Nietzsche's opinion, Plato made the earthly seem inferior because of its distance from a world of the Good, where 'Good' indicates the kind of metaphysical inflation in morality that Nietzsche finds key to Platonic thought. Lacan agrees with Nietzsche about the 'mirage of that Supreme Good' – and via recourse to his own tripartite ontology of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, he 'proves' to us why Plato was wrong. Themi's book, therefore, is an explication of how a close reading of Lacan's *Ethics* might improve our comprehension of Nietzsche's overall criticism of Platonism. Lacan's *Ethics* builds on Nietzsche's work, and Nietzsche's critique strengthens our understanding of Lacan.

The second chapter concerns itself with sublimation. Broadly speaking, sublimation involves the placing of one's energies into such activities as painting or poetry, thereby preventing one from acting on base compulsions that would see us landed in prison or killed were we to succumb to them. As a theory, let us say, it is not without its detractors. Later on, in the third chapter, we explore Lacan's reading of Plato's *Symposium*. Specifically we regard its detailed dissection of the subject of love, again through lenses both Nietzschean and Lacanian. We see 'the Socratic origins of the denaturalizing Good', which for Nietzsche has Judaic roots 'which later found fulfilment in Christianity'. We are taken, then, as if by the hand, into the most challenging chapter yet, Chapter 5, the very title of which suggests that a great deal more could have been written on the subject: 'God of the Good: Christocentric Oedipal Morality'. If I quote merely one of the chapter's aims – that it 'begins with the "Death of God" chapter in Lacan's Seminar VII, analysing what is to become Freud's linking of Oedipus to the murders of a primeval Father, a Moses, and a Jesus' – then it might confirm (in confirmation is required) that this book is absolutely packed full with ideas and interpretations that resonate with, and reproduce new offspring off, one another.

From start to finish, Themi is consistently reliable when it comes to definitions, sources and explanations. All the same, it would be dishonest to suggest that a reader with little or no knowledge of Plato, Nietzsche or Lacan would glean the book's theories simply enough. Readers new to the thinkers in question will likely be obliged to work hard to understand (not

that asking a reader to work hard is a bad thing, of course!). All three of the argument's key players (not to mention many of those cited along the way – Freud and Žižek, for example) are often opaque in their own localised environments, let alone when triangulated with other. *Lacan's Ethics and Nietzsche's Critique of Platonism* is a brief but dense book, impeccably packaged and produced by SUNY.