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Nietzschean Ethics: One's Duty to Overcome

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Claremont McKenna College

Nietzschean Ethics: One's Duty to Overcome

Submitted to
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and
Dean Peter Uvin

by
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Abstract

In this paper, I will analyze Nietzsche's argument for a moral error theory and examine the implications of his view. In order to arrive at the best possible interpretation I will heavily incorporate many passages from Nietzsche's original works so that I can delve into a textual analysis of Nietzsche. Because Nietzsche is notoriously vague at times and often contradictory, I recognize that this is far from the only appropriate interpretation. However, I hope that it is one which has at least some intuitive appeal. Eventually, I hope to prove that despite his rejection of moral truths, Nietzsche's theory of value can lead us to a sound ethical theory.

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I: The Will to Truth

“To recognize untruth as a condition of life -- that certainly means resisting accustomed value feelings in a dangerous way; and a philosophy that risks this would by that token alone place itself beyond good and evil.”

-- Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

Despite his wide influence on philosophical thought, Friedrich Nietzsche is best known for denying the value of morality. Because Nietzsche often describes himself as an immoralist, it might seem as though “Nietzschean Ethics” is an oxymoron. How can Nietzsche possibly reject morality and advance an ethical theory at the same time? By the end of this thesis I hope to answer this question, but in order to do so we will need to define some terms. Firstly, I will argue that Nietzsche’s rejection of morality is not necessarily a rejection of all other-regarding or benevolent actions. Rather, Nietzsche defines morality as any philosophical framework which appeals to an absolute or intrinsic value. Secondly, when I use the word “ethics,” I am referring only to the practical question of how to evaluate one’s actions, or the question of what is truly valuable. Given that Nietzsche clearly attempts to answer this question throughout his works, I see no issue with describing his philosophy as an ethical theory. Admittedly, I do realize that the phrase “ethical theory” usually refers to theories about interpersonal conduct and our obligations to others, but I do not believe that the phrase should exclude theories which emphasize the self. Finally, even though Nietzsche personally renounces all forms of morality, I will attempt to prove that his ethical framework can ultimately lead us to the type of other-regarding actions which one would intuitively describe as “moral.”

Nietzsche rejects morality for two major reasons. (1) Morality claims to be an objective truth, and (2) it claims to have intrinsic value. Thus, in order to understand Nietzsche’s rejection of moral truth, we must first understand Nietzsche’s criticisms of each claim. Although Nietzsche did not outright reject the possibility of an objective truth, he was more or less agnostic about its existence. In fact, Nietzsche would have loved to obtain objective truth, but he believed that

human beings are confined by a “deceptive consciousness”¹ which prevents us from ever knowing it. Because we are limited by the illusion of perception, Nietzsche argues that we can never know an object itself. Therefore, any claim about the true nature of an object is merely a concept we’ve projected onto it. In describing the creation of these concepts, Nietzsche uses the example of a leaf, writing:

“Every concept originates through our equating what is unequal. No leaf ever wholly equals another, and the concept ‘leaf’ is formed through an arbitrary abstraction from these individual differences, through forgetting the distinctions. [...] We obtain the concept, as we do the form, by overlooking what is individual and actual: whereas nature is acquainted with no forms and no concepts, and likewise with no species, but only with an X which remains inaccessible and undefinable for us.”²

Essentially, Nietzsche argues that the properties we use to describe objects are artificial groupings, generalizations we make to facilitate language and perception. Since our concept of truth is only an approximation of reality, Nietzsche concludes that “the truth” exists only within one’s subjective consciousness. As a result, Nietzsche rejects all claims about objective truth. Instead, he asks us to recognize that truth is constructed, writing that “Truth is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered -- but something that must be created.”³

Because he wants us to recognize the falsity of most “truths,” Nietzsche claims that “convictions are more dangerous enemies of the truth than lies.”⁴ Nietzsche does see “life-preserving”⁵ value in creating these all sorts of concepts, but he believed that one of the most fundamental problems with philosophy was the assumption that the truth is intrinsically valuable.

¹ PN, pg. 44

² PN, pg. 46

³ WTP, pg. 298

⁴ PN, pg. 63

⁵ PN, pg. 45

This is because Nietzsche is convinced that placing too much value in the truth will inevitably lead to the “ascetic ideal,”⁶ a false sense of certainty (and moral obligation to the truth) which promotes self-denial. In criticizing the ascetic ideal Nietzsche writes,

“The ascetic ideal has a goal -- this goal is so universal that all the other interests of human existence seem, when compared with it, petty and narrow; it interprets epochs, nations, and men inexorably with a view to this one goal; it permits no other interpretation; no other goal.”⁷

Looking at religion, for example, Nietzsche points out that blindly believing in the “truth” of God often forces people to impose unnecessary restrictions upon their lives in order to conform to an objective ideal. Given his rejection of objective truth though, Nietzsche does not believe that God is an objective truth which we can discover. Rather, God is a “truth” we have invented. Because of this, Nietzsche believes that a blind belief in God is self-defeating. Since we have no way of confirming God’s existence, it is entirely up to us whether we believe in Him or not, but if choosing to believe in Him requires us to deny our natural desires, then we have limited ourselves through our own concept of the “truth.”

Nietzsche’s rejection of the God is the same reason that he rejects morality. Not only does Nietzsche believe that we can never know a moral “truth” with any certainty, but he is also extremely apprehensive about the fact that moral claims tend to limit us in a restrictive manner. By appealing to an objective truth, moral claims assert they are intrinsically valuable, but Nietzsche argues that this requires nothing less than a leap of faith. In Nietzsche’s words,

“It is still a *metaphysical faith* that underlies our faith in science -- and we men of knowledge of today, we godless men and anti-metaphysicians, we, too still derive our

⁶ BW, pg. 582

⁷ Ibid.

flame from the fire ignited by a faith millennia old, the Christian faith, which was also Plato's, that God is truth, that truth is *divine*”⁸

This “faith” in the value of the truth is what Nietzsche calls the “will to truth,” a desire for certainty which he believes exists within all human beings. As a philosopher, Nietzsche is sympathetic to our propensity for knowledge, but he is also deeply concerned that the will to truth has taught us to pursue truth in a dangerous manner. “Knowledge for its own sake,” he argues, “is the last snare of morality.”⁹ Instead, Nietzsche challenges us to question our obsession with the unknowable. As he puts it, “The will to truth requires a critique -- let us thus define our own task -- the value of truth must for once be experimentally called into question.”¹⁰

For the sake of this experiment, we can pretend that moral claims are actually true, but even if we do so, Nietzsche argues that they can never be intrinsically valuable. This is because moral claims often require us to act in ways which contradict our most fundamental desires. When somebody makes a moral claim like “lying is wrong,” for example, they are rarely making a purely descriptive claim about their own opinion. Rather, when somebody says “lying is wrong,” they are usually making a normative claim about what you “ought” to do. In doing so they are implying that their moral “truth” is intrinsically valuable. However, we can easily think of many cases where it would be contrary to our own best interests to assume that. Recognizing this discrepancy, Nietzsche claims that “what is fair for one cannot by any means for that reason alone also be fair for others.”¹¹ In other words, because we can only really know our own interests and desires we, can only ever know what is valuable for us. Thus, Nietzsche rejects the notion that one morality could be valuable for all people, asking us instead to become a new

⁸ BW, pg. 588

⁹ BW, pg. 269

¹⁰ BW, pg. 589

¹¹ BW, pg. 347

species of philosophers. “My judgment is my judgment, no one else is easily entitled to it,” he would write, “that is what such a philosopher of the future may perhaps say of himself.”¹²

In fact, Nietzsche did not believe anything could have intrinsic value. What this means for Nietzsche is that nothing in nature is inherently more valuable than anything else. Rather, value (like truth) is a concept we’ve created to make sense of our own realities; it is something we project upon the world, not something which is essential to it. Because nothing is intrinsically worth pursuing, Nietzsche argues that human beings can never be bound by a moral obligation to achieve some end. However, Nietzsche consistently makes apparent value judgments throughout his works, often implying that his proposed lifestyle is better than any other. In doing so, Nietzsche seems to be appealing to some sort of value -- something like the preservation of life or the fulfillment of desires -- but it is unclear how he can do so if he does not believe in intrinsic value. Because he seems to believe that human beings can create their own value, Nietzsche can certainly claim that *he* thinks these things are valuable. However, telling others to value these things requires a more complicated justification. In the following sections, I will explore possible explanations for Nietzsche’s value judgments, then I will go on to explain the ethical implications of his view.

¹² BW, pg. 243

II: Exploring Fictionalism

“Why couldn’t the world that concerns us be a fiction? And if somebody asked, ‘but to a fiction there surely belongs an author?’ -- couldn’t one answer simply: why?”¹³

-- Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

One possible conclusion we could draw from Nietzsche’s rejection of intrinsic value is that Nietzsche does not believe that anything can ever be valuable. If this is the case, then under Nietzsche’s theory no goal could ever be considered more or less valuable than any other. All lifestyles would have to be considered equally valuable, and as a result, we would have to interpret all of Nietzsche’s seemingly prescriptive claims as mere statements of his own opinions. This view can best be described as a nihilistic interpretation of Nietzsche. One of the strongest such interpretations is the one put forward by Nadeem Hussain, who argues that Nietzsche is “in one sense of the word, a nihilist.”¹⁴ Because Nietzsche vehemently renounces the nihilistic lifestyle of the “last men”¹⁵ throughout his works, I believe that we should be extremely weary of this interpretation, but it is important to note that Hussain makes a clear distinction between what he calls “practical” and “theoretical” nihilism.¹⁶ Although Hussain believes that Nietzsche is a nihilist in theory, he claims that Nietzsche’s philosophy gives us a way to avoid acting like one. More specifically, Hussain argues that Nietzsche avoids the conclusion of meaninglessness by turning to a fictionalist theory of value.

Of course, Hussain must first prove that Nietzsche actually rejects all value. In order to do so, Hussain begins by pointing out that Nietzsche is clearly a moral error theorist, quoting a passage from *Twilight of the Idols* where Nietzsche writes:

¹³ BW, pg. 237

¹⁴ Hussain, pg. 157

¹⁵ The last men are men who have become complacent with nothingness. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, Nietzsche describes them as empty human beings who “blink” and reject Zarathustra’s message.

¹⁶ In describing the distinction between the two forms of nihilism, he writes, “theoretical nihilism is the belief in valuelessness, or as Nietzsche often puts it, goallessness” while “practical nihilism is the practical consequence in most agents of the belief.” (Hussain, pg. 157)

“My demand upon the philosopher is known, that he take his stand beyond good and evil and leave the illusion of moral judgment beneath himself. This demand follows from an insight which I was the first to formulate: that there are altogether no moral facts. Moral judgments agree with religious ones in believing in realities which are no realities. Morality is merely an interpretation of certain phenomena -- more precisely a misinterpretation.”¹⁷

Nietzsche is very straightforward about his rejection of morality, so Hussain’s interpretation definitely seems to be warranted. In fact, if we define moral error theory as the view that all moral claims are inherently false, then there seems to be no question that Nietzsche is a moral error theorist. Given the strong textual evidence, Hussain’s interpretation should be largely uncontroversial, but as I pointed out in the last chapter, Nietzsche’s rejection of morality only proves that he rejected *intrinsic* value.

Hussain, however, needs to show that Nietzsche rejects all value in order for his interpretation to be accurate, and doing so proves a major obstacle for his theory. In order to attribute his theoretical nihilism to Nietzsche, Hussain refers us to this passage from *The Gay Science*:

“Whatever has value in our world now does not have value in itself, according to its nature -- nature is always value-less, but has been given value at some time as a present -- and it was we who gave and bestowed it.”¹⁸

Clearly, Nietzsche seems to be rejecting intrinsic value here as well, but as Hussain himself notes, that does not necessarily mean that Nietzsche rejects all value. In fact, by claiming that human beings have “given” value to nature, Nietzsche seems to be suggesting that value *can* exist so long as it exists extrinsically. If this is the case, then Nietzsche could be considered a subjective

¹⁷ TI, 'Improvers', 1

¹⁸ GS, 301

realist,¹⁹ but Hussain rejects this interpretation because it would undermine Nietzsche's theoretical nihilism.

According to Hussain, "Nietzsche claims that nothing has value in itself and therefore all claims of the form 'X is valuable' are false."²⁰ Therefore, even a subjective claim of the form 'X is valuable' would contradict Hussain's interpretation. Of course, this is a huge assumption to make based on Nietzsche's rejection of intrinsic value, but Hussain attempts to justify his view by providing several examples of Nietzsche's metaphysical skepticism, a view which is best summarized by this quote: "Whatever philosophical standpoint one may adopt today, from every point of view the erroneousness of the world in which we think we live is the surest and firmest fact that we can lay eyes on."²¹ Essentially, Hussain claims that Nietzsche doubts our ability to ever know anything. Thus, in Hussain's view, Nietzsche believes that "all evaluative judgments involve some kind of mistake necessarily."²² Therefore, because he claims that all perception is an illusion, Hussain argues that subjective claims are no different than objective ones. Unfortunately, Hussain does not provide a particularly strong textual basis for his claim, and as I will argue later, I believe that Nietzsche's skepticism is limited to the external world. For now, however, I will focus on explaining why Hussain's interpretation fails philosophically.

Because it takes the same form as moral error theory, Hussain's theoretical nihilism can best be described as a total value error theory. As I noted earlier, a total value error theory would require us to accept that there is no correct way to live one's life, but Hussain does draw a system for creating value from Nietzsche's works. Because he recognizes that subscribing completely to total value error theory would lead us to meaninglessness, Hussain argues that Nietzsche's theory requires allows us to create "fictional" values in order to avoid becoming destructive nihilists.

¹⁹ Although Hussain dismisses this view, I will reexamine it in Section III

²⁰ Hussain, pg. 161

²¹ BW, pg. 235

²² Hussain, pg. 162

This approach, which Hussain calls fictionalism, is a form of “honest illusion”²³ which allows us to assign “value” to an object without claiming that it is actually valuable. As Hussain describes it, the factionalist, “pretend[s] to value something by regarding it as valuable in itself while knowing that in fact it is not valuable in itself.”²⁴ In other words, Hussain wants us to create values which are not truly valuable and fool ourselves into believing in them. Or, put differently, that we should act as though certain things have value, even if we believe deep down that they do not. This way, Hussain is able to put forward a theory of value which could compel us to act without abandoning the claim that nothing can ever be truly valuable.

In order to attribute his view to Nietzsche, Hussain points to several compelling passages regarding art and the creation of beauty:

“How can we make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable for us when they are not? And I rather think that in themselves they never are. Here we should learn something... from artists who are really continually trying to bring off such inventions and feats. Moving away from things until there is a good deal that one no longer sees and there is much that our eye has to add if we are still to see them at all; or seeing things around a corner and as cut out and framed; or to place them so that they partially conceal each other and grant us only glimpses of architectural perspective; or looking at them through tinted glass or in the light of the sunset; or giving them a surface and skin that is not fully transparent -- all that we should learn from artists while being wiser than they are in other matters. For with them this subtle power usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins; but we want to be the poets of our life -- first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters.”²⁵

²³ This is the title of Hussain’s paper

²⁴ Hussain, pg. 170

²⁵ GS, 299

Here, Nietzsche seems to be suggesting that we learn from the artist's manipulation of perspective in order to assign value to our own lives. Notice, Nietzsche does not seem to believe that we can actually change the value or the beauty of the things we see around us. In fact, he claims nothing is ever truly beautiful on its own. Rather, by commending the artist's use of optical illusions, Nietzsche seems to be proposing that we deceive ourselves in a similar manner.

Throughout his works, Nietzsche often turns to artists, praising them for their ability to create beauty and, more importantly, to engage in what Hussain calls "honest illusion." Furthermore, because Nietzsche simultaneously rejects the value of nature and asks us only to view it as being valuable, it does seem as though he promoting some of fictionalism. In fact in another section on the value of art, Nietzsche writes,

"If we had not welcomed the arts and invented this kind of cult of the untrue, then the realization of general untruth and mendaciousness that now comes to us through science - - the realization that delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge and sensation -- would be utterly unbearable. Honesty would lead to nausea and suicide. But now there is a counterforce against our honesty that helps us to avoid such consequences: art as the good will to appearance ... As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still bearable for us, and art furnishes us with eyes and hands and above all the good conscience to be able to turn ourselves into such a phenomenon."²⁶

Artists -- knowing fully well that their art is only a representation of reality -- set out to make it beautiful -- to give it value anyways. Similarly, those who want to understand Nietzsche's philosophy ought to recognize that their perceptions are nothing but a representation of reality. To be like the artists, then, Hussain claims that we must endeavor to make our representation of life beautiful by assigning value to the things in our lives which will make it so.

²⁶ GS, 107

Of course, one might ask what constitutes a beautiful life (a question which I believe that Hussain is unable to answer), but first we must establish why beauty is valuable in the first place. Here, I will argue, lies the fundamental flaw with Hussain's brand of fictionalism. If value is not fixed, then it must be relative to something else. One might value food, for example, because it satiates their hunger, or they might value music because it brings them pleasure, but in both cases the object's value depends on something else. Hussain, on the other hand, does not provide a reason to value fictionalism, and although there certainly seems to be merit in what he is proposing, he has no philosophical basis for claiming that we ought to do so. Remember, in setting up his view Hussain rejects the idea that anything could truly be valuable, yet there seems to be an implicit value claim in his argument, namely that we should accept fictionalism because fictionalism is valuable. Thus, by establishing valuelessness as a metaphysical constraint, and simultaneously claiming that his theory has value Hussain has put forward a contradictory view. In other words, because he is committed to theoretical nihilism, Hussain has no answer to the question, "why should we be fictionalists?"

To better understand this objection, we can compare Hussain's fictionalism to another fictionalist view which Richard Joyce describes as "moral fictionalism." Because Joyce assumes in his paper that his readers have accepted a moral error theory, he writes that moral fictionalism is "presented as a stance that we could take towards a subject matter—morality, in this case—if we have become convinced that the subject is hopelessly flawed in some respect, such that we cannot in good conscience carry on as before."²⁷ Unlike Hussain, however, Joyce does assume a total value error theory, so he is able to justify his proposal by appealing to a non-moral value. As he puts it,

"One might think that the question 'If a moral error theory is the case, what should we do?' is self-undermining. And so it would be, if it were asking what we morally ought to

²⁷ Joyce, pg. 2

do, but that is not what is being asked. It is just a straightforward, common-or-garden, practical ‘ought.’”²⁸

Joyce is purposefully vague when he describes this non-moral value, but he does write that “when morality is removed from the picture, what is practically called for is a matter of a cost-benefit analysis, where the costs and benefits can be understood liberally as preference satisfactions.”²⁹ Technically, Joyce does not provide a justification for why we ought to value the satisfaction of preferences, but it seems to be a fairly straightforward appeal to self-interest or philosophical hedonism. I will evaluate this non-moral value more thoroughly in the next chapter, but for now we can pretend that this is a sound basis for an ethical theory.

If we assume that moral error theory is true, Joyce argues that we are left with a purely “practical” comparison between two options, abolitionism (the claim that we should abolish moral language altogether) and moral fictionalism (the claim that we should pretend to believe that moral claims are true). “For moral fictionalism to be viable,” he writes “it must win this pragmatic comparison.”³⁰ Joyce, however, is convinced that moral fictionalism will be the better option because he believes that pretending to believe moral claims allows us to function more effectively in a society. Meanwhile, abolitionism would require a radical restructuring of the way we communicate with other people. Thus, because he believes that most people would prefer to avoid such a large lifestyle change, Joyce argues that we are better off being moral fictionalists. Furthermore, because he rejects only moral values, Joyce’s argument seems to be philosophically sound.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Joyce, pg. 11

This brings us back to Hussain's view. Even though there does seem to be some merit in Hussain's interpretation, he is unable to appeal to a non-moral value because he does not believe that anything is truly valuable. As a result, Hussain has no way to claim that anything is worth pursuing, so despite his attempt to endorse fictionalism, Hussain's theory inevitably leads to practical nihilism, a conclusion which would prevent us from ever pursuing anything. Unlike Hussain, however, I believe that Nietzsche does have a value which prevents him from being a nihilist-- the will to power. Given its recurrence throughout Nietzsche's works, I believe Hussain's failure to account for the will to power is a gross misreading of Nietzsche, but by appealing to the will to power I believe that we can appropriate many of the positive elements of fictionalism, especially as a moral theory. In order to do so, we can turn to Joyce's theory as a model, but rather than appealing to pure self-interest, I will argue that the will to power is a stronger basis for accepting moral fictionalism. First, however, I will explain what exactly the will to power is and why Nietzsche believes that it is valuable.

III: The Will to Power

“Everyone now knows how to find the meaning of life within himself. But mankind wasn’t always so lucky. [...] Mankind, ignorant of the truths that lie within every human being, looked outward - - pushed ever outward. [...] These unhappy agents found what had already been found in abundance on Earth -- a nightmare of meaninglessness without end. [...] Outwardness lost, at last, its imagined attractions. Only inwardness remained to be explored. Only the human soul remained terra incognita. This was the beginning of goodness and wisdom.”

-- Kurt Vonnegut, Sirens of Titan

Because Hussain does not give us a standard of value, his view fails as an ethical theory, but throughout many of his works Nietzsche clearly appeals to a non-moral value, namely the will to power, as the basis for his prescriptive claims. As I noted earlier though, Nietzsche is extremely skeptical of our ability to find value in the external world, so instead he asks us to search for value within ourselves.³¹ In order to understand why Nietzsche wants us to value the will to power then, we must first understand his notion of the self. The question of what constitutes the self is one which philosophers have approached in many different ways, but essentially it comes down to question of what it means to exist. Immanuel Kant, for example, argued that existence ought to be reduced to pure reason, a notion of human nature that is evocative of Descartes’ famous claim, “I think therefore I am.”³² Descartes’ claim about existence gave us a reductivist view of human nature which was largely unprecedented, but despite his attempt to define existence by one fundamental experience, Nietzsche’s view reduces the human experience to something even more fundamental than the act of thinking. Thus, although Nietzsche praises Descartes as “the father of rationalism (and hence the grandfather of

³¹ In this section will be drawing from my own unpublished paper entitled, “Why Nietzsche Prefers the Masters”

³² Descartes’ *Discourse on the Method*

the Revolution) who conceded authority to reason alone,” he also states that “reason is merely an instrument, and Descartes was superficial.”³³

This is because while philosophers like Kant and Descartes assumed that reason can be described as a single entity completely separate from our natural instincts, Nietzsche claims that there is no way to differentiate rational thought from any of the other experiences which make up one’s consciousness. As a result, Nietzsche argues that reason independent of desire is an impossible concept. This criticism is best articulated by Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*, as he delves into the question of what defines thinking:

“When I analyze the process that is expressed in the sentence, ‘I think,’ I find a whole series of daring assertions that would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to prove; for example, that it is I who think, that there must necessarily be something that thinks, [...] that there is an “ego,” and, finally, that it is already determined what is to be designated by thinking -- that I know what thinking is. For if I had not already decided within myself what it is, by what standard could I determine whether that which is just happening is not perhaps ‘willing’ or ‘feeling’?”³⁴

In other words, Nietzsche believes that “thinking” is a concept which is indistinguishable from our most basic wills and that the notion of “I” is nothing less than an assumption. Therefore, Nietzsche asks us to dismiss the theory of the soul which he describes as “soul atomism” or “the belief which regards the soul as something indestructible, eternal, indivisible, as a monad, [or] as an *atomon*.”³⁵ The soul, he argues, cannot be reduced to an atomic entity because it is constantly changing.

³³ BW, pg. 294

³⁴ BW, pg. 213

³⁵ BW, pg. 210

Instead, Nietzsche suggests that we imagine the soul as “subjective multiplicity,” or more clearly as a “social structure of the drives and affects.”³⁶ In this view, there is nothing more fundamental to the human experience than our natural drives and desires, and thinking, Nietzsche argues, is “merely a relation of these drives to each other.”³⁷ By conceiving the soul in this way we can move away from the notion of the soul as an actor and towards an understanding of the soul as an action, a combination of wills with causal properties. Moreover, we can recognize that our drives -- like all forces -- necessarily seek an object. If we could not perceive the effects of gravity upon the material world, for example, then we would have no way to understand it. Similarly, photons are essentially non-existent to us until they have collided with our retinas. This is because a force without an object cannot truly exist. Human drives are no different; they come to exist by virtue of an object. Thus, all of our wills necessarily aim to impose their “power” on an object. This concept is the essential quality of the will to power. Above all else it seeks to impose its form, and the only way it can confirm that it has done so is by encountering resistance. Once we understand the will to power in this way, we can recognize that it is a constitutive³⁸ characteristic of all living wills. As Nietzsche puts it, “A living thing seeks above all to discharge its strength -- life itself is will to power.”

By stating that our drives are more fundamental than our reason, Nietzsche’s theory of soul implies that human nature is essentially no different than that of other animals. In fact, Nietzsche’s view was heavily influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution, so it is not surprising that his view of human nature is heavily rooted in our instincts. However, Nietzsche’s claim that all living things share one will prevented him from accepting the existence of free will. Rather, in discussing the concept Nietzsche writes:

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ BW, pg. 237

³⁸ Katsafanas, pg. 1

“The *causa sui* is the best self-contradiction that has been conceived so far, it is a sort of rape and perversion of logic; but the extravagant pride of man has managed to entangle itself profoundly and frightfully with just this nonsense. The desire for “freedom of the will” in the metaphysically superlative sense, [...] the desire to bear the entire ultimate responsibility for one’s actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society involves nothing less than to be precisely this *causa sui* [...] to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness.”³⁹

Nietzsche’s rejection of free will is unambiguous here, but he makes sure to avoid taking a concrete stance on its existence, writing also that “the ‘unfree will’ is mythology; in real life it is only a matter of *strong* and *weak* wills.”⁴⁰ Because he recognizes that we could never prove either theory, Nietzsche takes an agnostic stance on the issue, similar to his stance on the existence of objective truth. In fact, Nietzsche often refers to himself as an “anti-metaphysician”⁴¹ because he refuses to make absolute claims about the nature of reality. As we will see though, Nietzsche’s refusal to make such large assumptions allows him to arrive at a universal value which is very difficult to deny.

Kant, for comparison, argued the human will necessarily conformed to the principle of autonomy, (i.e. “the property of the will of being a law to itself”⁴²) while other animals conformed to the law of “natural necessity,” which he described as “the property of the causality of all non-rational beings to be determined to activity by the influence of alien causes.”⁴³ From this inherently rational and autonomous view of human nature, Kant (like Nietzsche) concluded that human beings could not be bound by an objective moral law. Instead, he proposed an intersubjective moral truth which he believed that all rational and autonomous beings were bound

³⁹ BW, pg. 218

⁴⁰ BW, pg. 219

⁴¹ BW, pg. 588

⁴² Groundwork, pg. 56

⁴³ Ibid

to by virtue of their natures. Of course, Kant had no way to prove that human beings were actually free and autonomous beings, but he argued that “every being that cannot act otherwise than under the idea of freedom is actually free, in a practical respect, precisely because of that.”⁴⁴ Thus, Kant argued that if a person believes that they have free will, (as most of us do) then they must also believe that they are bound by his moral principles. Unfortunately, Kant had no way of actually proving that human beings are fully autonomous, so his moral principles were derived from an idealized notion of human beings. As a result, Kant’s system of ethics largely denied the value of human desire, causing Nietzsche to ultimately reject it.

The reason I mention Kant’s proof here is because Nietzsche actually adopts an extremely similar argument in order to prove the universal value of the will to power.⁴⁵ Like Kant, Nietzsche attempts to derive a universal value from his conception of the human will, but unlike Kant he does not assume that human will is inherently rational or free. Rather, Nietzsche attempts to prove his intersubjective value by appealing to his conception of human nature as an amalgamation of instincts and desires. As a result, Nietzsche does not ask us to believe in an entirely free will, but he does claim that believing in the causality of our own will (whether it be free or unfree) requires us to believe that the human will holds “the same rank of reality as our affect.”⁴⁶ As Nietzsche puts it,

“The question in the end is whether we really recognize the will as efficient, whether we believe in the causality of the will: if we do -- and at bottom our faith in this is nothing less than our faith in causality itself -- then we have to make the experiment of positing the causality of the will hypothetically as the only one.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Groundwork, pg. 57

⁴⁵ I am drawing here from my own unpublished paper entitled “A Critique of Kant’s ‘Reason’”

⁴⁶ BW, pg. 237

⁴⁷ BW, pg. 238

In other words, Nietzsche believes that our notion of causality can be reduced to a single will, a will which is no different than that of other living creatures. In this regard, Nietzsche's theory is simpler than Kant's because while Kant assumed two types of wills (free and unfree wills), Nietzsche was able to explain our concept of causality by assuming only the will to power. In fact, Nietzsche argues that the "conscience of method demands" that we not "assume several kinds of causality until the experiment of making do with a single one has been pushed to its utmost limit."⁴⁸ More importantly, given Nietzsche's definition, the will to power seems to be virtually undeniable because causality is our greatest certainty.

Nietzsche's proof shows that the will to power is a universal law for all living things. However, what separates human beings from other animals is our capacity for self-reflection, something he attributes to the formation of society. Because society denied human beings the ability to act on every impulse and desire, it forced us to engage in the art of assigning values to our desires. Although Nietzsche is critical of this sort of self-denial, he writes:

"It is only fair to add that it was on the soil of this essentially dangerous form of human existence, the priestly form, that man first became an interesting animal, that only here did the human soul in a higher sense acquire depth and become evil -- and these are the two basic respects in which man has hitherto been superior to other beasts!"⁴⁹

Even though society limited our ability to impose our wills indiscriminately, Nietzsche claims that this internalization⁵⁰ made us more interesting. By giving us the ability to assign value to our wills, internalization imparted a sense of freedom in us which fundamentally changed the way we express the will to power. Not only are human beings the only creatures capable of denying the will to power to some extent, but we are also the only creatures who can actively affirm it in our

⁴⁸ BW, pg. 238

⁴⁹ BW pg. 469

⁵⁰ The "internalization of man" is Nietzsche's explanation for our ability to assign value, and therefore our conception of freedom.

own way. In fact, Kant makes a similar point about human beings, arguing that our capacity for reason allows us to act on “*representation of the law*”⁵¹ rather than the law itself. Of course, we can never fully escape our instinctual desires to impose our forms, but our ability to “think” allows us to value the will to power as we please. Thus, while we can claim that the will to power is exists within all living creatures, it is also clear that human beings are able to affirm (or repress) it in a far more nuanced and sophisticated way.

⁵¹ Groundwork, pg. 16

IV: Nietzschean Ethics

“This is my way; where is yours?” -- Thus I answered those who asked me “the way.” For the way -- that does not exist. Thus spoke Zarathustra”⁵²
-- Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*

By now, I hope that I have sketched out a convincing basis for a Nietzschean theory of value, but I will now attempt to show how we can use the will to power as the basis for an ethical theory. In proving the will to power as an intersubjective value, Nietzsche clearly takes the subjective realist approach. That is, he believes that the will to power is valuable because all living creatures value it, not because it is intrinsically valuable. However, because it is a subjective value, the will to power will necessarily take many different forms for different people. Different people will always have different desires, so they will often impose their power in very different ways. This is one the greatest strengths of Nietzsche’s theory of value, but it also creates a dilemma if we attempt to hold others to his ethical standard. On the other hand, given Nietzsche’s rejection of the external world, it does not seem as though he would be open to an external or objective metric.⁵³ Still, any ethical theory needs some sort of metric, so I will argue that the standard must be entirely relative to the self. While this might appear too simple of a standard for an ethical theory, I hope to show that Nietzsche’s theory gives us many ways to ensure that we are truly affirming the will to power.

As I mentioned in the last section, human beings are unique because we act only on our representations of the “law.” In order to make sure that we are holding ourselves to an appropriate standard then, we must make sure that we are representing the will to power in the correct manner. Here, we can return to Richard Joyce’s non-moral value in order to compare it to the will to power. Earlier I showed that Joyce appeals to the satisfaction of personal preferences in order

⁵² PN, pg. 307

⁵³ Find Citation

to justify his moral fictionalism, a view which I characterized as a sort of philosophical hedonism. Because Nietzsche's philosophy is highly individualistic, I recognize that valuing the will to power could easily be conflated with hedonism, but an important distinction which must be made is that Nietzsche's theory of value does not regard pleasure or satisfaction as an end. In fact, in criticizing hedonism and utilitarianism Nietzsche writes, "there are higher problems than all problems of pleasure, pain, and pity; and every philosophy that stops with them is a naiveté."⁵⁴ The will to power, on the other hand, aims at growing, transcending and overcoming. Therefore, the will to power gives us a far more demanding value than Joyce's hedonism because it does not require us to avoid suffering. On the contrary, Nietzsche sees virtue in suffering, writing that "the discipline of suffering [...] has created all enhancements of man so far."⁵⁵ By its very nature, the will to power requires us to strengthen ourselves, not to obtain pleasure, so it will necessarily hold us to a higher standard.

Once we understand the will to power in this way it becomes clear that we cannot act entirely out of convenience if we hope to affirm it. Rather, when we attempt to impose our forms we must actively seek out resistance and recognize the value of struggle. According to Zarathustra,⁵⁶ the will "*must always overcome itself*."⁵⁷ It has a desire for growth, continuous change, and self-actualization, and it is up to us to affirm that desire. In other words, we must make sure that we are constantly challenging ourselves. Because it holds us such to a high standard, the will to power essentially becomes a moral standard, but since it is based on one's own standard -- not some intrinsic value -- it is still compatible with Nietzsche's philosophy. Of course, bringing too much suffering upon oneself in order to affirm the will to power would

⁵⁴ BW, pg. 344

⁵⁵ BW, pg. 344

⁵⁶ A fictional character Nietzsche from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* who attempts to teach humanity how to overcome themselves

⁵⁷ PN, pg. 227

eventually risk becoming self-defeating, but again it is up to the will to recognize where that balance lies. In fact, Nietzsche advocates self-knowledge for exactly this reason, warning us that we should always know our limitations. “Will nothing beyond your capacity,” Zarathustra tells us, “there is a wicked falseness among those who will beyond their capacity.”⁵⁸

Furthermore, because he believes that our desires are constantly at war with one another, Nietzsche’s theory of ethics demands self-mastery, a process which requires us to take our desires and shape them into the “aesthetic phenomenon”⁵⁹ Nietzsche wants us to become. In order to conceptualize one’s best self, one must have the vision of an artist and a strong will, but most importantly one must understand the vices and virtues which make them who they are. Only then can we begin to unify our souls into a cohesive entity. Recognizing this need for unity, Nietzsche describes the will to power as a “will from multiplicity to simplicity, a will that ties up, tames, and is domineering and truly masterful.”⁶⁰ In other words, one must take their many parts and become one. Because of this, the will to power can also be described as a, “Universal Will to Become,”⁶¹ or, as Alexander Nehamas puts it, the desire to “become what one is.”⁶² In order to unify our will into one whole, however, we must find a common goal, and knowledge is the only way to do so. If we are to believe in the process of overcoming, then deep down we must also believe that we *can* overcome -- that there is necessarily something which is worth striving for “deep down”⁶³ inside us.

Thus, despite Nietzsche’s complicated relationship with the concept of truth, it is important to note that the value of self-knowledge is a very important part of his philosophy.

While Nietzsche does not want us to assume that the truth is intrinsically valuable, he argues that

⁵⁸ PN, pg. 401

⁵⁹ GS, 107

⁶⁰ BW, pg. 349

⁶¹ Sirens of Titan

⁶² Nehamas, pg. 411

⁶³ BW, pg. 352

pursuing knowledge can be subjectively valuable if it helps us to impose our forms. In the words of Zarathustra, “To will liberates, for the will is to create: [...] And you shall learn solely in order to create.”⁶⁴ This is because even though Nietzsche views the will to truth as “a kind of cruelty of the intellectual conscience,”⁶⁵ he also recognizes that at its root is still a form of will to power. In fact, regarding his desire for knowledge, Zarathustra also writes, “In knowledge too I feel only my will’s joy in begetting and becoming; and if there is innocence in my knowledge, it is because the will to beget is in it.”⁶⁶ Ultimately, the will to power is a universal desire to impose one’s form, but in order to do so we must learn what that form is. One would never know, for example, that their true self is a great artist if they never attempted to teach themselves how to paint. Similarly, one would never know that they had a passion for literature if they never attempted to read books. “Learning changes us,”⁶⁷ Nietzsche argues, because it teaches us what we are capable of becoming.

Here, I will argue, lies the value of fictionalism. As I showed earlier, not only does Nietzsche believe that the will to power is the only thing which could be considered valuable for all human beings, but he also claims that the will to power is the only thing we can truly know -- that we can know it “not as a deception, as a ‘mere appearance,’ an ‘idea’ [...] but as holding the same rank of reality as our affect.”⁶⁸ Given Nietzsche’s apparent skepticism regarding other matters, this is a unique vote of confidence which seems to place it on a different metaphysical plane entirely from other any other concept. In fact, Nietzsche goes on to write that “The world viewed from inside, the world defined and determined according to its ‘intelligible character’ -- it would be ‘will to power’ and nothing else.”⁶⁹ Anything else, then, could be reduced to a fiction.

⁶⁴ PN, pg. 313

⁶⁵ BW, pg. 351

⁶⁶ PN, pg. 199

⁶⁷ BW, pg. 352

⁶⁸ BW, pg. 237

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Regarding our virtues, for example, Nietzsche writes “Every people has its own Tartuffery and calls it virtues. -- What is best in us we do not know -- we cannot know.”⁷⁰ Yet, he goes on to write that we should perfect ourselves in “our virtue, the only one left to us.”⁷¹ Meanwhile, Nietzsche argues that all “truths are illusions,”⁷² yet he asks us to search for “truths” within ourselves nonetheless. Surely, we could interpret these claims as blatant contradictions, but I believe we can make sense of these claims by applying a fictionalist interpretation to his claims about value. More specifically, I will argue that Nietzsche wants us to place fictional value in the fictional concepts which will help us to maximize the will to power.

First of all, although Nietzsche believes that the vast majority of “truths” are erroneous, he does provide a way to claim that some beliefs are better than others. As he puts it, “the falseness of a judgment is for us not necessarily an objection to a judgment; [...] The question is to what extent it is life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating.” Therefore, even if we are completely wrong in all of our assumptions about the world, Nietzsche argues that it is still worthwhile to believe in the “truths” which will help us to overcome. More specifically, he wants us to believe that one’s virtue is a “truth.” As Nietzsche puts it,

“If we should have virtues we shall presumably have only virtues which have learned to get along best with our most secret and cordial inclinations, with our most ardent needs. Well then, let us look for them in our labyrinths -- where, as is well known, all sorts of things lose themselves, all sorts of things are lost for good. And is there anything more beautiful than looking for one’s own virtues? Doesn’t this almost mean: believing in one’s own virtue?”⁷³

⁷⁰ BW, pg. 375

⁷¹ BW, pg. 345

⁷² PN, pg. 46

⁷³ BW pg. 335

In a sense, Nietzsche is asking us to place faith in the “truth” of a value which lies within us, but he does not claim that it is some absolute or intrinsic value. Rather, because Nietzsche believes that our own value is self-imposed, “virtue” must be an entirely subjective concept. What’s more, given his earlier claim about the impossibility of discovering one’s own virtue, it seems clear that he believes our virtues are essentially fictions which we must teach ourselves to believe.

The reason why is that they help us to overcome. Although we have no way of knowing what is really real or what is truly valuable, Nietzsche wants us to believe in anything which will affirm the will to power. In fact, Nietzsche often invokes the “overman,”⁷⁴ a fictional embodiment of the act of overcoming which gives us a goal to aspire to. By asking us to value a conjecture though, Nietzsche’s overman is strangely evocative of the ascetic ideal he criticizes so heavily. The difference, claims Zarathustra, is this:

“God is a conjecture; but I desire that your conjectures should not reach beyond your creative will. Could you create a god? Then do not speak to me of any gods. But you could well create the overman. Perhaps not you yourselves, my brothers. But into fathers and forefathers of the overman you could re-create yourselves: and let this be your greatest creation.”⁷⁵

While the notion of God assumes that there could be one “good” for every person, the overman is an entirely relativistic concept insofar as it represents what each person desires to become. Furthermore, one’s conception of the overman depends entirely on who they hope to be, so it is a concept which constantly changes as one learns more about themselves. Thus, the overman is not only entirely conceivable, but it is also a notion which implicitly affirms the will to power. As a result, it conforms to Zarathustra’s edict on the will to truth: “But this is what the will to truth

⁷⁴ PN, pg. 197

⁷⁵ PN, pg. 198

should mean to you: that everything be changed into what is thinkable for man, visible for man, feelable by man.”⁷⁶

Although one’s virtues are fictions in the sense that we cannot be certain of their existences, a fictionalist theory of value would require that their value be fictional as well. Therefore, we must also prove that we cannot be certain of their value. Given the obvious benefits of believing in the overman, this is a much more difficult claim to justify, but notice that it is one’s belief in the overman, not the overman himself, which is truly valuable. As a result, a fiction like the overman requires that we use both subjective realism and fictionalism to explain its value. The overman is fictionally valuable because he is not truly a valuable end. In fact, to become the overman would be a contradiction because the overman, like all men, must be in a constant state of becoming. Thus, we can only pretend that it is valuable to become him. At the same time, the fiction of the overman is subjectively valuable insofar as desiring the overman truly leads us to affirm the will to power. This subjective value would never be possible, however, if we did not first fool ourselves into believing that the overman is an object worth pursuing. In other words, fictions give our desires objects where there are none.

In order to make this concept clearer we can consider an example: Imagine that Peter is a Nietzschean who has decided that deep down he is capable of becoming a great soccer player. In order to do so, Peter decides that he will value winning soccer games above all else. By valuing winning, Peter believes that he can motivate himself to play his hardest every single game, so that eventually he will become the great soccer player he hopes to be. In fact, Peter decides he wants to win so badly that he starts practicing every single day. Suppose, however, that Peter’s team consistently lets him down. Every single game Peter plays at the highest level that he possibly can, but despite his best efforts, he is unable to guide his team to victory. However, after an entire

⁷⁶ PN, pg. 198

season practicing every day and playing his hardest every game, Peter is a better player than he has ever been before. If winning were truly valuable then we would have to conclude that Peter has failed to maximize his value, but Peter has obviously overcome himself as a soccer player and is ultimately one step closer to becoming the great soccer player he originally wanted to become. Although he has clearly failed by his own standard, Peter has also clearly affirmed the will to power. Therefore, because the will to power is the only thing which is truly valuable, we must conclude that winning soccer games was never truly valuable. Rather, it is Peter's *desire* to win soccer games which drove him to become a better player. However, if Peter had never fooled himself into believing that winning was truly valuable, then he never would have found the motivation to overcome himself. (Of course, Peter does have an interest in actually winning. He might, for example, feel so defeated that he can't motivate himself to play the game anymore. The point, however, is that the true value lies in the act of overcoming, not the supposed ends.)

A similar approach can be taken with morality. Remember that in Joyce's theory of moral fictionalism, we are supposed to pretend that moral claims are true even if we do not truly believe that they are. In fact, Joyce's main justification for arguing that moral fictionalism has pragmatic value is that it helps combat individual weakness of will. More specifically, Joyce claims that moral fictionalism is pragmatic because "moral beliefs function to bolster self-control against practical irrationality" by helping us to combat individual "weakness of will."⁷⁷ In other words, moral belief is valuable because it helps us to promote our long-term best interests. As Joyce himself points out, this argument from pragmatism is similar to the arguments for morality that have been proposed by many notable philosophers such as David Hume and Thomas Hobbes. He writes,

“One result we can draw from Hobbes and Hume is that a person may have many reasons for acting in accordance with a moral requirement: the fear of punishment, the desire for

⁷⁷ Joyce, Moral Fictionalism

an ongoing beneficial relationship, the motivation to maintain a good reputation, the simple fact that one on the whole likes one's fellows, that one has been brought up such that acting otherwise makes one feel rotten—all these being solid prudential reasons—plus the moral requirement to act.”⁷⁸

These arguments make it clear that acting morally is in our self-interests, but they also make it clear that the moral action -- not the belief in morality itself -- has value. Noting this, Joyce goes on to provide another argument for the value of moral belief,

“Because short-term profit is tangible and present whereas long-term profit is distant and faint, the lure of the immediate may subvert the agent's ability to deliberate properly so as to obtain a valuable delayed benefit, leading him to ‘rationalize’ a poor choice. Hobbes lamented this ‘perverse desire for present profit’—something which Hume blamed for ‘all dissoluteness and disorder, repentance and misery’, adding that a person should embrace ‘any expedient, by which he may impose a restraint upon himself, and guard against this weakness.’”

Joyce believes that moral belief can be that “expedient” which helps us to combat that weakness of will, but because he assumes that we are no longer able to hold genuine moral beliefs, he suggests that we pretend to have them anyways. In this way one can ensure that they act “morally” even if they subscribe to a Nietzschean error theory.

Because moral claims generally claim to have intrinsic value though, we must not only pretend that they are valuable, but we must also pretend that they are valuable in every circumstance. Thus, when we make a fictional moral claim like “stealing is wrong” we must pretend that stealing is dis-valuable in every circumstance even if we can conceive of many

⁷⁸ Joyce, pg. 12

circumstances where it would affirm the will to power. While this might seem to contradict the will to power, maximizing the will to power also requires us to have long-term desires which should prevent them from doing so. For example, it seems quite obvious that being placed in prison would significantly limit one's ability to impose their form on the world, so most reasonable Nietzscheans would want to avoid any action which would lead to such a punishment. However, building up moral habits can help us to avoid all sorts of actions which run contrary to the maximization of the will to power.

In fact, one would also be able to form positive virtues such as "honesty" or "kindness" because one would recognize that it is often in our best interests for others to trust us, and vice versa. "Honest illusion" is especially important in this case because we would have to fool ourselves into believing that such virtues are universally valuable even though it is clear that they probably aren't. The desire to be honest or kind, however, would be valuable, so we would be philosophically justified in engaging in fictionalism. Essentially, fictionalism can be used as a tool to build moral mantras which can use to motivate ourselves. Perhaps this is what Nietzsche means when he talks about the human will to "mere appearance," or when Zarathustra tells us that we must become "children" once more. We must constantly create new value for ourselves, but at the same time we must also recognize that what is valuable is not a state of being but an act of becoming. How we do so is largely up to our own specific tastes and styles, but so long as we are honest with ourselves, Nietzsche's philosophical argument for personal perfection ought to keep us from distancing ourselves from others.

Conclusion

I hope that this thesis has given a convincing argument for adopting a Nietzschean system of ethics. While it does not give us a series of guidelines for moral actions, in the end Nietzsche's philosophy requires us to become the best versions of ourselves that we can be. Thus, any situation can come to a personal value judgment. However, this must not necessarily be thought of as a bad thing. The most obvious criticism is that Nietzsche's theory gives us no way to judge an individual with no other-regarding inclinations, or to judge anybody for the way in which they attempt to overcome themselves. Although this might be true, I do not think that the benefits of moral judgment outweigh the costs of assuming that there is one "right" thing to do. Furthermore, because it does not give us very many specific prescriptions, I believe that Nietzsche's philosophy is compatible with a wide variety of ethical views including, contractualism, consequentialism, and deontology so long as we recognize that only we can bind ourselves to a moral code. In the end, Nietzsche's theory is simply a way to recognize that we must take the gift of life and value each moment.

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