

Nietzsche and Moral Perfectionism

by

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Introduction

Nietzsche is typically thought of as having no positive ethics; instead, many claim that his aim was to subvert all ethical categories and transcend them altogether. In this project, I will make the competing claim that Nietzsche had in mind a number of personal characteristics that he endorses and promotes throughout his work. Nietzsche's obscure and often contradictory style of writing makes him difficult to pin down on matters such as these, but I believe there is enough to make a satisfactory case for Nietzsche being a virtue thinker. Of course, if Nietzsche is in fact a virtue thinker, he would necessarily be a highly unconventional one. Throughout this project, I will explore both the similarities and differences between Nietzsche's conception of the personal virtues and traditional virtue ethics as outlined by other virtue thinkers. I believe Nietzsche's ethical thought can best be explained by the concept of moral perfectionism, which I feel is best defined as the idea that human beings ought to strive for and promote excellent lives. In Nietzsche's case, I will make the argument that he endorses a profoundly elitist version of this idea. Finally, I will address those who think that Nietzsche does not advocate for a specific kind of ethics, but instead offered a pluralistic and egalitarian account in which one person's way of life is in no way superior to another.

While Nietzsche is notorious for the insults he had dished out to a considerable number of individuals throughout his writing, it is not difficult to find instances where he had praised certain thinkers for exhibiting particular characteristics which he admired. Among the individuals whom Nietzsche particularly admired are Goethe, Beethoven, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, but there exists a host of other thinkers whom Nietzsche thought of as virtuous. A chief criticism Nietzsche had of morality was that it did much to hinder the development of higher

men; a Nietzschean virtue ethics would then necessarily promote those virtues which aid in the development of higher men. I believe a helpful method to accomplish the aims of this project will be to analyze Nietzsche's praise of these higher individuals and explicate what exactly he saw as virtuous in their character. From this, I believe we will be able to identify a number of virtues that Nietzsche sees as conducive to the exercise of the *will to power*. In the end, I believe I will have convincingly shown that resilience, creativity, solitude, pride, risk-taking, and exuberance are what constitute Nietzschean virtues.

In the first essay of his *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche illustrates the difference between what he describes as "slave" and "master" morality. Essentially: slave morality is reactive, full of resentment, and life denying, while master morality is marked by its propensity to action and is life-affirming in its essence. Nietzsche makes a point to stress how reaction and resentment are both key components of slave morality. The weak observe that they are inferior by the standards of the higher types, so they proceed to construct their own morality in reaction to this. Nietzsche characterizes this slave morality as full of hatred and "venom" toward the higher types. Opposed to this is the morality of the higher types, which lacks any resentment and is instead affirming. The higher types simply affirm their own values, we're told, and lack the reactive disdain that characterizes slave morality. Nietzsche also tells us that the higher types are resilient - while lower types allow themselves to be affected by the morality of the higher types, the higher types are unaffected in any way by the resentment inherent in the morality of the lower types. The higher types are aware of their own power and, indeed, affirm it. This account of morality is especially important in that it hints at some of the characteristics which Nietzsche finds admirable.

The Passive Virtues

As I begin to list what I think are the Nietzschean virtues, I thought it would be helpful to divide them up into two groups, one group titled “Passive” and the other “Active.” However, I believe there exists a relationship between the two groups. In particular, I believe that the former provides a sort of foundation for the latter. For instance, exuberance (an active virtue that involves the continuous affirmation of one’s life) necessarily requires that one has developed the passive virtue of resilience; this is because in order for one to actively affirm life, one must have developed the virtue of resilience that allows one to withstand unfortunate events that are all-too-common in life. In essence, the passive virtues are those that are more akin to static attitudes and dispositions. The active virtues, on the other hand, involve the states that motivate us to take a particular action (i.e. the active virtues are related to those emotional states that often directly precede action). I will begin by listing and explaining the passive virtues.

Resilience

One of the characteristics of these higher types that Nietzsche particularly admired is their resiliency in the face of the hardships that are endemic to human life. Later in the first essay, Nietzsche goes on to expound on resilience being a characteristic of a higher type. He writes that higher types are marked by:

“An inability to take seriously for any length of time their enemies, their disasters, their misdeeds—that is the sign of the full strong natures who possess a superfluity of moulding plastic force, that heals completely and produces forgetfulness: a good example of this in the modern world is Mirabeau, who had no memory for any insults and meannesses which were practised on him, and who was only incapable of forgiving because he forgot. Such a man indeed shakes off with a shrug many a worm which would have buried itself in another;”

(The Genealogy of Morals, Essay I, Sec. 10)

Nietzsche names the French enlightenment statesman Mirabeau as being a chief example of this virtue of resilience that is to be found in higher types. Mirabeau was involved in numerous political scandals and his advocacy of moderate political positions during the French Revolution earned him many enemies. Nietzsche viewed Mirabeau’s resolve in the face of these events as admirable. Moreover, throughout Nietzsche’s writings we find a laissez-faire attitude toward suffering. Suffering for Nietzsche was far from an intrinsic evil: it was seen as instrumental for the development of higher men. The ability to endure suffering and instrumentalize it for greater purposes was key. For these reasons, we can infer that Nietzsche saw resilience as being one of the virtues that is common of his higher type.

The key virtue of resilience is closely related to another Nietzschean virtue that will be discussed thoroughly in a later part of this paper, namely risk-taking. For Nietzsche, creative types push the envelope in their creative work and so necessarily take risks. Of course, it is not likely that all decisions to take risks end up working out as intended, so it is necessary that these creative types are prepared to withstand the vicissitudes that are a natural result of their creative

endeavors. Nietzsche felt this resilience in pursuit of art was exemplified in Goethe. In the *Twilight of The Idols*, Nietzsche writes:

“[Goethe] did not retire from life but put himself into the midst of it; he was not fainthearted but took as much as possible upon himself, over himself, into himself.”

(Twilight of The Idols, 9:49)

Goethe’s early works were associated with Romanticism, an artistic movement that was known by its glorification of nature, the past, and the passions. Nietzsche was a critic of the Romantics as he saw them as being symptomatic of the fatigue and dreariness toward life that he believed was becoming endemic among Europe’s intellectuals. Nietzsche believed that the Romantics were in the business of crafting idealized worlds as a means to cope with and escape reality. As the quote above shows, Nietzsche had identified Goethe as having resisted the worst characteristics of Romanticism with his latter turn toward a more realist style. Goethe's later style was quite unique and presented a break from the proto-Romanticism that was popular in his time. Goethe’s bold decision to make this stylistic turn to a more realist, mature style (Goethe dubbed it “Classicism”) is also praised by Nietzsche. Later in the same passage, Nietzsche writes, *“In the midst of an age with an unreal outlook, Goethe was a convinced realist.”* We will revisit this topic later on when we discuss risk-taking in more detail, but it is clear that Nietzsche highly esteemed what he perceived to be heterodoxy in the works of creative figures.

Earlier, I had briefly described the permissive attitude which characterized Nietzsche’s view toward suffering. I believe it is important to now explore this topic a bit further as I believe

it helps solidify the virtue of resilience as being a key part of a Nietzschean virtue ethics.

Nietzsche's conception of suffering and its effect on character development is also where we first run into a major difference that Nietzsche's virtue ethics has with traditional Aristotelian virtue ethics. Exploring this particular conflict between the virtue ethics of Nietzsche and Aristotle will help illuminate some important ways in which the two philosophers differ in their conceptions of virtue. It also sheds light on the two very different ways in which these two virtue thinkers conceived of life and the process of living.

In one of my earlier thesis proposals, I wrote about the way in which Aristotle conceived of "the good life" as being the natural goal of all human life and how this conception depends, in large part, on luck. Aristotle thought the good life required some degree of material well-being in addition to the virtues, and indeed that the two were necessarily connected. At various points in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle makes it clear that external goods (that is, goods outside of the control of the individual) and character play an interrelated role in virtuous action and human flourishing. For instance, in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes at length about the ways in which chance and fortune determine our ability to live a flourishing life.

Aristotle writes:

"...it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment. In many actions we use friends and riches and political power as instruments; and there are some things the lack of which takes the lustre from happiness, as good birth, goodly children, beauty...As we said, then, [human flourishing] seems to need this sort of prosperity in addition."

(Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. 1: Ch. 8, 1099a31-b9)

For Aristotle, there is a prerequisite level of material conditions that must be reached in order for a person to flourish and lead a good life. Also, since for Aristotle the cultivation of virtue is dependent on habit (i.e. on regularly committing virtuous actions), and the ability to commit virtuous actions is dependent on good material conditions, it is clear that Aristotle then believed that one would not be able to properly develop the virtues if they were not endowed with the means to act virtuously. All of this is, of course, in stark contrast to Nietzsche and his conception of the virtues. In fact, Nietzsche appears to take the opposite view on the matter, namely that suffering, deprivation, lack of comfort, etc. are conducive to the betterment of our character. Nietzsche regularly commented about the utility of suffering in the development of the higher man. In fact, for Nietzsche, suffering was the catalyst which drove the creativity that is exemplified in all great works of art. In the first book of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche comments on the usefulness of suffering in driving higher men to reach their full potential:

“Test the live of the best and most productive men and nations, and ask yourselves whether a tree which is to grow proudly heavenward can dispense with bad weather and tempests: whether disfavoured and opposition from without, whether every kind of hatred, jealousy, stubbornness, distrust, severity, greed, and violence do not belong to the favoring circumstances without which a great growth even in virtue is hardly possible? The poison by which the weaker nature is destroyed is strengthening to the strong individual - and he does not call it poison.”

(The Gay Science, Bk I: Sec. 19)

This passage highlights just how important the virtue of resilience is to Nietzsche's thought and how drastically opposed to Nietzsche's outlook is to Aristotle's. Where Aristotle sees unfavourable circumstances as being antithetical to the development of virtuous nature, Nietzsche sees them as necessary for the development of the higher nature. Resilience, then, would be a particularly important virtue for Nietzsche in that it is not only a virtue in itself, but it is also the virtue that is the most conducive to the development of other virtues.

Pride

While the virtue ethics of Nietzsche and Aristotle are in conflict on account of the utility of suffering, they are on the same page when it comes to another virtue, namely pride. Aristotle extols the virtue of pride particularly in book 4 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. He even claims that pride is among the most important of the virtues in that it helps to separate the common man from the great-souled man. He has this in mind when he writes:

“...it is characteristic of the proud man not to aim at the things commonly held in honour, or the things in which others excel; to be sluggish and to hold back except when great honour or a great work is at stake, and to be a man of few deeds, but of great and notable ones. He must also be open in his hate and in his love (for to conceal one’s feelings, i.e. to care less for truth than for what people will think, is a coward’s part)”

(Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. 4, Ch. 3: 1124b23-28)

Pride is particularly important for Aristotle in that it complements the other virtues well. A prideful man will not be dishonest or deceitful out of fear of others, for instance. A prideful man would then necessarily also be a truthful man.

On the topic of pride, Nietzsche is on much better terms with Aristotle. In book 1 of the *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche is similarly keen to point out the importance of pride for the higher type. Part of why Nietzsche detests the rise of doctrines of equality is precisely because they do

much to neuter man's inclination to be proud. Nietzsche praises ancient Greek philosophers for not being bound by the same doctrines:

“A Greek of noble descent found such immense intermediate stages, and such a distance betwixt his elevation and that ultimate baseness...The Greek philosopher went through life with the secret feeling that there were many more slaves than people supposed - that is to say, that everyone was a slave who was not a philosopher. His pride was puffed up when he considered that even the mightiest of the earth were thus to be looked upon as slaves.”

(The Gay Science, Bk. 1, Sec. 18)

Nietzsche here laments what he considers the modern levelling of individuals. Nietzsche claims ancient Greeks properly delineated their society, appropriately separating the nobility from the lower sections of society. Nietzsche blames the rise of doctrines of equality in the modern period for having undermined these divisions. He references the figure of the ancient Greek philosopher as having exemplified this prideful self-reverence. It is likely that Nietzsche here is referencing Plato's Socrates, who made no secret of the negative view he had toward those he felt were unwise and incapable of self-reflection. Nietzsche could also have had the Presocratics in mind, perhaps someone like Pythagoras who had elitist tendencies, such as repeatedly disparaging the opinions of the masses and starting his own cult/school. Like Aristotle, Nietzsche certainly also thought that pride was conducive to the exercise of the other virtues. It is hard to imagine a writer, artist, or any other creative type who does not have pride in their work or is not driven by pride. Likewise, it is not easy to imagine a life-affirming person who does not have at least some

sense of pride in the life they have lived. Both of these virtues, creativity and exuberance, will be discussed in more detail in the “Active Virtues” section of his project. I believe I’ve done enough, however, to show the importance of pride in a Nietzschean account of the virtues.

Solitude

For Nietzsche, an inclination toward solitude is an incredibly valuable personal characteristic. The chief reason for this is that Nietzsche believes a certain level of solitude is necessary in order to become in-tune with our individuality. Examples of Nietzsche extolling the virtue of solitude can be found throughout his work, but a particularly striking example can be found in his *Beyond Good and Evil*:

“For solitude is a virtue with us, as a sublime tendency and impulse for cleanliness, which senses how contact between one person and another - "in society" - must inevitably bring impurity with it. Every community somehow, somewhere, sometime makes people - ‘common.’”

(Beyond Good and Evil, Aphorism 284)

For Nietzsche, solitude is not only beneficial to us in that it allows us to develop our inner selves, but it also keeps us away from interaction with others, which for Nietzsche taints our individuality. Indeed, much of Nietzsche’s thought is an attack on the norms and values of society for the purpose of encouraging the values of the individual. This thought therefore leads Nietzsche to claim that engagement with society is necessarily damaging. This is another instance where Nietzsche’s thought runs counter to that of Aristotle. Aristotle is known for his valuing of the political life. One of Aristotle’s chief proclamations was to claim that man is “zoon politikon”, or the “political animal.” Nietzsche’s disparagement of society in favor of

solitude and radical individualism would be incomprehensible to Aristotle. Nietzsche, of course, knows this and even addresses Aristotle on this point directly in his *Twilight of the Idols*:

"To live alone one must be an animal or a god - says Aristotle. There is yet a third case: one must be both - a philosopher."

(Maxims and Arrows, *Twilight of the Idols*)

An important point needs to be made here with regards to Nietzsche's conception of the virtues. Unlike Aristotle (and Hume), Nietzsche did not think of the virtues as essentially social. Aristotle and Hume's virtues are closely related to their functions in society. For instance, Hume's method for identifying the virtues involves taking a detached, impartial view of the characteristic in question and asking whether it is beneficial to society as a whole; if this turns out to be the case, then the characteristic in question is virtuous (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, 3.1.2.4). Aristotle, for his part, did not think it was even possible for the virtues to be cultivated without participation in politics and in the community (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1099b30). This is because, for Aristotle, the virtues are cultivated through habituation, and the *polis* is the ideal setting in which to develop the virtues through habit. The *polis* offers us a chance to deliberate with our fellow citizens in matters of law, justice, good governance, etc. and this, in turn, helps us to develop our faculties related to them. Life in the *polis* would also highlight the dependence we have on fellow citizens, and our awareness of this dependence will then, in turn, cultivate our dispositions related to sympathy, friendliness, etc. This is because the interests of the *polis* then

necessarily become an extension of our own interests, and so we are only to reach our potential virtuous character only in cooperation with others.

Nietzsche, of course, does not hold these views. In fact, it can be said that not only did Nietzsche think Aristotle was mistaken on the necessity of community in cultivating character, he thought the exact opposite to be true. Virtue could only be cultivated in solitude and, as the above quote from *BGE* shows, participation in society can only bring about the superficial virtues which we adopt only to please others. It is no surprise, then, that Nietzsche's virtues (contra Hume) have nothing to do with their utility or their effect on society's well-being. As we will see in Nietzsche's attack on sympathy, he did not think highly of supposed virtues which work primarily for the benefit of others. Nietzsche's attitude towards solitude can explain part of his admiration for the American Transcendentalists, particularly Emerson, who held similarly positive attitudes towards solitude and self-reliance (though perhaps not as extreme as Nietzsche's). This also sheds light on Nietzsche's anti-political beliefs. He would argue that nothing good could possibly come out of large-scale cooperation with others, so why bother? On this matter, I believe Aristotle's account is more convincing. I do think Nietzsche is correct in that some measure of solitude can oftentimes be useful for discovering aspects of one's character and in the production of creative works, but I think Nietzsche goes much too far. I agree with Aristotle that some semblance of political life is desirable, not only for the development of our character but also because politics offer us a way to care for our fellow citizens.

The Active Virtues

Now that we've discussed the passive virtues, it is time to move on to our discussion of the active virtues. In particular, I will discuss the virtues of risk-taking, exuberance, and creativity. For this, I will be making extensive use of a number of passages from several of Nietzsche's works, but *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in particular will prove to be especially useful for these purposes. I will also make the case that creativity should be regarded as the chief Nietzschean virtue as, I will argue, it is in many respects the culmination of all the other virtues. These next several sections will round out our discussion of Nietzsche's positive ethics before moving on to an exposition of Nietzsche's views regarding sympathy.

Risk-taking

The case for risk-taking being a characteristic which Nietzsche held in high regard should be relatively straight-forward enough for those who have had exposure to Nietzsche's work. It should be noted that risk-taking is related to another virtue that we have discussed in-depth earlier in this project, namely resilience. For Nietzsche, in order for life to be fulfilling, we must make the decisions that expose us to the vicissitudes of life. Nietzsche was no idealist, and so did realize that risk taking would expose one to the negative feelings that naturally arise when some of our risky decisions inevitably do not work out in our favor. Nietzsche derided the idea that one can experience life devoid of suffering. He went even further to claim that to experience the

highest joys of life meant enduring whatever painful experiences fortune has in store for you. In the first book of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche makes this explicit:

“The aim of science should be to give men as much pleasure and as little displeasure as possible? But what if pleasure and displeasure were so tied together that whoever wanted to have as much as possible of one must also have as much as possible of the other - that whoever wanted to learn to "jubilate up to the heavens" would also have to be prepared for "depression unto death"? And that is how things may well be. At least the Stoics believed that this was how things were, and they were consistent when they also desired as little pleasure as possible, in order to get as little displeasure as possible out of life.”

(The Gay Science, Book I, Sec. 12)

Nietzsche’s final sentence here regarding the Stoics is important. Usually Nietzsche attacks ascetic-types for running from life in order to avoid suffering (behaviour he saw as life-denying), but here he is giving the Stoics credit for at least realizing that to reduce suffering necessarily in turn reduces the amount of joy a person can experience over the course of their lives. The kind of life Nietzsche would endorse is one that encourages the taking of risks. For Nietzsche, risk taking is one of the most life-affirming practices as it exposes us the experiences and passions that he feels should be endemic to the lives of higher men. Nietzsche’s own iconoclasm should be seen as a product of Nietzsche’s propensity for risk-taking. Throughout his work, Nietzsche takes aim at established orthodoxy not just in the realm of moral philosophy, but also in a number other fields as well. *The Birth of Tragedy* was certainly a heterodox work that, at the

time of its writing, went against dominant academic thought in both philology and classical studies. Likewise, Nietzsche's autobiography, *Ecce Homo* (which contains chapter titles like "Why I Am So Clever" and "Why I Write Such Excellent Books") certainly flaunts biographical standards with its self-aggrandizing and self-flattery. So while we may imagine Nietzsche as having been some kind of daredevil physically, he certainly did not shy away from taking risks in his intellectual enterprises.

Exuberance

Exuberance is another particularly important virtue for Nietzsche. By exuberance, I mean a sort of blend of what is typically meant by the terms *playfulness*, *happiness*, *fatalism*, and *life-affirmation*. Exuberance can be seen as the core of Nietzsche's concept of *amor fati*, or love of fate. Nietzsche, like Spinoza, was a determinist who believed that the events that a person experiences throughout their life were always meant to happen, and that things could not have possibly been otherwise. In the face of this, Nietzsche believed that a person can do no better than accepting this determinacy and nevertheless affirming their existence. In Nietzsche's work, exuberance is exemplified by Nietzsche's "eternal recurrence" thought experiment: an experiment in which we are to imagine that the totality of our lives will reoccur again and again ad infinitum. If one is moved to despair at such a thought, then they have not affirmed life. For Nietzsche, this concept of eternal recurrence is the ultimate test of life affirmation. Nietzsche introduces his doctrine of eternal recurrence in *The Gay Science*, in which he writes a particularly striking passage:

"What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself...' The question in each and every thing, 'Do you want this again and

innumerable times again?’ would lie on your actions as the heaviest weight! Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to long for nothing more fervently than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?”

(The Gay Science, Book 4, Sec. 341)

That Nietzsche has this concept first articulated by a demon is significant, I think. This implies it is natural to first feel repulsed and disturbed at such an idea. It also puts forth the idea that the concept should be taken as a challenge; that is, if one does not feel comfortable willing their existence ad infinitum, then one ought to fashion one’s life and thoughts in such a way so as to eventually affirm life and feel joy at the prospect of eternal recurrence. In this way, one can get back at the demon by using his own concept as a source of joy instead of despair and anxiety. In addition to Nietzsche’s conception of fatalism and the affirmation that ought to come with it, I believe Nietzsche also expounds playfulness and light-heartedness in his work. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the activities of song and dance are regularly invoked and oftentimes associated with the figure of Zarathustra. Moreover, in the section titled ‘On The Three Metamorphoses’, where Zarathustra gives a brief overview of the necessary stages in the quest of self-overcoming, Zarathustra presents the final stage, that of a child as being necessary for the creation of new values. This is because

“The child is innocence and forgiving, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred ‘Yes.’”

(Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Part 1, ‘On The Three Metamorphoses’)

A certain level of light-heartedness is required to face the seriousness of a world suddenly stripped of its old values. Moreover, the task of creating new values is itself certainly daunting and requires the playfulness and curiosity inherent in children. The task of value creation requires the kind of risk-taking that we had discussed earlier, and children are well predisposed to risk-taking.

Creativity

Creativity is among the most important characteristics for Nietzsche. Nietzsche shared with the Romantics the idea that it was a part of human nature to want to shape the world around you. Nietzsche called his particular conception of this idea the *will to power*. This idea was also at the root of Nietzsche's attitude toward creativity. When creative types create a piece of art, they are necessarily affirming their own values and imposing them on the world around them. It is no surprise, then, that when Nietzsche wants to point to a historical figure whom he considers a higher type, he usually points to artists, writers, musicians, etc. For instance, Nietzsche praises the characters of Thucydides, Beethoven, Goethe, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, among others. Nietzsche also certainly considered himself to be a higher type, and the quality and amount of his literary and philosophical output is definitely part of the reason why. It should be noted that creativity here does not only refer to artistic creations, but also the creation and affirmation of new values. In this sense, the child in the opening of *Zarathustra* is also a highly creative figure. I believe creativity should be considered the culmination of the rest of the Nietzschean virtues. Nietzsche himself believed that it would be impossible to become creative without first having the *resilience* to withstand and channel great amounts of suffering, the propensity toward *solitude* that lays the foundation for creative expression, a *prideful* attitude that all higher types share toward their work, and the *risk-taking* and *exuberance* that are the catalyst behind all great works of art.

Nietzsche's high esteem for the value of art can be found throughout his work, but his most thorough exposition can be found in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In that work, Nietzsche saw the

greatest feats of creativity exemplified in ancient Greek tragedy. This is because in ancient Greek tragic poetry he found the rare synthesis of two artistic strands, namely the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian*. Essentially: the Apollonian spirit is marked by the order and restraint it gives to art, while the Dionysian is marked by unbridled passion and instinct. Nietzsche believed the apex of creative energy was felt when these two strands were brought together in the creation of an artistic work. He argues this synthesis is missing from modern art and has not been achieved since the classical period. Nietzsche's regard for the virtues that we've been discussing also factors into his description of the effect ancient Greek tragedy had on its audience:

“Dionysian art, too, wishes to convince us of the eternal joy of existence: only we are to seek this joy not in phenomenon, but behind them. We are to recognize that all that comes into being must be ready for a sorrowful end; we are forced to look into the terrors of the individual existence--yet we are not to become rigid with fear: a metaphysical comfort tears us momentarily from the bustle of the changing figures.”

(The Birth of Tragedy, Sec. 17)

Here we see Nietzsche praising the Dionysian aspects of ancient Greek tragedy for the effects it had on the psyche of its viewers. In particular, he notes the tendency of Dionysian art to promote resilience and exuberance toward life.

What About Sympathy?

I have previously outlined what I believe would be a chief virtue in a Nietzschean virtue ethics, namely resilience. In doing this, I thought it necessary to write at length about Nietzsche's idiosyncratic and permissive view towards suffering. I'd like to revisit this topic as I believe it sheds light on our next topic of discussion, namely Nietzsche's attitude toward compassion. I believe Nietzsche is often misunderstood on this topic, so I will attempt to be as precise as I can be. I will also attempt to determine whether or not compassion should feature as a Nietzschean virtue. I'd like to spend the next several pages giving a fleshed out account of Nietzsche's views on sympathy while putting forth the view that unlike the other characteristics discussed in the paper thus far, sympathy/compassion does not qualify as a Nietzschean virtue. Since compassion plays such a crucial role in ethics and many systems of morality, I believe it is necessary to discuss Nietzsche's critique of it in more detail. I will later offer a Nietzschean critique of the importance given to sympathy by the British sentimentalists and David Hume in particular. I've chosen to include Hume's account of sympathy because I believe it to be the most convincing in showing the importance of sympathy in ethical life. However, as I will show, this sympathy-based account of ethics can be plausibly challenged by a Nietzschean critique of the supposed universality of the sentimentalist conception of human nature and the effect this has on the role sympathy plays within sentimentalist morality.

In laying out Nietzsche's attitude towards compassion, I believe it is necessary to note that Nietzsche distinguishes empathy from pity - the latter being an emotion he did not hold in high regard at all. Throughout his writing, Nietzsche attacks pity as being purely superficial and

counterproductive. One of his criticisms of Christianity was that he believed it to be a religion of pity. He regularly contrasted Christianity, which he believed was obsessed with guilt and pity, with the mythology of the ancient Greeks, which he held as being much more life-affirming. In Nietzsche's view, pity is nothing more than hollow words that accomplish nothing but allow for superficial people to feel as if they've helped the sufferer. But for Nietzsche, what makes pity especially detestable is that it robs the sufferer of their individuality. In Book 4 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche makes this especially clear:

“What we most deeply and personally suffer from is incomprehensible and inaccessible to nearly everyone else; here we are hidden from our nearest, even if we eat at the same pot. But whenever we are noticed to be suffering, our suffering is superficially construed; it is the essence of compassion that it strips the suffering of what is truly personal: our ‘benefactors’ diminish our worth and our will more than our enemies do.”

(The Gay Science, Bk. 4: Section 338)

Nietzsche is arguing that our suffering and personal issues are so personal that they, necessarily, can not be fully understood by most others. Any attempt by the vast majority of people to comment on our issues results in shallow words. Even in his discussion of compassion, Nietzsche's radical individualism can't help but leak out. However, Nietzsche is not altogether dismissive of the suffering of others. Rather, Nietzsche extols us to lend a hand to those whose suffering is closest to our own. He continues:

“You will also want to help, but only those whose distress you entirely understand, because they have one sorrow and one hope in common with you—your friends: and only in the way that you help yourself:—I want to make them more courageous, more enduring, more simple, more joyful! I want to teach them that which at present so few understand, and the preachers of fellowship in sorrow least of all:—namely, fellowship in joy!”

(The Gay Science, Bk. 4: Section 338)

Again, Nietzsche believes compassion is virtuous only when it is shown to those whose suffering is most similar to yours. In cases like this, the compassion shown won't be like the empty words of pity that serve only to diminish the individuality of the sufferer. The purpose of compassion is to uplift those who suffer like you, and you should aim to uplift them in the way you uplift yourself. In this way, compassion is more likely to reach the individual and become beneficial. Therefore, if compassion is to be included as part of a Nietzschean virtue ethics, it must be a kind of compassion that is more narrow and idiosyncratic than our usual conception of compassion.

It is still the case, however, that Nietzsche believed compassion to be profoundly overvalued, both by the intellectuals of his day and by society as a whole. According to Nietzsche, the root of this overvaluation of compassion has its basis in the inaccurate and decadent view of suffering that has proliferated throughout society. Recalling our discussion of resilience, we noted how Nietzsche regarded suffering to be conducive to development of higher types. This conception of suffering as a good stands in stark contrast to the popular, decadent notion of suffering as an unparalleled evil that is to be avoided at all costs. Throughout his writing, Nietzsche regularly took aim at the British sentimentalists and utilitarians for helping to

popularize the idea of pleasure as the chief good and suffering the chief evil. An example of this can be found in the “Maxims and Arrows” portion of the *Twilight of the Idols* where Nietzsche writes:

“If we have our own why in life, we shall get along with almost any how. Man does not strive for pleasure; only the Englishman does.”

(*Twilight of the Idols*, Maxims and Arrows, 12)

Nietzsche here is reasserting his idea that suffering is endemic to life and was, until this point, therefore dealt with by accepting it as necessary for whatever goals for life one had. He rebukes the English philosophers of his time for putting forth a conception of ethics that seems to pursue the incomprehensible tasks of reducing human suffering and maximizing pleasure. This critique of sentimentalism and utilitarianism then naturally leads us to one of Nietzsche’s issues with compassion: it is superficial. By feeling sympathetic to the plight of a particular person, we imply that we know the end result of that person’s current bout of suffering. It can be the case, as Nietzsche argues it usually is for higher types, that suffering can lead to the higher development of a person. Compassion in these cases strips the individual of their individuality by presupposing that others know what is ultimately best for them.

Another point of contention Nietzsche has with sympathy is that it is usually exploited by lower types for their own ends. Nietzsche contested the conventional view of compassion that portrays the receivers of compassion as passive subjects. He instead portrays the lower types as wielding compassion over the higher types as if it were a weapon. Nietzsche claims that it is

typical of lower types to co-opt another person's capacity for sympathy by forcing them to feel pity. In this way, Nietzsche argues, the lower types exercise their will to power without being in possession of any strength. They succeed in inflicting pain onto the higher types by forcing the higher types to feel pity toward the situation of the lower types and shame toward their own fortunate situation. Nietzsche mentions precisely this state of affairs in the third essay of his *Genealogy of Morality* where he argues that the lower types have

“succeeded in poisoning the consciences of the fortunate with their own misery, with all misery, so that one day the fortunate begin to be ashamed of their good fortune and perhaps say to one another: ‘it is disgraceful to be fortunate: there is too much misery’”

(Genealogy of Morals, Essay 3, Sec. 14)

Now that we have given further reasoning for Nietzsche's attack on the supposed inflated importance of compassion, I believe it will be worthwhile to explore a system of ethics that gives sympathy a privileged place in deciding ethical matters. The moral philosophy of David Hume is certainly one contender. Hume's chief argument is that the capacity of human beings for empathy is the key aspect of our ethical thinking. Empathy is used both to motivate us to commit moral actions *and* to allow us to judge the moral worth of the actions of others. Hume's explanation of the evaluative instrument of empathy goes something like this: when judging the moral actions of others, we tend to think of ourselves as impartial observers detached from the situation of the agent in question. We then use our faculty of empathy to infer whether or not the particular characteristic that is exemplified by the agent's action is virtuous or not. We deem a

particular characteristic virtuous if, using our faculty of empathy, we judge that this characteristic is beneficial to society in general. If we judge this to be the case, the particular characteristic induces a pleasurable feeling in us and we therefore deem it virtuous. Hume's account of the motivating factors of moral actions is also dominated by our use of our capacity for empathy. Hume argues that in order for an agent to act, they must necessarily be motivated either by feelings of pleasure or pain, i.e. of desire or aversion. The importance Hume places on empathy in deciding ethical matters seems to be, on its face, quite accurate and intuitive. For example, when I hear about the plight faced by, say, war refugees or trans people, my empathetic faculties produce an feeling of aversion to their suffering which, in turn, compels me to take actions to help alleviate that suffering.

So, then, what exactly is problematic about Hume's account of morality? Nietzsche would argue that its main issue is it constructs an account of human nature that is unrealistically uniform. Hume claims that the capacity for empathy can be found throughout humanity (*Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 9.7/273). In doing this, Hume can be seen as drastically underestimating the physiological diversity that is to be found among humans. Hume attempted to tie morality to a psychological feature that he believed is more or less identical among humanity. The issue with this is if capacity for empathy is a psychological quality, it is almost certainly similar to other psychological qualities (e.g. sociability, friendliness, drive, etc.) in that it oscillates drastically from one person and another. An obvious instance of this is the case of the psychopath, who is marked by his inability to feel empathy with others. Hume and his fellow British sentimentalists appear to be the target of this critique from Nietzsche when he writes in *The Gay Science*:

“There is little to be learned from those historians of morality (especially Englishmen): they themselves are usually, quite unsuspectingly, under the influence of a definite morality, and act unwittingly as its armour-bearers - perhaps still repeating sincerely the popular superstition of Christian Europe, that the characteristic of moral action consists in self-denial, self-sacrifice, or in fellow-feeling and fellow-suffering. The usual error in their premises is their insistence on a certain consensus among human beings.”

(The Gay Science, Book 5, Sec. 345)

The sentimentalists are mistaken to assume that humans share a common nature that can form the backbone of any moral system. Nietzsche argues that this is the chief problem for those who peddle moral systems that make universal normative demands. Of course, it is not clear that Nietzsche’s criticism here holds water; I think Nietzsche might be guilty of exaggerating the degree of differences among people. Also, it is not obvious that the existence of people who are inherently incapable of proper moral deliberation (whether owing to a deficiency in feeling, reason, or something else) necessarily leads to the untenability of moral theories which presuppose a concept of human nature that describes the overwhelming majority of humans. In any case, I believe I have accomplished what I set out to do, which is to show that Nietzsche does not value sympathy nearly enough for it to be included in a Nietzschean form of perfectionist ethics.

The Perfectionist Interpretation

In this section, I will offer a defense of this thesis against those who argue for a more egalitarian Nietzsche. In particular, I will discuss a work by Nietzsche scholar Alexander Nehamas titled *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*. Nehamas argues that if it is the case that Nietzsche is a perfectionist, then he is a pluralistic one. He makes the case that Nietzsche does not endorse one way of life over another, but rather that Nietzsche believed there can be a variety of ways to lead an excellent life, depending on the particular innate characteristics of an individual. In disputing this, I appeal to the pervasive and disturbing elitism and defenses of inequality that can be found throughout Nietzsche's work. In particular, I will argue that Nietzsche believed only certain kinds of individuals are able to lead excellent lives. For Nietzsche, the basis for this elitism is that people are not equal physiologically, so there are only a limited number of individuals who are able to properly develop the characteristics I've discussed in this paper. With this done, I believe that I will have made the case that Nietzsche is not only a moral perfectionist, but also one who is necessarily elitist.

Nehamas' *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* is considered a classic of Nietzsche scholarship. The book offers a novel and thought-provoking way of interpreting Nietzsche's work. In this work, Nehamas advances the argument that Nietzsche viewed the world as if it were a literary text (p. 3). To make this argument, Nehamas draws attention to Nietzsche's idea of *perspectivism*, which is the idea that it is impossible to have an objective "view" of reality. Instead, each one of our perspectives are only one of many possible interpretations and therefore equally valid. It is easy to see, then, how Nietzsche's perspectivism forms the backbone of

Nehamas' thesis. Since there are no facts, but only interpretations, Nehamas argues that this must mean that Nietzsche saw life as being akin to a novel, where there can be a large number of equally valid interpretations. Nehamas uses this argument to explain many of Nietzsche's anti-realist and skeptical positions. In this view, universal moral systems are anathema for Nietzsche precisely because they involve projecting a certain interpretation onto individuals who have their own life experiences and interpretations.

Nehamas relies on his thesis to argue that it is not possible for Nietzsche to have put forth any kind of positive, perfectionist account of the best kind of life or the best kind of person. This is not possible because, for Nietzsche, character and value are, after all, a matter of perspective (p. 8). There are a great number of possible ways to interpret what good character consists of, so, in this view, it would not make sense to argue for an ethics that is superior to all others. Nehamas writes:

“To give general directions for becoming an individual is surely as self-defeating as is offering general views when one believes that general views are all simply interpretations. And this, of course, provides another reason why Nietzsche does not have anything like a traditional positive moral view. Nietzsche solves this double problem by refusing to offer any descriptions of what an ideal person or an ideal life would be like.”

(Nietzsche: Life as Literature, p. 8)

For these reasons, Nehamas' Nietzsche necessarily becomes a Nietzsche that takes a much more egalitarian approach compared to what I have argued for in this paper. Because ethical values vary in accordance with each person's perspective, Nietzsche could not have possibly argued that certain virtues ought to be privileged. It is up to each individual to identify what their ethical

values are and ought to be, and there is no way to determine that one perspective is more valid than another.

Of course, I feel that the last sentence in the above quoted excerpt can easily be disputed. I have spent the majority of this paper identifying characteristics that Nietzsche has praised on multiple occasions throughout his work. However, I believe there is a more convincing way of arguing against Nehamas' views on Nietzsche's ethical thought, and that is to highlight Nietzsche's pervasive elitism. Nietzsche's elitism and praise for inequality can turn out to be significantly problematic for Nehamas' thesis. If it can be established that Nietzsche believed there are fundamental physiological differences between individuals that lead some to be superior to others, then this strikes a blow to Nehamas' more egalitarian conception of Nietzsche. The reason for this being that it would not make much sense for Nietzsche to argue for the equality of a variety of ways of life if he did not believe that people were fundamentally equal. However, as I will show, Nietzsche certainly believed that some people were inherently superior to others and that therefore the ideal of Nietzsche's perfectionist ethics can only be attained by those of superior stock.

The first thing I'd like to draw attention to is Nietzsche's apparent belief in a biological theory called Lamarckism, which was an evolutionary theory that was in vogue among intellectuals in the late 19th century as a viable competitor to Darwinism. The main difference being that whereas Darwinism held that natural selection was the driving force behind evolution, Lamarckism argued that characteristics acquired in an organism's lifetime can be passed down to its offspring, and that this then was the principal driving force behind evolution. This belief in the heritability of acquired characteristics was later found to be scientifically unsound. There

exist a handful of examples of Nietzsche seeming to endorse a neo-Lamarckian view throughout his work, but the most clear example comes in Book 5 of *The Gay Science*, wherein Nietzsche writes:

“Once one has trained one’s eyes to recognize in a scholarly treatise the scholar’s intellectual idiosyncrasy - every scholar has one - one will almost always behold behind this the scholars ‘pre-history,’ his family, and especially their occupations and crafts...Take an example: the sons of registrars and office-clerks of every kind, whose main task has always been to arrange a variety of material, distribute it in drawers, and systematise it generally, evince, when they become learned men, an inclination to regard a problem as almost solved when they have systematised it. There are philosophers who are at bottom nothing but systematising brains—the formal part of the paternal occupation has become its essence to them. The talent for classifications, for tables of categories, betrays something; it is not for nothing that a person is the child of his parents.”

(The Gay Science, Book 5, Sec. 348)

Nietzsche’s disdain for philosophers who advance systematic theories is known, but here he seems to be arguing that these systemic philosophers have inherited their tendency to systemize from their parents, who in turn acquired this tendency as a result of their professions. This is almost certainly proof of Nietzsche’s belief in some version of neo-Lamarckism. A further indicator is that Nietzsche spends the very next section (349) attacking aspects of Darwinism. This belief in neo-Lamarckism lends further credence to my point that Nietzsche is

fundamentally a believer in inequality. Through this neo-Lamarckian lens, Nietzsche formed his theory of “higher-types” and “lower-types,” and this explains why Nietzsche spends much of the first essay of *The Genealogy of Morals* writing about these divisions as if they were a fact of biology; he believed the negative traits of the so-called “lower types” to be compounded by years of evolution that saw these traits being passed down by earlier “lower types.”

Of course, I do not need to reference Nietzsche’s adherence to obscure 19th century biological theories to show his penchant for elitism. Oftentimes, Nietzsche is much more open about his belief in the inherent superiority of select people. For instance, in the *Twilight of The Idols*, Nietzsche praises the *Law of Manu*, which is the ancient Hindu social text that codifies the caste system. Nietzsche contrasts this social code with ones, apparently influenced by Christianity, that attempt to establish social equality. Nietzsche writes:

“Let us consider the other case of so-called morality, the case of breeding a particular race and kind. The most magnificent example of this is furnished by Indian morality, sanctioned as religion in the form of ‘the law of Manu.’ Here the task is set to breed no less than four races at once: one priestly, one warlike, one for trade and agriculture, and finally a race of servants, the Sudras. ...One heaves a sigh of relief at leaving the Christian atmosphere of disease and dungeons for this healthier, higher, and wider world. How wretched is the New Testament compared to Manu, how foul it smells!”

(*Twilight of The Idols*, “The Improvers of Mankind”, Sec. 3)

This is perhaps the most disturbing passage I've come across in my reading of Nietzsche's work. It is near impossible to read this passage as anything other than an endorsement of outright racism. Furthermore, thanks to having studied a bit of the caste system in a course I had taken on Asian philosophy, Nietzsche's account of the caste system struck me as orientalized and simplistic. My suspicions were confirmed when, in my attempt to make sense of this passage, I came across scholarship that convincingly linked Nietzsche's interpretation of Manu with the work of Louis Jacolliot, a 19th century orientalist and racist. Nietzsche had apparently accepted Jacolliot's ideas wholesale despite having had access to credible academic Indologists (*Toward a Genealogy of Aryan Morality: Nietzsche and Jacolliot*, 2006). A plausible explanation for this is that Nietzsche, in an attempt to ground his elitism in historical reality, had uncritically accepted theories that he viewed as evidence for his ideas. The idea that Nietzsche was trying to prove that his elitism was merely an account of how things are can be further supported by a passage in *The Antichrist*. This passage is the only other time where Nietzsche mentions the *Law of Manu*. He writes regarding Manu:

"...the order of the castes, the highest, dominating law, is but the sanctioning of a natural order, of a natural legality of the highest rank, over which no arbitrariness, no 'modern idea' has any power."

(The Antichrist, Sec. 57)

I believe I have persuasively shown that Nietzsche had a deeply-held belief in the inherent inequality of the world. For the reasons I have outlined earlier in this section, this makes

untenable the idea that Nietzsche believed that each person's ethical perspective is equal to everyone else's. It is in fact the case that Nietzsche believed a certain kind of individual, and also a certain kind of ethical life, to be superior to all others. For Nietzsche, the best kind of individuals are those who embody the virtuous characteristics that I have identified earlier in this paper. As this section shows, it is not the case that every individual is capable of achieving these characteristics. Nietzsche believed that there necessarily exist lower-types whose lives will be dominated by vices like resentment and envy. The problem of how Nietzsche's perspectivism relates to his ethical thought still remains, but I believe I have shown that Nehamas' theory on how to solve it is not congruent with much of Nietzsche's writing.

Epilogue

I consider this project a success in that I believe I have accomplished my goals, which was to argue for and defend my thesis. I believe this project has also had a profound effect on my philosophical development. When I started writing this paper, I wasn't the biggest fan of Nietzsche but I was nevertheless interested in his thinking and confident that I would be able to successfully argue that he was some kind of moral perfectionist. Sometime in the middle of writing this paper, I became very attracted to the "ideal" life Nietzsche had described. I was also fascinated and convinced by a lot of Nietzsche's anti-essentialist ideas that I was encountering in the process of gathering information on this project. Toward the end, however, I was becoming less and less convinced by some of Nietzsche's ideas. A large part of this was that I had become disillusioned by the extent of Nietzsche's elitism, but I was also starting to regard Nietzsche's arguments against morality as suspect. In any case, I am glad I spent my senior year studying a

thinker who certainly has a place in the history of moral philosophy and who has had a profound effect on much of 20th century philosophy.

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