

Paul Rée, all-too Human
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Paul Rée, Basic Writings, Robin Small, ed., trans.,
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There is a cautionary admonition known to all academics that goes simply “publish or perish.” From this truncated Darwinian-sounding truism not even amounting to a full sentence, it follows that not only can the lack of scholarly output preclude career opportunities around the shrinking waterhole of the tenured academy, it can also diminish, obscure or even obliterate the historical reputation of the great and mediocre alike. So it was with Paul Rée.

To those familiar with the life of Friedrich Nietzsche, Paul Rée lingers as a biographical shadow of The Wanderer of early years. More than a footnote, he was the philosopher’s friend of the 1870s and early ‘80s—the bright but unexceptional intellectual companion to the great man, a supporting role, a minor figure. He is often assumed to have been a sounding board for Nietzsche’s ideas, a presumed but unnamed empiricist basis against which Nietzsche rails in the opening paragraphs of the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* and one third of the famous Nietzsche-Salome-Rée triangle—that trio of “free spirits” that ended with such bitter feelings. For decades Nietzsche scholars from R. J. Hollingdale to Karl Jaspers to Walter Kaufmann have speculated about the influence or cross-pollination between the ideas of the two men with varying conclusions.

Except for his association with Nietzsche and subsequent questions of influence on or from the Prussian Anti-Christ, Rée has mostly “perished” in academic circles. This is not to say that Rée did not write—he did—it is just that he did not write much and what he did produce has been historically regarded as marginal in its own right and has therefore remained largely unavailable.

Now, and for the first time ever, the early and most important works of Paul Rée (editor/translator Robin Small tells us that his later works—*The Illusion of Free Will* and *The Origin of Consciousness*, both from 1885—were largely undeveloped re-hashings of his earlier writings) are available to an English-reading audience. For those of us with an interest in Nietzsche—and especially in his underrated early and middle writings—the wait has been a long one. Although *Basic Writings, Paul Rée* will probably not change many minds on Rée’s merits as a philosopher in any fundamental respect, the reward has been worth the wait.

Paul Rée was born in the small Pomeranian town of Bartelshagen on November 21, 1849. His parents were assimilated Jews of some commercial wealth. Although Nietzsche was born into a Protestant family and was five years older, the facts of their early lives include similarities and parallels including academic aspirations, brief military service in the Franco-Prussian War, and an interest in human psychology and philosophy, especially Schopenhauer’s ideas on Will and Representation. Rée was a student at Basel when he met Nietzsche in 1873. For the next nine years they would be the best of friends

and frequent traveling companions.

The split of course was over Lou Salome, a young Russian woman of French and German descent who would be one of the great *femme fatales* of intellectual history and would also be linked to Rilke and Freud. After 1882 the two men would never see each other again. Rée died from a fall from a mountain path in Switzerland on October 29th 1901.

The present edition of Rée's *Writings* consists of a substantial (53 pages), introduction by Professor Small that provides an excellent and weighed appraisal of his life, work and relationship with Nietzsche. The remaining 178 pages include Rée's two major early works, *Psychological Observations* (a collection of 475 aphorisms first published in 1875 and arranged into seven general areas of psychological and social inquiry and commentary) and the more conventionally structured essays of *The Origin of the Moral Sensations* (whose title seems to echo Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and prefigure Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*).

To anyone who has read the *Apollonian* epigrams of Nietzsche's middle period—*Human all-too Human*, *The Dawn*, and *The Gay Science*—the format of *Psychological Observations* will be immediately familiar, although they seldom match the quality, originality, or larger vision of Nietzsche's works. This format or genre, as Small suggests, may have been Rée's greatest influence on the works of his more noteworthy friend, and there may well be a conceptual kinship with Nietzsche's earlier aphorisms. This is entirely plausible given that Nietzsche references Rée in *Human all-too Human*, the first of his aphoristic works and which came out three years after *Psychological Observations*.

If Rée's ideas confirm the fact that he was writing in the wake of Darwin and under the philosophical influence of Schopenhauer, his choice of the aphorism also suggests that he was taken with the economy and elegance of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century French aphorists. Much of his outlook also seems drawn from this period as well. In fact Rée's temperament and view of mankind is as much akin to the moral skepticism of La Rochefoucauld (admittedly, with an evolutionary twist) as it is with the seemingly self-negating metaphysical pessimism of Arthur Schopenhauer. Such a view holds that people are essentially self-serving, but that social circumstances of polite society force us to disguise the motives of our true animal nature in public life. This, as far as it goes, is fair enough, and it is doubtful that anybody would argue that people do not put on airs in order to make an impression. Still, it is a perspective that at times comes across as being as limited as the unadorned truisms by which Rée asserts it.

The problem with such a view is that it is not very interesting as a repeatedly asserted fact dressed up in different ways, and tells us very little that is new or more deeply insightful. The flaw of this sort of moral pessimism is that it is a position that is easily immunized from criticism but which adds little to our understanding. Admittedly it is a view that is more defensible than an equal and opposite assertion of optimism, while having a similar tendency towards both oversimplification and overstatement.

Such a view, for instance, does little to explain the shades and complexity between the Manichaeist extremes of black and white of human behavior, between the poles of absolute selfishness and selflessness: are some people capable of genuine higher motivations for their own sake, like honest love, friendship, charity, self-sacrifice and courage? Is everybody always a cold and calculating actor (as the later admirer of

Nietzsche, Albert Camus suggests in *The Fall*)? As actors, are we always “on”? Are people ever honest when they appear to be or is it all an act for ulterior motives of self-interest (and the interesting follow up question, of whether selflessness and even self-sacrifice are just manifestations of the selfish indulging of the will)? Are we all cautious sociopaths gaming for relative advantage in an inescapable rat race? Are we ever honest with ourselves or is it all rationalization and denial?

Unfortunately, Rée’s perspective also inherits the limitations of the genre of austere truisms that are so well suited to putting forth such a view. Similarly, he is often content with throwing out a stark and well-turned phrase that provokes out interest, but then lets it stand by itself in instances where greater development or elucidation could have made it more interesting or insightful. This is one reason why Rée is ordinary or at best “frequently interesting” while Nietzsche is often profound. To be fair, Rée’s aphorisms range from the prosaic to the insightful and make for good starting points of discussion. They do not, however, rival Nietzsche’s work of the late 1870s and early ‘80s.

By contrast, in his three great aphoristic works, Nietzsche generally develops ideas that require greater elaboration. Those short observations that are not developed stand like non-redundant pieces of a large puzzle to be assembled piecemeal, or else are succinct and powerful ideas by themselves. This deep and insightful psychological experimentalism of his middle period is one of the things that makes Nietzsche a great thinker and a pleasure to read even in translation. Nietzsche’s mature vision of the great individual as embodying a dialog between the instinctual Will of the *Dionysian* and the reason of the *Apollonian*, even as a life-affirming inversion of Schopenhauer’s model, is also far more original than Rée’s observations. This sort of depth and penetrating insight is lacking in the “worldly wisdom” of Paul Rée, as is a fresh and interesting view of human nature.

In *The Origins of the Moral Sensations* (1877), Rée expresses a type of early sociobiology based on the evolutionary advantage of human motivations such as vanity, in conjunction with external factors of group selection (still a very vigorous area of evolutionary debate). In fact, “ego” and “vanity” are as central to Rée’s model of evolutionary psychology as *ressentiment* and Will to Power would be for Nietzsche’s later writings. As an evolutionary empiricist, Rée looks at behavior not for its underlying causes, as might Freud or Jung, but rather in terms of whether it is useful generally beneficial to the individual or rewarded by the group. As Small notes, unlike Schopenhauer, Rée looks to naturalistic rather than to metaphysical explanation, especially with what he called “the problem of altruism” This recognition of evolutionary explanations makes both his and Nietzsche’s outlooks more complete than later continental writers and philosophers whose works are more purely internal, more rationalistic. In this also, he anticipates contemporary ideas such as those of Edward O. Wilson.

On the question of altruism, Rée concludes that morality is a kind of social intelligence that grows out of animal instinct. This also seems sensible enough so far as it goes and provided that one does not rely on instrumental description rather than genuine explanation. Still, Rée’s approach of Darwinian positivism at times comes across as somewhat superficial and very much like the result-oriented approach of the “English psychologists” in the empiricist/utilitarian tradition that Nietzsche (and later

thinkers like Noam Chomsky) came to oppose. Nietzsche looked deeper than mere biological or social advantage and despised empiricists and rationalist views that looked no further than an external basis for behavior and especially morality. He sought to find what it was that made us fundamentally, and perhaps uniquely, human (for Nietzsche it was the qualities of the saint, artist and philosopher, for Chomsky it would be human syntax, for post-humanists like John Gray, the differences are superficial distinction of degree, rather than fundamental differences of kind).

Rée's program also seems to fall victim to a tenet drawn from Karl Popper's theory of emergence: just because human psychology emerges from electro-chemical process as a result of evolutionary biology does not mean that we can understand it entirely in physical or evolutionary terms. Chemistry is grounded in part on physics, biology is based on chemistry, and psychology is based on biology, but all are more than the sum of their constituents and all require a framework of their own. Nor do such purely physicalist explanations effectively counter Leibniz's observation that subjective experience—consciousness as we experience it—is irreducible to physical processes.

To give them their due, Rée's writings, although drawn from both conventional sources and the newer ideas of other people, suggest a view that is a fairly unique blend of pessimism, Darwinism, and empiricism. At the same time, Rée is also darker than most positivists from a time known for intellectual optimism. Because of this, he sometimes comes across as misanthropic, and although he later disowned them in a letter to Nietzsche's sister Elizabeth, his comments about women in *Psychological Observations* are particularly insufferable.

The importance of this book, then, is historical and relational rather than purely substantive in terms of depth or insight. Its significance lies less in the originality or the intrinsic force of Rée's ideas, but rather in their relative proximity to the aphorisms of Nietzsche's middle period with which they bear such a notable structural resemblance. In a broader sense, they are significant as an example of thought at the juncture of philosophy and psychology between Darwin and Freud and might bear a more complimentary comparison with the evolutionary psychology of the American philosopher, Chauncey Wright or the wholesale evolutionism of his nemesis, Herbert Spencer. In this sense, Rée's ideas are also important as a more conventional psychological model for human values against which Nietzsche would rebel in *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morals*, the greatest books of his later "integrated" period (i.e. the period of his writings in which some of *Dionysian* drama of his later "excited" period was mixing in with the *Apollonian* calm and circumspect of his aphoristic period).

Paul Rée seems condemned to fall into Nietzsche's margins. The comparison of the two, although unfortunate, is inevitable given their literal proximity to one another, common interests, probable influence, and Nietzsche's continued growth and eventual implosion as a thinker. Still, it is an unfair juxtaposition—not only was Nietzsche one of the most original thinkers of the German—indeed, the Western—Canon, he is also one of its greatest writers. There is also a difference of type in this comparison: Rée was a naturalist while Nietzsche is perhaps the first modernist and the most radical thinker of European social thought, and the split between the onetime friends may denote a historical demarcation between the two outlooks as well. One could use this book more charitably, in just letting Rée speak for himself as a concise and articulate example of

evolutionary psychology of the 1870s.

Even in his own right, Rée is decidedly a minor figure and the publication of *Basic Works* is not likely to change that status greatly, nor will it threaten or rival any of the major works of Adler, Freud, James, Jung, or Nietzsche. Still, these writings will both fill in a gap and add to the complexity of the story and immediate context of Friedrich Nietzsche and should be read by anyone with an interest in his ideas and milieu. Anyone with an interest in the history of psychology during the important decades between the publication of *On the Origin of Species* and the advent of modern psychoanalysis will find the book rewarding as something more than just a passing curiosity. To those who have grappled with the question of values in the face of the undirected order of natural selection and the crises of modernism, or with a historical interest in the Darwinian Controversies of the 1860s and '70s or current discussion on group selection, this book is an important example of an early naturalistic attempt at a program that would eventually fizzle as behaviorism but which would flourish again as modern sociobiology.

Basic Writings allows Rée to speak for himself to an English-speaking audience and to stand or fall on his own merits without an intermediary (as with Nietzsche, he seems to translate well into English) or another man's biographer. It also preserves for posterity the works of a man who deserves to be remembered for historical reasons broad, narrow, and complementary. What could be more worthwhile than that?