If, as both Michel Foucault and Bernard Williams suggest, the significance of Nietzsche lies in the uses to which his thought can be put, then we should welcome the appearance of Christine Swanton’s *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*. By putting Nietzsche in the service of contemporary analytic virtue ethics, Swanton contributes to clarifying just how wide and deep the range of suitable appropriations of his work is. Anyone who reads this book will learn an immense amount about the intricacies of current discussions of virtue ethics. Furthermore, by situating Nietzsche’s immoralist psychology in relation to her own favored ethical outlook, Swanton forcefully addresses a number of issues that arise in almost any appropriation of Nietzsche for ethics. This is therefore a valuable book, even if it perhaps ultimately leads up a garden path.

The contemporary flourishing of virtue ethics arguably begins with G. E. M. Anscombe’s claim for the priority of moral psychology to ethics. Her argument is, roughly, that it is necessary to have a correct account of the proper functioning of persons and agency in order to consider the normative standards that are appropriate for human beings. With respect to this basic position, Swanton follows in the tradition of Anscombe. She looks to Nietzsche, and also empirical psychology, for “psychological theories of character which give a sufficiently deep account” (6) of those fine inner states that constitute virtues. This is an incisive use of Nietzsche. If we take Nietzsche as offering an especially radical or “deep” version of moral psychology, then Nietzschean psychology should have a profound effect on the ethical approach that Anscombe has in mind.

Swanton, accordingly, identifies her main appropriation of Nietzsche in this way: “Nietzsche’s importance to ethical theory, in my view, lies not only in his characteristic emphasis on the expressive component of morality, but also in his view that depth-psychological analysis reveals that apparently valuable responses can *express* disvaluable states” (130). Nietzsche, for Swanton, informs us that human activity is distinctively meaningful, perhaps as revelatory of inner states. Moreover, Nietzsche provides us an account of how this meaningfulness, although dependent on superficial psychological explanations, ultimately arises out of “deeper” psychic structures. Swanton also makes use of a number of other, more specific Nietzschean psychological claims. She claims that a Nietzschean moral psychology demands that we “lower our sights” in identifying the virtues: “If the views of Nietzsche and post-Nietzscheans on human nature are correct, it is vital that we form a conception of virtue that is appropriate for what Nietzsche has called ‘the convalescent’” (64). She finds in “undistorted” (12) will to power an account of “self-love…as a *bonding* with oneself” (134) that is a “crucial depth-psychological component of virtue” (11). She also seems to find in Nietzsche an ally in her broad approach, especially with regards to the importance of creativity (53), a pluralist rejection of naturalism (90), and a particularism (242) that requires “connecting ethics to concrete phenomena” (9).

In the ethics that results, virtue and character are, of course, the fundamental normative moral concepts, and Swanton insists on a pluralism in the “bases” and “modes” of “moral responsiveness or acknowledgement,” “in what makes a character trait a virtue,” and in “the
conception of rightness of action.” A virtue is, or expresses, a “fine inner state” (6), and is defined as “disposition to respond to, or acknowledge, items within its field or fields in an excellent or good enough way” (19). Virtues each have a “profile,” in particular a “functional profile,” an “acknowledgement profile,” and a “target profile,” that allow them to be recognized as virtues. In short, virtues are those features of ourselves that enable us to integrate and respond to the “demands of the self and the demands of the world” (193) in a plurality of appropriate ways, and we distinguish them in terms of what they call for and what their objects are. Since “the chances of us developing to perfection the psychological basis for leading the best life are vanishingly small” (14), virtue is, importantly, a “threshold concept”: it requires being good enough rather than complete in one’s development. Eudaimonism is rejected because, according to Swanton, virtues are not “reliable bets” (81) for personal flourishing. Although the virtues are considered, in accordance with eudaimonism, in terms of “healthy growth and development,” the good in a human life seems to be conceived of in such a way that there is at most a subsidiary role for what one is.

The exposition of this conception takes up the whole book, and will not be considered in detail here. It is worthwhile, however, to assess Swanton’s appropriation of Nietzsche. Even where her claims are dubious, they raise issues that still need to be resolved in the Nietzsche literature or more generally.

One possible area of criticism is Swanton’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s depth psychology. For Swanton, Nietzsche’s psychology conveys one overarching point: that the significance of an action may lie in a deeper source than its superficial intentional description. More specifically, Swanton looks to undistorted manifestations of will to power to lay bare what the genuine source of actions are: in such terms one can distinguish strong, healthy activity from distorted forms. But this is a poor understanding of depth psychology. It makes no claims that are not available to Aristotle, who could also distinguish between the telic description of an action and its underlying psychic source. And Nietzsche’s version of depth might best be considered not as the genuine, unambiguous inner source that lies just below the surface, but as an appeal to how irresolvably captious and knotty the explanation of action is. The bottomless of caves, the masks that lie under masks, and the infinite polysemy of punishment might better relate Nietzschean depth than undistorted strength or weakness.

Depth, according to Swanton, relates to will to power: truly virtuous activity stems, at bottom, from self-love, which expresses an undistorted form of will to power. So will to power, on Swanton’s account, has two main features. First, it is the most basic motivational state: it belongs to persons and functions in the explanation of particular actions. Second, it is itself subject to normative standards: “what is of normative significance is not will to power, or power as such, but will to power, or power, manifested excellently” (134f; cf. 144). Both features are common enough interpretations of will to power, but we may nevertheless wonder how well they fit with Nietzsche’s work. Will to power as a universal motivation would be a questionable empirical thesis that explained little, since any particular motivation would be a manifestation of it. Regulative norms would allow for distinguishing well-functioning workings of will to power, but would provoke the question of what sanction those norms possess. Nietzsche’s appeals to will to power, I think, serve more a fundamental explanatory purpose than Swanton suggests; if anything, they seem to offer an account of how psychology and norms fit into nature as a whole, rather than identifying a particular norm-governed motivation.

Swanton’s invocation of standards of excellence that apply to will to power raises, in any case, issues of justification. According to Swanton, the world simply makes demands on us.
This could be a harmless way of expressing agents’ recognition of moral facts. But expressing this in terms of demands, and appealing, as Swanton does, to altruistic universal love (115ff), compassion for the vulnerabilities of others (137), objectivity (ch. 8), and constraints (ch. 10) risks running to asceticism. The problem here is not the particular values that Swanton appeals to; a Nietzschean ethics is certainly entitled to make such appeals even if Nietzsche did not. The problem is how fundamentally un-Nietzschean her ethics is. Swanton seems to drop a very Nietzschean point that is typically at the heart of virtue ethics: that the recognition of moral facts (or the force of moral interpretations) is not independent of the perspective of the virtuous agent. Moral facts that need to be put “in some sort of balance” (194) with first-person pursuits are ascetically detached from the well-being or well-faring of anyone’s life while at the same time mysteriously compelling.

Swanton’s argument for why we should nevertheless recognize the demands of universal love, for example, seems to be that such an altruism could express “an ‘overflowing,’ rather than a needy, weak resentment” (150). This is no doubt true; such a “gift-giving” virtue is possible. This response, however, fails to address Nietzsche’s more basic concern, which is why altruism or universal love ever came to be considered important at all. Swanton’s insistence on “looking deeply into the agent” (177) neglects what is, for Nietzsche, a deeply social and historical question: what the meaning of ascetic ideals is. According to Swanton, healthy human functioning only manifests itself in a social context, but this form of sociality is already one step too late. It neglects how deeply social even individual ethical formation is.

This in turn points up a host of justificatory problems that arise when moving from Aristotle to Nietzsche. Both Swanton and Nietzsche seem to reject at least Aristotelian versions of naturalism and eudaimonism, but preserve some normative space for individual flourishing. There are deep costs here, however. In Aristotle’s picture, the account of the virtues, the account of the human good, and the account of human nature are mutually supporting. Once any component is taken away, the question of why one should be virtuous at all finds no easy answer. Swanton’s answer seems to be simply that “virtues express fine inner states” (6), but this begs the question. We still lack an explanation of why having fine inner states is important, why moral demands should be recognized, how ethical authority is possible, how the virtuous are capable of the appropriate responsiveness, and how the active (choice, potency) and passive (receptivity, habit) aspects combine in states of character, among other things. Nietzsche, I think, worries about these matters to an extent that Swanton does not, but should.

Although I emphasize criticism here, the book contains a great many valuable insights. Nietzscheans might find it especially useful for the questions that it provokes in appropriating Nietzsche for ethical theory. Swanton does a commendable job of showing how readily Nietzschean insights can be adopted into analytic discourse, and how just a little bit of Nietzsche can problematize the theoretical structures with which it engages.