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Abstract

In this essay I seek to show that a philosophy of modesty informs core aspects of both Nietzsche's critique of morality and what he intends to replace morality with, namely, an ethics of self-cultivation. To demonstrate this I focus on *Dawn: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, a largely neglected text in his corpus where Nietzsche carries out a quite wide-ranging critique of morality, including *Mitleid*. It is one of Nietzsche's most experimental works and is best read, I claim, as an Epicurean-inspired critique of the present and an exercise in moral therapy. In the opening sections I draw attention to the wider social dimension of the text and its concern with a morality of compassion, which is rarely done in the literature. I then turn to highlighting Nietzsche's 'Epicurean moment', followed by two sections on Nietzsche on the self in which I aim to bring to light his ethics of self-cultivation and show in what ways his revaluation makes central to ethics a modest egoism and care of self. In the conclusion to the essay I provide a contrast between Nietzsche and Kant and deal with reservations readers might have about his ethics. Overall, the essay seeks to make a contribution to an appreciation of *Dawn* as a work of moral therapy.

Keywords

Morality; Compassion; Ethics; Nietzsche; Self-Cultivation; Autonomy; Therapy.

Beyond Compassion:
On Nietzsche's Moral Therapy in Dawn

Should not each individual (*Individuum*) be an attempt to achieve a *higher species than man* through its most individual things? My morality (*Moral*) would be to *take* the general character of man more and more away from him...to make him to a degree non-understandable to others (and with it an object of experiences, of astonishment, of instruction for them).¹

Introduction

Two things of note ought to strike us about the “Nietzsche” of the free spirit period (1878-82), which is the focus of my essay. First, is the extent to which the philosophy is one of modesty: this is true of both the kind of work it sets out to do and the goals it sets for its readers as ethical subjects. Second, there is the peculiar character of Nietzsche's commitment to ethics. Nietzsche at times can appear as rationalist as Kant and yet he wants ethics, involving duties one has to oneself and to others, to be something *pleasurable* (he is in search of the gay or joyful science). Nietzsche has the hope that one day, after much long practice and daily work, each of us could say – as an ethical injunction since it can't be anything else – “we *want* to become those that we are,”² not we need or we ought to become this, but that it is our desire, something we enjoy and take pleasure and pride in. The ethical aspiration is towards philosophy's traditional goals: rational mastery of the affects, autonomy or self-legislation, and with a more modern colouring, authenticity. And yet, much of this, if not all, needs to be conceived according to Nietzsche in quite modest terms. Much of the work of the free spirit trilogy is thus devoted to deflating the pretensions of the ego to claims of self-origination; this is what Nietzsche exposes as the Oedipal fantasy in which we exist, as it were, as our own mother and father. Although Nietzsche argues against Schopenhauer's doctrine on the immutability of character, arguing against him that we are not *fully* developed facts, it remains the case that for Nietzsche the liberty we have within our power is a modest and

¹ Nietzsche (1988, volume 9, 6 [158], p. 237).

² Nietzsche (1974, section 335).

limited one: the liberty we have at our disposal is that of *cultivating* the drives, not some miraculous power of self-invention and self-creation *ex nihilo*.

Nietzsche's attacks on morality can mislead: as if his aim was to remove us from the tasks of morality altogether. In fact, Nietzsche's goal is nothing other than a moral one, or perhaps it is best to say "ethical", and for reasons that several later thinkers have argued, such as Deleuze and Foucault.³ Nevertheless, I would maintain that we should not lose sight of the fact that Nietzsche's goal is a morality or, if we prefer, ethics of self-cultivation. He wants us to learn this skill or art as one that can be taken up by the self, as it works on itself, being as much as an aesthetic exercise as an ethical one. He describes this well in *The Gay Science* 290 where he writes of the importance of giving style to one's character, and which in our own time has been taken over by Foucault, though perhaps with a more fanciful conception of the self than Nietzsche would allow.⁴ Nietzsche conceives the work of self-cultivation in terms of the gardener styling nature, rather than some Baudelairean-inspired idea of unrestricted, open-ended self-invention. The task, says Nietzsche, is to cultivate the shoots of one's drives and affects, which one can do with the good or bad taste of a gardener, and in the French or English, or Dutch or Chinese style.⁵

Perhaps the difficulty for some readers is that Nietzsche presents this becoming-ethical on our part in such seemingly uninviting terms: we are to remove ourselves from the mass of humanity, we need to endure long periods of solitude, we need to resist the temptation of the sympathetic affections, and we need to get beyond our compassion. I want to show that Nietzsche has reasons, one's integral to his project, to support the mode of

³ See Deleuze (1988, chapter two); Foucault (1997). For Deleuze whereas 'ethics' refers to a typology of 'immanent modes of existence', 'morality' refers existence to otherworldly, spiritual, or transcendent values and is the judgment of God or the system of judgment. Thus the transcendent opposition of the values good and evil is replaced by the qualitative difference of the modes of existence that we can call good and bad. As Nietzsche points out, to think beyond good and evil does not mean thinking "beyond good and bad." Nietzsche (2006, essay one I, section 17).

⁴ See Foucault (1997, p. 262): "From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art." For an attempt to distinguish Nietzsche from Foucault see Ure (2008, especially pp. 76-7).

⁵ Nietzsche (2011, section 560).

ethical practice he advocates. The main claim of the essay is this: Nietzsche's campaign or polemic against morality begins in earnest in *Dawn* and it consists in (a) contesting and deflating the pretensions of the modern cult of the sympathetic affects, including compassion (*Mitleid*); (b) replacing this with a more modest conception of morality, namely, an ethics of self-cultivation. It is perhaps important to bear in mind what Nietzsche says about the book in *Ecce Homo*: although it mounts a "campaign" against morality, the reader should not think it has about it "the slightest whiff of gunpowder"; rather, the reader should "make out quite different and more pleasing scents."⁶

Nietzsche's Therapy in *Dawn*

Nietzsche's philosophy is one that has therapeutic ambitions. This is especially the case in the texts that make up the free spirit trilogy. In part, Nietzsche conceived the art of the maxim in therapeutic terms. The modern age has forgotten the art of reflection or observation, in which it is possible to gather maxims "from the thorniest and least gratifying stretches of our lives" so as to make ourselves feel better, to give ourselves a lift and a tonic.⁷ We can return to life revived rather than depressed from our encounter with thorny problems, and with "presence of mind in difficult situations and amusement in tedious surroundings."⁸ There is a need, therefore, for modern spirits to learn how to derive pleasure from the art of the maxim, from its construction to its tasting. Nietzsche notes that it is virtually impossible to say whether the inquiry into the "human, all too human" will work more as a blessing than a curse to the welfare of humanity; at any rate, and for the time being, the issue is undecided. He further notes that because science, like nature, does not aim at final ends, any fruitfulness in the way or promoting the utility and welfare of humanity will be the result of science's attaining something purposeful without having willed it. But where science is needed now, as part of

⁶ Nietzsche (2007, III, 'Daybreak', section 1).

⁷ Nietzsche (1997, section 38).

⁸ Nietzsche (1997, section 38).

general therapeutic practice of reflection and observation, is in cooling down the human mind: “shouldn’t we, the *more spiritual* human beings of an age that is visibly catching fire in more and more places, have to grasp all available means for quenching and cooling, so that we will remain at least as steady...and moderate as we are now...”⁹ The illnesses and neuroses we encounter in humanity require that *ice-packs* be placed on them. This concern with a cooling down of the human spirit continues in *Dawn* where Nietzsche’s concern with the spread of fanaticism – especially of moral thinking - is perhaps made more explicit.

A significant change takes place in Nietzsche’s thinking with *Dawn*, which can be summarised as follows. In *Human, all too Human* Nietzsche had essentially been working under the influence of Paul Rée and his thinking about morality. The working assumption of Rée’s approach is that we can give a strictly naturalistic account of morality in which morality is seen to be coextensive with the unegoistic instincts or drives. In short, Rée accepts the thesis of Kant and Schopenhauer that for morality to be possible the ego must not be present in actions judged to be of moral worth; the difference is that he pursues a naturalistic inquiry into this, in large part inspired by evolutionary theory, including Lamarckism and Darwinism.¹⁰ In *Human, all too Human* (1878) Nietzsche is a psychological egoist and thinks “morality” is simply an impossible demand humanity places upon itself. He borrows the key argument from Rée explicitly in the book: “The moral person,” he writes, quoting from Rée’s *On the Origin of Moral Sensations*, “does not stand any nearer to the intelligible (metaphysical) world than the physical person,” and Nietzsche adds that this is an insight that needs to be hardened and sharpened “by the hammerblows of historical knowledge.”¹¹ By the time of *Dawn* (1881) Nietzsche is adopting a different approach and strategy: why assume that “morality” is coextensive with the unegoistic? Perhaps there are many “moralities” and no single moral-making morality. This is indeed the position he adopts in the text and is what allows for his first proper revaluation of values. The significance of this change in his

⁹ Nietzsche (1997, section 38).

¹⁰ See Rée (2003, p. 87 and chapter 1, pp. 89-99).

¹¹ Nietzsche (1997, section 37).

thinking largely explains the change in therapy that is evident in the text: it's no longer simply a question of psychological dissection, in which we are not sure whether such dissection will be of benefit to humanity or work to its detriment; rather, it is now that Nietzsche sees much more fruitful possibilities opening up – new dawns in effect – and he is much more “cheerful” about the task of exposing the prejudices or presumptions of morality.

In his new biography of Nietzsche Julian Young, helpfully I think, describes *Dawn* as a ‘spiritual *resource*’ more than a theoretical treatise; it is a book meant for meditation and rumination rather than instant consumption. He adds that the book does not aim to fulfill this purpose in the manner of Eastern philosophy where the aim is to put the intellect out of action. As he puts it, “the basis for the work is the use, even the passionate use, of reason.”¹² I am interested in the text as an exercise in moral therapy. As to whether one should look in it for a consistent and fully worked out moral philosophy is a difficult question. It is not that Nietzsche is inconsistent or incoherent; it is rather that the text develops what might be called trains of thought that sometimes lead to decisive insights but which also leaves much for the reader to engage with and to complete. Nietzsche wants his readers to develop an intimate relationship with the text. The text has a sense of the future – that new dawns are about to break – but much is deliberately left open for the reader’s rumination.

Nietzsche’s thinking aspires to be a practical philosophy. He writes in *The Gay Science* (1882): “I favour any skepsis to which one can reply: ‘let us try it!’ I do not wish to hear anything of all those things and questions that do not permit any experiment.”¹³ In *Dawn* he states that we ourselves are experiments and our task should be to *want* to be such. We are to build anew the laws of life and of behaviour by taking from the sciences of physiology, medicine, sociology, and solitude the foundation-stones for new ideals if not the new ideals themselves.¹⁴ As these sciences are not yet sure of themselves we find ourselves

¹² Young (2010, p. 297).

¹³ Nietzsche (1974, section 51).

¹⁴ Nietzsche (2011, section 453).

living in either a preliminary or a posterior existence, depending on our taste and talent, and in this interregnum the best strategy is for us to become our own *reges* (sovereigns) and establish small experimental states. My claim is that we should read such a statement – the invocation to live experimentally – in terms of a series of *modest* proposals Nietzsche is making about ethical (re-) formation.

Nietzsche's thinking is best conceived, then, as a philosophy of modesty. In *Human, All too Human* he announced his project as one of "historical philosophizing" and declared that its key virtue will be that of "modesty" (*Bescheidenung*) – if everything that there is has come to be then there are no eternal facts or absolute truths.¹⁵ Similarly, in the preface to *Dawn*, where he calls for the "self-overcoming of morality" "out of morality", Nietzsche takes morality to task because he says, our taste prefers "more modest words" (*bescheidenere Worte*).¹⁶ My contention in this essay is that it is this concern with cultivating modesty which informs Nietzsche's critique of morality and what he proposes to replace morality with, namely, an ethics of self-cultivation. The problem, as we shall see, lies with the presumptions of morality which lead us to live in denial of our ethical complexity and the fact that we are *not* the authors of our being in the world (as morality supposes). Or, at the very least, we conceive this in very immodest terms as if we had fantastic powers of self-invention and, indeed, of freedom.

The therapy Nietzsche outlines in *Dawn* is equally a modest one, made up of "slow cures" and "small doses". He notes that chronic diseases of the soul, just like those of the body, rarely emerge through one-time large offences against the rationality of body and soul, but rather through countless undetected little acts of negligence. If this is the case then the cure has to be equally subtle and entail countless little offsetting exercises and the unwitting cultivation of different habits.¹⁷ Nietzsche argues that to bring about the most profound

¹⁵ Nietzsche (1997, section 2).

¹⁶ Nietzsche (2011, Preface, section 4).

¹⁷ Nietzsche (2011, section 462).

transformation possible it is wisest to administer the means in the smallest doses, but unremittingly and over long periods of time. He is suspicious of those he calls impatient and dangerous “political invalids” and claims that no great things can be accomplished at one fell swoop. He thus writes: “Thus we want to guard against exchanging head over heels and with acts of violence the moral condition we are used to for a new evaluation of things – no, we want to keep on living in that condition for a long, long time – until we, very late, presumably, become fully aware that the *new evaluation* has become the predominant force and that the small doses of it, *to which we will have to grow accustomed from now on*, have laid down in us a new nature.”¹⁸

The Prejudices and Presumptions of Morality

Throughout *Dawn*, Nietzsche operates with several critical conceptions of morality. With regards to the modern prejudice, which is one of the main foci of his polemic in the book, here there is the presumption that we know what actually constitutes morality: “It seems *to do* every single person *good* these days to hear that society is on the road to *adapting* the individual to fit the needs of the throng and that the *individual’s happiness as well as his sacrifice* consist in feeling himself to be a useful member of the whole...”¹⁹ As Nietzsche sees it, then, the modern emphasis is on defining the moral in terms the sympathetic affects and compassion (*Mitleid*). We can, he thinks, explain the modern in terms of a movement towards managing more cheaply, safely, and uniformly individuals in terms of “*large bodies and their limbs*.” This, he says, is the basic moral current of our age: “Everything that in some way supports both this drive to form bodies and limbs and its abetting drives is felt to be *good*...”²⁰

¹⁸ Nietzsche (2011, section 534).

¹⁹ Nietzsche (2011, section 132).

²⁰ Nietzsche (2011, section 132).

He makes a number of objections to this tendency and drive and they run and recur throughout the book. Let me note some of them.

In the presumption that the essence of the moral is to be defined in terms of purely other-regarding actions there is lacking appreciation of our ethical complexity and the fact that in any action multiple motives might be in play. For Nietzsche moral motives are epistemically opaque, and on this point he is close to Kant.²¹ Kant acknowledges that we can never know with absolute certainty the nature of our motives: we may believe we have performed an action out of respect for the moral law but in fact it may have been performed out of self-love or some other heteronomous inclination. Nietzsche adheres to this view because for him there are many motives informing any single action and these motives are hidden from the agent performing the action. As he indicates in his treatment of *Mitleid*, it may well be that honour, fear, self-defence, or revenge are what moves us to help another although we tell ourselves it was an act performed solely for their well-being. As one commentator rightly notes, for Nietzsche human nature “has depths and obscurities that make it extremely difficult, if not impossible to specify the drives and urges from which our actions stem.”²² We are not transparent to ourselves in Nietzsche’s view, and when we rely on introspection or self-consciousness to discover our motives and intentions we are involved in processes of selection and interpretation; that is, we do not simply retrieve so-called “mental facts” in such acts. Rather, we “impose, form, organize, and categorize our inner experiences just as we do our outer experiences.”²³ Nietzsche insists that actions are never what they appear to be: “We have expended so much labour on learning that external things are not as they appear to us to be – very well! The case is the same with the inner world!”²⁴

²¹ Cartwright (1984, p. 96).

²² Cartwright (1984, pp. 96-7).

²³ Cartwright (1984, p. 98).

²⁴ Nietzsche (2011, section 116).

In the book Nietzsche devotes a significant number of sections to the topic of *Mitleid*, largely concentrated in book two of the text. His aim is to outline some of the perspectives by which we can gain some genuinely reflective insight into the affect of compassion and to encourage us to pursue critical lines of inquiry, so *Mitleid* will be shown to be not a pure other-regarding affection, to be an injurious affect, to have value for specific cultures, and so on.²⁵ His criticism rests on a number of concerns. Let me mention three.

(a) A concern that in extolling compassion as the panacea to our moral anxieties we are in danger of existing as fantasists. Nietzsche wonders whether people speak with such idolatry about love – the “food of the gods” - simply because they have had so little of it. But would not a utopia of universal love be something ludicrous? – “each person flocked around, pestered, longed for not by one love...but by thousands, indeed by each and everyone.”²⁶ Instead, Nietzsche wants us to favour a future of solitude, quietude, and even being unpopular. The imperatives of philosophies of universal love and compassion will serve only to destroy us. If we are tempted by them we should put them to the test and stop all our fantasizing.²⁷

(b) A concern that in its cult of the sympathetic affects modern society is in danger of providing the image of a single moral-making morality that amounts to a tyrannical encroachment on the requirements of individual self-cultivation. In an essay on pity and mercy in Nietzsche, Martha Nussbaum notes, correctly in my view, that Nietzsche’s project is one that aims to bring about a revival of Stoic values – self-command and self-formation – within a post-Christian and post-Romantic context (she criticizes him for this Stoicism).²⁸

²⁵ See especially Nietzsche 2011 sections 132-38. It is perhaps important to bear in mind that in taking to task *Mitleid* in the ways that he does in these sections of *Dawn* Nietzsche is working with Schopenhauer’s conception of it where it involves the complete identification with the suffering of another. See Schopenhauer (1995, p. 144).

²⁶ Nietzsche (2011, section 147).

²⁷ Nietzsche (2011, section 137).

²⁸ Nussbaum (1994, p. 140). Nussbaum claims that in his cult of Stoic strength Nietzsche depicts “a fearful person, a person who is determined to seal himself off from risk, even at the cost of loss of love and value” (1994, p. 160). Like the otherworldliness he abhors, the

The picture frequently presented is one of Nietzsche advocating, in place of an ethics of sympathy or compassion, one of idiosyncratic self-assertion or the value of unbridled egoism. This is, clearly, a caricature, and fails to capture what we might call the Stoic demands Nietzsche places on the self and its cultivation: harshness toward oneself, self-discipline, self-control, honesty, and a profound love of fate.²⁹ An important aphorism in this regard is 139 which runs:

You say that the morality of being compassionate is a higher morality (*Moral*) than that of Stoicism? Prove it! But remember that what is ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ in morality is not, in turn to be measured by a moral yardstick: for there is no absolute morality (*Moral*). So take your rule from somewhere else – and now beware!³⁰

Here we see Nietzsche contesting the idea that there is a *single* moral-making morality – he never contests the idea that morality is necessary, only that there is a single, absolute conception of it.

(c) A concern that the metaphysical estimation of *Mitleid* by Schopenhauer – namely, that through *Mitleid* we pierce the veil of Maya and discover that all is One and “this art thou” - is psychologically naïve and without penetration. In *Dawn* 142 Nietzsche refers to Schopenhauer’s account of a “mystical process” by which *Mitleid* makes two beings into one and describes it as “rapturous and worthless poppycock” (*schwärmerischen und*

Stoicism he endorses is a form of self-protection, expressing “a fear of this world and its contingencies” (*ibid.*). This picture of Nietzsche does not tally with the stress we find placed in *Dawn* on the need for the individual that wishes to become sovereign to take risks and to experiment. We will grow, Nietzsche stresses, only by experiencing dissatisfaction with ourselves and assuming the risk of experimenting in life, freely taking the journey through our wastelands, quagmires, and icy glaciers. The ones who don’t take the risk of life, he says, will never make the journey around the world that they themselves are, but will remain trapped within themselves like a knot on the log they were born to, a mere happenstance (2011, section 343). The figure Nussbaum esteems over Nietzsche is Rousseau, who is prized for his “eloquent writings on pity” (1994, p. 140) and whose thinking lies at the basis of “democratic-socialist thinking” (1994, p. 159). For an intelligent response to some of Nussbaum’s concerns over Nietzsche on *Mitleid*, see von Tevenar (2007); for criticisms of Rousseau on pity see Boyd (2004) and Ure (2006). For Nussbaum’s criticism of Nietzsche’s Stoicism see also Nussbaum (2001, p. 362 and p. 384).

²⁹ See Elveton (2004, p. 193).

³⁰ Nietzsche (2011, section 139).

nichtswürdigen Krimskrams).³¹ For Nietzsche it is simply not the case that we ever act from single motive. If we wish to free ourselves from *our* suffering in acts of *Mitleid*, which is what he thinks is taking place, it is also the case, Nietzsche surmises, that with the same act we surrender to an impulse for pleasure, for example, in the thought of praise and gratitude which will come our way if we were to come to someone's aid. The performer of the act can thus take a delight in himself, for example, in the sensation that the action has put an end to an injustice that arouses one's indignation – the release of this indignation can have an invigorating effect. Once again, as is so typical of his middle period writings, Nietzsche is asking for psychological probity when it comes to analysing moral matters and what is said to constitute the moral:

That compassion... should be *of the same ilk* as the suffering in view of which it arises or that compassion possesses an especially keen and penetrating understanding of that suffering, both these claims are contradicted by *experience*, and anyone who has glorified compassion based on just these two aspects *lacked* sufficient experience in precisely this domain of the moral.³²

In and of itself *Mitleid* has as little good character as any other drive: it is only when it is extolled – which happens when we fail to apprehend what is injurious about it and discover in it instead a source of pleasure – that a good conscience attaches itself to it, and only then does one surrender to it readily and not shy away from the impulse.³³ In conditions, such as existed in Greek culture, when its injurious character is apprehended, it is considered a weakness; it is a “pathological recurring affect, the danger of which one can remove by

³¹ Schopenhauer notes that when one person connects with another through compassion what they have done, in effect, is to have pierced the veil of Maya, that is, they have broken the spell of individuation and now can see that “all is One.” This is why Schopenhauer says that virtue is “practical mysticism” that springs from the same knowledge that constitutes the essence of all mysticism. For Schopenhauer, metaphysics is virtue translated into action and proceeds from the immediate and intuitive knowledge of the identity of all beings. See Schopenhauer (1969, volume one, p. 373).

³² Nietzsche (2011, section 133).

³³ Nietzsche (2011, section 134).

temporary, voluntary discharges”.³⁴ Nietzsche is not arguing against the idea that physicians of humanity are needed or that humanity does not suffer; rather, his point is that to be a proper physician to humanity one needs to be cautious with regard to the sentiment of compassion otherwise we will be lamed in all the decisive moments and our knowledge and benevolent hand will be paralyzed.

Nietzsche suggests that a culture of compassion could be a very destructive culture; in fact he thinks humankind would perish from it if it became the norm for a day; we might grow sick of it because of feeling so sick about ourselves. Our inability to digest and cope with life’s experiences and their severities will induce us to become deeply melancholic. There is a need for us, then, to become much more subtle in our appreciation of this moral affect. *Mitleid* is an affect which, like any other, needs to be brought under control and sifted by reason; otherwise it is as dangerous as any other affect.³⁵

Nietzsche treats *Mitleid* as a psychological malaise and as a sociological phenomenon of modernity,³⁶ and the two are intermingled in his account in *Dawn*. For Nietzsche, then, the principal prejudice that holds sway in the Europe of his day is that the sympathetic affects define the essence of the moral, such as actions deemed to be congenial, disinterested, of general utility, and so on. He also thinks we are busy building a society of “security” in which the chief goal is to protect individuals from various hazards of life and so reduce human suffering and conflict. In *Dawn* Nietzsche’s focus is not, as is widely supposed, on Christianity as the religion of pity or compassion – he maintains that until the eighteenth century such a virtue was a subsidiary and nonessential aspect of this religion. He then inquires into the source of the feeling that morality consists in disinterested, useful, and congenial actions and claims that it is the effect and change of heart wrought upon Europe by Christianity, even though this was neither its intention nor its teaching. Rather, the view that

³⁴ Nietzsche (2011, section 134).

³⁵ Nietzsche (1968, section 928). In this note Nietzsche writes that “greatness of character” consists in *possessing* the affects to the highest degree but also having them under control.

³⁶ Ure (2006, p. 81).

morality means nothing other than disinterested, useful, and congenial actions is the residuum of Christian sentiments once the strictly egotistical, foundational belief in the importance of eternal personal salvation, and the dogmas on which this belief rested, receded and there then came into the foreground ancillary beliefs in love and love thy neighbour which harmonized with ecclesiastical charity. There emerges in modernity a cult of love for humanity and the idea of surpassing the Christian ideal became, “a secret spur of all French freethinkers from Voltaire through to August Comte”, for example, the latter’s moral formula of “*vivre pour autrui*” (live for others).³⁷

Nietzsche’s main target in the book, then, is what he sees as the fundamental tendency of modern “commercial society” and its attempt at a “collectivity-building project that aims at disciplining bodies and selves and integrating them into a uniform whole”.³⁸ Here “morality” denotes the means of adapting the individual to the needs of the whole, making him a useful member of society. This requires that every individual is made to feel, as its primary emotion, a connectedness or bondedness with the whole, with society, in which anything truly individual is regarded as prodigal, costly, inimical, extravagant, and so on. Nietzsche’s great worry is that genuine individuality and a healthy concern with self-fashioning will be sacrificed and this, in large part, informs his critique of what he sees as the cult of sympathetic affects within modernity.

Nietzsche’s critique of commercial society

For Nietzsche it is necessary to contest the idea that there is a single moral-making morality since every code of ethics that affirms itself in an exclusive manner “destroys too much valuable energy and costs humanity much too dearly.”³⁹ In the future, Nietzsche hopes, the inventive and fructifying person shall no longer be sacrificed and “numerous novel

³⁷ Nietzsche (2011, section 132).

³⁸ Ure (2006, p. 88 note 45).

³⁹ Nietzsche (2011, section 164).

experiments shall be made in ways of life and modes of society.”⁴⁰ When this takes place we will find that an enormous load of guilty conscience has been purged from the world.

Humanity has suffered for too long from teachers of morality who wanted too much all at once and sought to lay down precepts for everyone.⁴¹ In the future, care will need to be given to the most personal questions and create time for them.⁴² Small individual questions and experiments are no longer to be viewed with contempt and impatience.⁴³ In place of what he sees as the ruling ethic of sympathy, which he thinks can assume the form of a “tyrannical encroachment,” Nietzsche invites individuals to engage in self-fashioning, cultivating a self that others can look at with pleasure:

Moral fashion of a commercial society – Behind the fundamental principle of the contemporary moral fashion: “moral actions are generated by sympathy (*Sympathie*) for others,” I see the work of a collective drive toward timidity masquerading behind an intellectual front: this drive desires...that life be rid of *all the dangers* it once held and that *each and every person* should help toward this end with all one’s might: therefore only actions aimed at the common security and at society’s sense of security may be accorded the rating “good!” – How little pleasure people take in themselves these days, however, when such a tyranny of timidity dictates to them the uppermost moral law (*Sittengesetz*), when, without so much as a protest, they let themselves be commanded to ignore and look beyond themselves and yet have eagle-eyes for every distress and every suffering existing elsewhere! Are we not, with this prodigious intent to grate off all the rough and sharp edges from life, well on the way to turning humanity into *sand*?...In the meantime, the question itself remains open as to whether one is *more useful* to another by immediately and constantly leaping to his side and *helping* him – which can, in any case, only transpire very superficially, provided the help doesn’t turn into a tyrannical encroachment and transformation – or by *fashioning* out of oneself something the other will behold with pleasure, a lovely, peaceful, self-enclosed garden, for instance, with high walls to protect against the dangers and dust of the roadway, but with a hospitable gate as well.⁴⁴ (D 174).

⁴⁰ Nietzsche (2011, section 164).

⁴¹ Nietzsche (2011, section 194).

⁴² Nietzsche (2011, section 196).

⁴³ Nietzsche (2011, section 547).

⁴⁴ Nietzsche (2011, section 174).

The perspective Nietzsche adopts here on “commercial society” – he appears to have encountered the term in Hippolyte Taine⁴⁵ - is perhaps a little odd since we typically associate it with an ethic of selfishness and pride. However, I think it is clear that in this section Nietzsche is expressing an anxiety that other nineteenth century social analysts, such as Tocqueville, have, namely, that market-driven atomization and de-individuation can readily lead to a form of communitarian tyranny.⁴⁶ We are today creating a society of “universal security” but the price being paid of it is, Nietzsche thinks, much too high: “the maddest thing is that what is being effected is the very opposite of universal security.”⁴⁷ We live within the effect of general opinions about *the* “human being,” which is a “bloodless abstraction” and “fiction.”⁴⁸ Even the modern glorification of work and talk of its blessings can be interpreted as a fear of everything individual. The subjection to hard industriousness from early until late serves as “the best policeman” since it keeps everyone in bounds and hinders the development of reason, desire, and the craving for independence. It uses vast amounts of nervous energy which could be given over to reflection, brooding, dreaming, loving and hating and working through our experiences: “...a society in which there is continuous hard work will have more security: and security is currently worshipped as the supreme divinity.”⁴⁹

Perhaps Nietzsche’s fundamental presupposition in the book is that ours is an age of great uncertainty in which there is emerging individuals who no longer consider themselves to be bound by existing mores and laws and are thus making the first attempts to organize and create for themselves a right. Hitherto such individuals have lived their lives under the jurisdiction of a guilty conscience, being decried as criminals, freethinkers, and immoralists.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ See Taine (1906, p. 191). Taine writes here of “aristocratical and commercial society...”

⁴⁶ See Ure (2006, p. 82).

⁴⁷ Nietzsche (2011, section 179).

⁴⁸ Nietzsche (2011, section 105).

⁴⁹ Nietzsche (2011, section 173).

⁵⁰ Nietzsche (2011, section 164).

Although this development will make the coming century a precarious one (it may mean, Nietzsche notes, that a rifle hangs on each and every shoulder), it is one that Nietzsche thinks we should find fitting and good since it at least insures the presence of an oppositional power that will admonish that there is any such thing as a single moral-making morality.

An Epicurean Moment

In *Dawn*, then, Nietzsche is ploughing his own field and he knows well the charge that will be levelled against him: indulging in immoral cultural Epicureanism. Indeed, at this time he was inspired by Epicurus's conception of friendship and the ideal of withdrawing from society and cultivating one's own garden.⁵¹ In a letter to Peter Gast of 1883 Nietzsche writes that Epicurus, "is the best negative argument in favour of my challenge to all rare spirits to isolate themselves from the mass of their fellows."⁵² If philosophical therapeutics is centred on a concern with the healing of our own lives so as to return us to the joy of existing,⁵³ then in the texts of his middle period, including *Dawn*, Nietzsche can be seen to be an heir to this ancient tradition. The difference is that he is developing a therapy for the sicknesses of the soul under modern conditions of social control and discipline. Nevertheless, it is the case that Nietzsche at this time is seeking to revive an ancient conception of philosophy. In a note from 1881 he states that he considers the various moral schools of antiquity to be "experimental laboratories" containing a number of recipes for the art of living and holds that these

⁵¹ Catherine Wilson neatly lays out the central tenets of the Epicurean system in a recent study. They include: the denial of supernatural agency engaged in the design and maintenance of the world; the view that self-moving, subvisible particles acting blindly bring about all growth, change, and decline; and the insistence that the goal of ethical self-discipline, which involves asceticism, is the minimization of mental and physical suffering (Wilson, 2008, p. 37). It is on this last point that Nietzsche will come to later criticize Epicureanism and describe Epicurus as a "typical decadent". See Nietzsche (2005, section 30). In the same text Epicurus is once again prized on account of his battle against "the *subterranean* cults, the whole of latent Christianity", his fight against the "corruption of the soul" through notions of guilt, punishment, and immortality (Nietzsche, 2005, section 58). For further insight into Nietzsche's reception of Epicurus see Caygill (2006).

⁵² Nietzsche (1987, p. 418).

⁵³ Hadot (1995, p. 87).

experiments now belong to us as our legitimate property: “we shall not hesitate to adopt a Stoic recipe just because we have profited in the past from Epicurean recipes.”⁵⁴

Nietzsche admits at this time to being inspired by the example of Epicurus whom he calls one of the greatest human beings to have ever graced the earth and the inventor of a “heroic-idyllic mode of philosophizing.”⁵⁵ In *Dawn* Epicurus is portrayed as the enemy of the idea of punishments in Hell after death. Nietzsche suggests that the triumph of Epicurus’s teaching resounds most beautifully in the mouth of the sombre Roman Lucretius but comes too early. Christianity takes over the belief in “subterranean terrors” under its special protection and this foray into heathendom enables it to carry the day over the popularity of the Mithras and Isis cults, winning to its side the rank of the timorous as the most zealous adherents of the new faith (Nietzsche notes that because of the extent of the Jews’ attachment to life such an idea fell on barren ground). However, the teaching of Epicurus triumphs anew in the guise of modern science which has rejected “any other representation of death and any life beyond it.”⁵⁶ Nietzsche describes Epicurus as “the soul-soother (*Seelen-Beschwichtiger*) of later antiquity” who had the wonderful insight that to quieten our being it is not necessary to have resolved the ultimate and outermost theoretical questions.⁵⁷ To those who are tormented by the fear of the gods, one points out that if the gods exist they do not concern themselves with us and that it is unnecessary to engage in fruitless disputation over the ultimate question as to whether they exist or not. Furthermore, in response to the consideration of a hypothesis, half belonging to physics and half to ethics, and that may cast gloom over our spirits, it is wise to refrain from refuting the hypothesis and instead offer a rival hypothesis, even a multiplicity of hypotheses. To someone who wishes to offer consolation – for example, to the unfortunate, to ill-doers, to hypochondriacs, and so on – one

⁵⁴ Nietzsche (1988, volume 9, 15 [59]).

⁵⁵ Nietzsche (1986, section 295).

⁵⁶ Nietzsche (2011, section 72).

⁵⁷ Nietzsche (1986, section 7).

can call to mind two pacifying formulae of Epicurus that are capable of being applied to many questions: “firstly, if that is how things are they do not concern us; secondly, things may be thus but they may also be otherwise.”⁵⁸ Nietzsche is keen, then, to have his readers follow the example of Epicurus and encourage them to cultivate an attitude towards existence in which they accept their mortality and attain a new serenity about their dwelling on the earth, to conquer unjustified fears, and to reinstitute the role played by chance and chance events in the world and in human existence.⁵⁹ As Pierre Hadot notes, for the Epicurean sage the world is the product of chance, not divine intervention, and this brings with it pleasure and peace of mind, freeing him from an unreasonable fear of the gods and allowing him to consider each moment as an unexpected miracle. Each moment of existence can be greeted with immense gratitude.⁶⁰

It’s from Epicurus, then, that Nietzsche gets the inspiration to give up on what he calls the first and last things, the questions of a theologically-inspired metaphysics, and devote attention to the closest things. Nietzsche has made this decision in 1878-9 and it provides the context for much of what it follows in the free spirit trilogy. Let me outline some of its features.

In modern culture we can detect, Nietzsche writes, a “feigned disrespect for all the things which human beings in fact take most seriously, *for all the things closest to them.*”⁶¹ As Ruth Abbey notes, in devaluing the small, worldly matters Christian and post-Christian sensibility, “puts people at war with themselves and forbids a close study of which forms of care of the self would be most conducive to individual flourishing.”⁶² As Nietzsche notes, most people see the closest things badly and rarely pay heed to them, whilst “*almost all the*

⁵⁸ Nietzsche (1986, section 7).

⁵⁹ On the importance of chance see Nietzsche (2011, sections 13, 33, 36).

⁶⁰ Hadot (1995, p. 252).

⁶¹ Nietzsche (1986, section 5).

⁶² Abbey 2000: 99.

physical and psychical frailties of the individual derive from this lack...being *unknowledgeable in the smallest and everyday things* and failing to keep an eye on them - this is that transforms the earth for so many into a ‘vale of tears.’”⁶³ Our understanding of existence is diverted away from the smallest and closest things:

Priests and teachers, and the sublime lust for power of idealists of every description...hammer even into children that what matters is something quite different: the salvation of the soul, the service of the state, the advancement of science, or the accumulation of reputation and possessions, all as the means of doing service to mankind as a whole; while the requirements of the individual, his great and small needs within the twenty four hours of the day, are to be regarded as something contemptible or a matter of indifference.⁶⁴

Nietzsche goes on here to name here Socrates as a key figure in the history of thought who defended himself against this “arrogant neglect” of the individual for the benefit of the human race.⁶⁵ In *Dawn* 435 Nietzsche notes that our greatness does not crumble away all at once but through continual neglect:

...the little vegetation that grows in between everything and understands how to cling everywhere, this is what ruins what is great in us – the quotidian, hourly pitifulness of our environment that goes overlooked, the thousand tiny tendrils of this or that small and small-minded feeling growing out of our neighborhood, our job, the company we keep, the division of our day. If we allow these small weeds to grow unwittingly, then unwittingly they will destroy us!⁶⁶(D 435)

The closest things are those things which are overlooked or even disparaged by priests and metaphysicians who devote all their time and energy to the care of the soul. They include things like eating and diet, housing, clothing, and social intercourse. These should all be made the object of constant impartial and general reflection and reform. Nietzsche argues: “Our

⁶³ Nietzsche (1986, section 6).

⁶⁴ Nietzsche (1986, section 6).

⁶⁵ For further insight into the different depictions of Socrates we find in Nietzsche see Nehamas (1998, pp. 128-156). See also Hadot (1995, pp. 147-79). In *Dawn* section 9 Socrates is said to be one of those (rare) moralists who offer the individual a morality of self-control and temperance and as a means to their own advantage or a personal key to happiness.

⁶⁶ Nietzsche (2011, section 435).

continual offences against the most elementary laws of the body and the spirit reduce us all...to a disgraceful dependence and bondage...on physicians, teachers and curers of soul who lie like a burden on the whole of society.”⁶⁷ All the physical and psychological frailties of the individual derive from a lack of knowledge about the smallest and most everyday things, such as what is beneficial to us and what is harmful to us in the institution of our mode of life, in the division of the day, eating, sleeping, and reflecting, and so on.

Nietzsche insists that we do not require certainties with regard to the “first and last things” - what he calls “the furthest horizon” - in order to live a “full and excellent human life.”⁶⁸ He proposes a fundamental rupture be affected with regard to customary habits of thinking. In the face of questions such as, what is the purpose of man? What is his fate after death? How can man be reconciled with God?, it should not be felt necessary to develop knowledge against faith; rather we should practise an indifference towards faith and supposed knowledge in the domains of metaphysics and religion. He proposes the following as a principle of the new life: “life should be ordered on the basis of what is most certain and most demonstrable, not as hitherto on that what is most remote, indefinite, and no more than a cloud on the horizon.”⁶⁹

This concern with the small things and “casuistry of selfishness” continues well into the late Nietzsche, with Nietzsche writing in *Ecce Homo* that “nutrition, place, climate, recreation” are “inconceivably more important than everything one has taken to be important to date,” and here it is necessary that we relearn.⁷⁰

Nietzsche on the Drives and the Self

⁶⁷ Nietzsche (1986, section 5).

⁶⁸ Nietzsche (1986, section 16).

⁶⁹ Nietzsche (1986, section 310; see also section 350).

⁷⁰ Nietzsche (2007, II, section 10).

We are not, as we may like to suppose, the fantastical authors or agents of our own experiences since we are subject to the play of drives and this for Nietzsche is a worryingly contingent business. One difficulty we encounter in developing an adequate understanding of inner processes and drives is language and the prejudices on which it is based. Nietzsche notes that words exist only for superlative degrees of such processes and drives and when words are not available to us we tend not to engage any longer in precise observation. “Wrath, hate, love, compassion, joy, pain,” and so on are all names for extreme states, whilst the milder middle degrees, as well as the lower ones which are constantly in play, “elude us and yet it is precisely they that weave the web of our character and our destiny.”⁷¹ We are not, then, good readers of ourselves:

*We are none of us what we appear to be solely in those states for which we have consciousness and words – and hence praise and censure; we misconstrue ourselves according to these cruder outbursts, which are the only ones we register; we draw a conclusion from material in which the exceptions outweigh the rule, we misread ourselves in this seemingly clearest block print of the self (Selbst).*⁷²

The irony is that it is through our opinions and valuations of ourselves, which we have arrived at through this mistaken route, that we form our so-called “ego” (*Ich*) and this collaborates from now on in the formation of our character and destiny (*Schicksal*).

In his exploration of the drives Nietzsche notes that no matter how much we struggle for self-knowledge nothing is more incomplete to us than the image of the totality of our drives. It is not only that we cannot call the cruder ones by name, but also more worryingly that their number and strength, their ebb and flow, their play and counter play, and most of all the laws of their alimation remain completely unknown to us:

This alimation thus becomes the work of chance: our daily experiences toss willy-nilly to this drive or that drive some prey or other which it seizes greedily, but the whole coming and going of these events exists completely apart from any meaningful

⁷¹ Nietzsche (2011, section 115).

⁷² Nietzsche (2011, section 115).

connection to the alimentary needs of the sum drives: so that the result will always be two-fold: the starving and stunting of some drives and the overstuffing of others.⁷³

Our experiences, then, are types of nourishment; the problem is that there is lack of knowledge on our part as to the character of our experiences. The result is that we live as contingent beings:

...as a consequence of this contingent alimentation of the parts, the whole, the fully-grown polyp turns out to be a creature no less contingent (*Zufälliges*) than its maturation.⁷⁴

Nietzsche notes that this insight would be more transparent to us if all the drives wanted to take matters as seriously as does the drive for hunger. He then develops an insight onto our dreams and how they serve to compensate the drives for a contingent absence of nourishment during the day. One dream may be full of tenderness and tears, another on a different day playful and high-spirited, whilst other ones may be adventurous or full of melancholy. It is through the invention going on in dreams – the make-believe – that we give discharge and free rein to our different and manifold drives. These are free and arbitrary interpretations of our nerve impulses during sleep, as well as of movements of blood and intestines, of the pressure of an arm or of the bedclothes, of the sounds from a bell tower, and so on. Given that this “text,” as Nietzsche calls it, remains pretty much the same from evening to evening, why does it elicit from our dreams such divergent commentary? His answer is that the “make-believing faculty” of reason (*die dichtende Vernunft*) is imagining each different day divergent causes for the same nerve impulse and in accordance with the fact that different drives seek to gratify themselves. One day this particular drive is at high tide, on another day a different drive is surging. Nietzsche rightly notes that in contrast to dreaming, waking life does not enjoy the same freedom of interpretation since it is less poetic and unbridled. Nevertheless this fact should not serve to deceive us: when we are in a waking state our

⁷³ Nietzsche (2011, section 119).

⁷⁴ Nietzsche (2011, section 119).

drives also interpret nerve impulses and ascribe causes to them and in accordance with the needs of our drives. On this level, then, Nietzsche contends that there is no essential difference between wakefulness and dreaming states.⁷⁵ This suggests to him that our consciousness may be nothing other than a “fantastical commentary on an unknown, perhaps unknowable, yet felt text.”⁷⁶ Nietzsche concludes by suggesting that to experience is, therefore, to make believe or invention.

How, then, is autonomy or self-mastery to be achieved? Nietzsche has a twofold answer: (a) one practices the passion of knowledge, treating oneself as a site of experimental self-knowledge; (b) one exercises an intellectual conscience, a superior form of conscience, or the conscience behind one’s conscience. One need not practise any of this in a spirit of renunciation. Nietzsche expresses an opposition to any ethic that would draw its inspiration from the negative virtues. He says that he abhors every morality that says “Do this! Renounce! Overcome yourself!” What he is well disposed towards, he continues, is a morality that impels you to do something “again and again from morning till evening, and to dream of it at night’, but to think of nothing else other than doing it well, ‘as well as *I* alone can.”⁷⁷ When we live this way, he says, the things that do not belong to such a life drop off without hate or reluctance. The task, then, is not to strive for an impoverishment of our lives with open eyes, as the negative virtues teach. Rather, we should fix our eye forwards, not sideways, backwards, or downwards, and in living like this we will not even notice those things in our lives that have taken their leave. Nietzsche invites us to reflect on the history of our every day by considering the habits it is made up of: are they the product of innumerable little

⁷⁵ For a recent account of dreams that bears out some of Nietzsche’s insights but not others, see McGinn (2004). As McGinn points out one crucial difference between the dream state and the waking state is that in the former dreams are “modally exhaustive” or blind. As McGinn explains: “In waking consciousness I can be perceiving one thing and imagining something else: there is the perceived world and the imagined world. I ‘live’ in both worlds, the actual and the possible....But in the dream there is only the dream world and no envisaged alternative to it; so I feel condemned to that world, since I can picture no other,” (p. 80).

⁷⁶ Nietzsche (2011, section 119).

⁷⁷ Nietzsche (1974, section 304).

cowardices and lazinesses or of our courage and innovative reason? Those who are thirsty for reasons and knowledge want to face their experiences as sternly as a scientific experiment, hour by hour and day by day. They want to be their own experiments and guinea-pigs. To justify that we have done the right action, one that we can label as moral, we often appeal to our conscience. But this is to assume that our conscience is infallible and that it always speaks morally to us. Do we not require then another conscience to assess the adequacy of this belief, such as an intellectual conscience? Any judgement we make that “this is right” has a prehistory in our drives, inclinations, aversions, and experiences to date, including what we have failed to experience. As Nietzsche points out, there are many different ways that we can listen to our conscience, and the inadequate way lies in relying upon the firmness of our moral judgement simply because this firmness could be evidence of our personal abjectness or lack of a personality. Moreover, our so-called moral strength might have its source in our stubbornness or in our inability to envisage new ideals.⁷⁸

In a note from autumn 1880 he insists that the intellect is the tool of our drives, “it is *never free*.” What it does is to sharpen itself in the struggle with various drives and thereby refines the activity of each individual drive. But he also insists that: “The will to power (*der Wille nach Macht*), to the infallibility (*Unfehlbarkeit*) of our person, resides in our greatest justice and integrity (*Redlichkeit*): scepticism just applies to all authority, we do not want to be duped, not even by *our drives*! But what does not *want*? A drive, certainly!”⁷⁹ So, for Nietzsche we are acquiring a new set of drives, including the drive to independence and even the passion of knowledge will become a drive. At work in Nietzsche we see an ethic of “individualization” which: (a) is a form of perfecting oneself through quite radical independence, entailing long periods of solitude; (b) requires constant and intense self-observation and of the circumstances and situations one finds oneself in.⁸⁰ As one

⁷⁸ Nietzsche (1974, section 335).

⁷⁹ Nietzsche (1988, volume 9, 6 [130], p. 229).

⁸⁰ See Sachs (2008, p. 91).

commentator notes: "...autonomy must always be a work in progress: a subject begins in heteronomy and becomes increasingly autonomous as more of her drives and affects are endorsed reflexively and integrated into her overall character."⁸¹

The focus, then, is on the drives in which the self is not conceived metaphysically for there is no self independent of the structuring and organisation of the drives. For Nietzsche what we call the "self" just is a site or agent of structuring, ordering, and organising. If free spirits aspire to a new condition of freedom this is because a new drive has become dominant within them and expresses itself as a "task" (*Aufgabe*), which Nietzsche compares to an "unconscious pregnancy."⁸² The actual "philosophy" one comes up with may itself be nothing other than a sublimation and refinement, even a release, of the drives. Thus, Nietzsche admits in *Dawn* that *his* philosophy is, at bottom, an instinct for a personal diet and hygiene, one that suits a particular taste and for whom it alone is beneficial. This is an instinct that that is searching for its own air, its own heights, its own weather, its own type of health, and through the detour of his head. He states: "There are many other and certainly more loftier sublimities (*höhere Erhabenheiten*) of philosophy and not just those that are more gloomy and more ambitious than mine – perhaps they too are, each and every one, nothing other than intellectual detours for these kinds of personal drives? –"⁸³

Nietzsche and Care of Self

Nietzsche concludes book two of *Dawn* by offering a "counter-calculation." If only those actions which are performed solely and only for the sake of another are said to be moral then there are no moral actions; similarly, if only those actions which are performed out of "free will" are held to be moral then there are no moral actions (here Nietzsche is supposing free will in the sense of some miraculous act of self-causation). He concludes:

⁸¹ Ibid. 95.

⁸² Nietzsche (1997, Preface).

⁸³ Nietzsche (2011, section 553).

We return to humanity the healthy courage for, and the good cheer of, those actions decried as egoistical and restore to them their *value* – we deprive them of their guilty conscience! And since till now these actions have been by far the most frequent sort and will continue to be so for all time to come, we thus relieve the entire tableau of actions and existence of its *evil appearance!* This is a very great outcome! If humanity no longer considers itself evil, it will cease to be so!⁸⁴

So, Nietzsche, it seems clear, wishes to restore a good conscience to egoism and to encourage his readers to practice a care of self. And it is also clear, I would contend, that Nietzsche is not in *Dawn* advocating the overcoming of all possible forms of morality. Where morality centres on “continual self-command and self-overcoming...in great things and in the smallest,” he champions it.⁸⁵ His concern is that “morality” in the forms it has assumed in the greater part of human history, right up to Kant’s moral law, has opened up an abundance of sources of displeasure and to the point that one can say that with every “refinement in morality” (*Sittlichkeit*) human beings have grown “*more and more dissatisfied* with themselves, their neighbour, and their lot...”⁸⁶ The individual in search of happiness, and who wishes to become its own lawgiver, cannot be treated with prescriptions to the path to happiness simply because individual happiness springs from one’s own unknown laws and external prescriptions only serve to obstruct and hinder it: “The so-called ‘moral’ precepts are, in truth, directed against individuals and are in no way aimed at promoting their happiness.”⁸⁷ Indeed, Nietzsche himself does not intend to lay down precepts for everyone. As he writes, “One should seek out limited circles and seek and promote the morality appropriate to them.”⁸⁸

The morality that humanity has cultivated and dedicated itself to is one of “enthusiastic devotion” and “living for others” in which it looks down from sublime heights on the more sober morality of self-control (which is regarded as egotistical). Nietzsche

⁸⁴ Nietzsche (2011, section 148).

⁸⁵ Nietzsche (1986, section 45).

⁸⁶ Nietzsche (2011, section 106).

⁸⁷ Nietzsche (2011, section 108).

⁸⁸ Nietzsche (2011, section 194).

suggests the reason why morality has been developed in this way is owing to the enjoyment of the state of intoxication which has stemmed from the thought that the person is at one with the powerful being to whom it consecrates itself; in this way “the feeling of power” is enjoyed and is confirmed by a sacrifice of the self. For Nietzsche such an overcoming of the self is impossible: “In truth you only *seem* to sacrifice yourselves; instead, in your thoughts you transform yourselves into gods and take pleasure in yourselves as such.”⁸⁹

In examining the inflated character of moral thinking and language Nietzsche is dealing with a problem that preoccupies him in his middle period: the problem of fanaticism. As he notes at one point in the text, such “enthusiasts” will seek to implant the faith in intoxication “as *the* life within life: a terrible faith!”⁹⁰ Such is the extent of Nietzsche’s anxiety that he wonders whether humanity as a whole will one day perish by its spiritual firewaters and by those who keep alive the desire for them. The “strange madness of moral judgements” is bound up with states of exaltation and “the most exalted language.”⁹¹

Nietzsche appeals to the Stoic Epictetus for an example of a non-fanatical mode of living and as a counterweight to modern idealists who are greedy for expansion. Epictetus’s ideal human being, lacking all fear of God and believing strictly in reason, “is not a preacher of penitence.”⁹² Although this ancient thinker was a slave, the exemplar he invokes is without class and is possible in every class. Epictetus is also admired by Nietzsche on account of his dedication to his own ego and for resisting the glorification of thinking and living for others.⁹³ Of course, this is a partial and selective appropriation of Epictetus on Nietzsche’s part. Although his chief concerns are with integrity and self-command, Epictetus is also known for his Stoic cosmopolitanism in which individuals have an obligation to care for their fellow

⁸⁹ Nietzsche (2011, section 215).

⁹⁰ Nietzsche (2011, section 50).

⁹¹ Nietzsche (2011, section 189).

⁹² Nietzsche (2011, section 546).

⁹³ Nietzsche (2011, section 131).

human beings, and Nietzsche is silent about this aspect of Stoic teaching.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, it is true that the ethical outlook of Epictetus does invite people “to value their individual selves over everything else,”⁹⁵ and for Nietzsche he serves as a useful contrast to Christian thinkers such as Pascal, who considered the ego to be something hateful:

If, as Pascal and Christianity claim, our ego (*Ich*) is always *hateful*, how might we possibly ever allow or assume that someone else could love it – be it God or a human being! It would go against all decency to let oneself be loved knowing full well that one only *deserves* hate – not to mention other feelings of repulsion. - ‘But this is precisely the kingdom of mercy’. – So is your love-thy-neighbour mercy? Your compassion mercy? Well, if these things are possible for you, go still one step further: love yourselves out of mercy – then you won’t need your God any more at all, and the whole drama of original sin and redemption will play itself out to the end in you yourselves.⁹⁶

Part of Nietzsche’s hostility towards “morality” stems from what he regards as the anti-naturalism of moral concepts and thinking, as when he writes that what he wants is to stop making causes into sinners and consequences into executioners.⁹⁷ A “moral” interpretation of the body and its affects blocks off the securing of naturalistically informed self-knowledge and generates a psychological suffering peculiar to it, as when Nietzsche writes of Pascal who construed whatever proceeded from the stomach, the entrails, the nerves, the gall, and the semen – “the whole contingent nature of the machine we know so little!” – as a moral and religious phenomenon in which one could ask whether God or devil, good or evil, salvation or damnation was to be discovered in them.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Thomas Brobjer suggests that Nietzsche did not read the extended ‘Discourses’ and was only familiar with Epictetus’s short ‘Manual’ or *Enchiridion*, and this might account for the somewhat one-sided portrait of him we get from Nietzsche’s appraisal. See Brobjer (2003, p. 430). For a full picture of Epictetus see Long (2002).

⁹⁵ See Long (2002, p. 3). Long also notes that Epictetus devotes more thought to the care of the self than he does to what is incumbent on human beings as members of society (p. 30).

⁹⁶ Nietzsche (2011, section 79).

⁹⁷ Nietzsche (2011, section 208); and see Sachs (2008, p. 88).

⁹⁸ Nietzsche (2011, section 86).

Nietzsche wishes to replace morality, including the morality of compassion, with a care of self. We go wrong when we fail to attend to the needs of the “ego” and flee from it:

Let’s stick to the idea that benevolence and beneficence are what constitute a good person; only let’s add: “provided that he is first benevolently and beneficently disposed *towards himself!*” For *without this* – if he runs from himself, hates himself, causes injury to himself – he is certainly not a good person. Because he is rescuing himself from himself *in others*...to run from the ego (*ego*) and to hate it and to live in others, for others – has, heretofore, been called, just as unreflectedly as assuredly, “*unegotistical*” and consequently “*good*!”⁹⁹

However, with respect to the ego it is clear that Nietzsche wants us to start cultivating what we might call a modest egoism. As he writes in a note of 1884, “Egoism! But no one has yet asked: what kind of ego?”¹⁰⁰ And as he puts it in a note from 1881, “*Stop feeling oneself as this phantastic ego!...Discover the errors of the ego!...Get beyond ‘me’ and ‘you’! Learn to feel (empfinden) cosmically!*”¹⁰¹ This, I take it, is a Stoic reference and sentiment that Nietzsche is expressing: the idea is to give up the childish habit of regarding oneself as the centre of the world and view oneself as a singular moment in a rational cosmos.¹⁰² As Epictetus puts it in book two of his *Discourses*, “I am a human being, a part of the whole, like an hour in a day.”¹⁰³

In section 128 of *Dawn* Nietzsche seeks to indicate that the desire to be our own author has its psychological roots in a narcissistic desire to experience oneself as all-powerful.¹⁰⁴ He draws on the myth of Oedipus to make his point:

⁹⁹ Nietzsche (2011, section 516).

¹⁰⁰ Nietzsche (1968, section 364).

¹⁰¹ Nietzsche (1988, volume 9, 11 [7], p. 443).

¹⁰² The Stoics regarded emotions as harmful mistaken judgments based on an immature habit of regarding oneself as the centre of the world; they encouraged people to follow cosmic reason and view themselves as its singular moments in the rational universe. See Knuuttila (200, p. 6). For insight into Nietzsche’s Stoicism and use of Stoic therapies see Ure (2008); see also Elveton (2004).

¹⁰³ Epictetus (2008, p. 86).

¹⁰⁴ See Ure (2008, p. 46).

You wish to take responsibility for everything! Only not for your dreams! What miserable frailty, what poverty in the courage of your convictions! Nothing is *more* your own than your dreams! Nothing more *your* work! Content, form, duration, actor, spectator – in these comedies you yourselves are everything! And this is just the place in yourselves you shun and are ashamed of, and even Oedipus, the wise Oedipus, knew how to derive consolation from the idea that we cannot do anything about what it is we dream! I conclude from this: that the vast majority of human beings must be aware that they have abhorrent dreams. Were it otherwise: how greatly this nocturnal poeticizing would have been plundered to bolster human arrogance! – Do I have to add that wise Oedipus was right, that we really aren't responsible for our dreams, but no more for our waking hours either, and that the doctrine of free will has as its mother and father human pride and the human feeling of power?¹⁰⁵

Nietzsche conceives the dreamer on the model of the figure of Oedipus with the dream itself as analogous to a tragicomic work of art. The critical bite of the aphorism comes from Nietzsche's attempt to expose the hubris involved in seeking to attribute to ourselves the power of auto-genesis, "conceiving of ourselves as both mother and father to ourselves, so to speak, we engage in a comic, childish self-inflation designed to satisfy our *Machtgefühl*."¹⁰⁶ Here the self imagines itself to be completely self-sufficient and conducting the dream of self-authorship. The dangers of leading such an existence are manifold and include what Michael Ure calls a series of "intersubjective pathologies," such as melancholia and revenge. We see in this and other sections from book two of *Dawn* two important features of Nietzsche's understanding of the self at this time: (a) the psychological claim that the fantasy of auto-genesis is in fact symptomatic of a desire for narcissistic plenitude; and (b) the idea that careful self-cultivation is the only therapeutic response that can work against the pathological affects borne of narcissistic loss.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

¹⁰⁵ Nietzsche (2011, section 128).

¹⁰⁶ Ure (2008, p. 46).

¹⁰⁷ On these points see Ure (2008, pp. 47ff.).

In *Dawn* Nietzsche's is a specifically ethically-motivated naturalism: how might we relearn our subjectivities so that we can fashion them in ways that are more conducive to our bodily and spiritual well-being and flourishing and that does not assume what "morality" assumes and demands? What is now required, Nietzsche argues, even in the domain of psychological observation, which hitherto has been associated with a frivolous spirit, is a "persistent labouring that does not tire of piling stone upon stone, pebble upon pebble," and here one needs the moderate courage not to be ashamed of such "modest work" and to defy all contempt for it.¹⁰⁸ For Nietzsche the prejudices and presumptions of morality are the target to be attacked because they assume knowledge that he thinks we simply do not have and only serve to prevent such knowledge from being developed. Although the goal is ultimately, we might say, one of autonomy – Nietzsche says the task is not to allow oneself to be the happenstance one factually is - Nietzsche's conception of this is more modest, more experimental, and more uniquely individual than what we find in Kant.

In the conclusion let me say something about Nietzsche's relation to Kant. In *Dawn* Kant, we find, is praised over other moral philosophers, especially Schopenhauer, for esteeming reason over sentiment in ethics and for standing outside the modern movement with its emphasis on defining morality in terms of the sympathetic affects.¹⁰⁹ The problem, Nietzsche says in *Dawn* section 339, is that Kant demands that duty "must *always* be something of a burden," never habit and custom, and in this demand "there is concealed a remnant of ascetic cruelty."¹¹⁰ So, one of Nietzsche's interests in ethics is that duty should cease being a burden and he has the hope that after long practice it can become instead a pleasurable inclination and a need in which the rights of others to whom our duties, and now our inclinations, refer become occasions of pleasant feelings for us. And it is clear that Nietzsche thinks the ethical task of achieving self-control and self-mastery, which involves

¹⁰⁸ Nietzsche (1997, section 37).

¹⁰⁹ Nietzsche (2011, section 132).

¹¹⁰ Nietzsche (2011, section 339).

long practice and much daily work, will be made more appealing if it is construed *aesthetically*: one can take pleasure, even delight, in such an exercise and use the full range of one's senses and reason.

Nietzsche differs from Kant, then, in placing the emphasis on autonomy being a radically individualised task, a duty that he hopes can become a joy. As he will later put it in *The Anti-Christ*, “A virtue needs to be our *own* invention, our *own* most personal need and self-defence: in any other sense, a virtue is just dangerous...The most basic laws of preservation and growth...require that everyone should invent his *own* virtues, his *own* categorical imperatives.”¹¹¹ Like Kant, Nietzsche wants us to be astute agents of reason which involves mastering the affects, working against fanaticism, and attaining the modesty of self-control.¹¹² Unlike Kant, he thinks moral therapy needs to be directed more pertinently at the particular drives and capacities of individuals, and not presented as an overly rationalistic and universalistic model. For Nietzsche, Kant, we might say, assumes too much: he assumes a moral autonomy that is independent of the actual psychological and existential tasks necessary to carry it out, including the material to be worked on, and the division between heteronomy and autonomy is drawn too radically. Kantian autonomy does not rest on self-love and, in fact, requires the cancellation of the self or ego: the strict command of duty requires self-denial, and this is what Nietzsche means when he identifies in Kant's ethics the remnants of ascetic cruelty.¹¹³ Nietzsche does not suppose that all persons will wish to assume the task of the joyful science and instead of saying we have a duty to become the ones that we are he wishes us to declare to ourselves, “we, however, *want* to become the ones that we

¹¹¹ Nietzsche (2005, section 11).

¹¹² See Kant (1964, p. 61): “Moderation in affections and passions, self-control, and sober reflection are not only good in many respects: they may even seem to constitute part of the inner *worth* of a person.”

¹¹³ Kant writes: “Out of love for humanity I am willing to allow that most of our actions may accord with duty; but if we look more closely at our scheming and striving, we everywhere come across the dear self, which is always turning up; and it is on this that the purpose of our actions is based – not on the strict commands of duty, which often require self-denial” (Kant 1964, p. 75).

are...”¹¹⁴ The task is a rather modest one: to cultivate the drives and, in so doing, give style to one’s character by removing pieces of first nature and adding pieces of second nature, and thus fashion a self that others can behold with pleasure as opposed to a self that is plagued by “paranoia, guilt, and self-hatred.”¹¹⁵

Finally, what of the point I noted at the beginning of the paper concerning the seemingly harsh and unattractive character of Nietzsche’s conception of ethical practice? Let me end by commenting on just two points. Firstly, an essential test to learn for Nietzsche is the endurance of solitude.¹¹⁶ He does not envisage this as a mode of retreat. Rather, solitude has the advantage of providing us with the distant perspective we need to think well of things: “on my own I seem to see my friends more clearly and more appealingly than when together with them; and at the time when I loved music most and was most sensitive to it, I loved at a distance from it.”¹¹⁷ We need solitude “so as not to drink out of everyone’s cisterns” for amongst the many we simply do not think as an “I.” Not only is such solitude of benefit to ourselves it also improves our relation to others; when we turn angry towards people and fear them we need the desert to become good again.¹¹⁸

Secondly, Nietzsche urges us to get beyond our compassion because he appreciates that free thinking – such as the opening up of new ways of being ethical – will, initially at least, plunge people into despair and grief. For Nietzsche *Mitleid* is the enemy to be focused on because when it rules, and when suffering is seen as the greatest evil, “people lose the ability to endure hardship and privation as well as the attendant personal strength and resistance.”¹¹⁹ *Mitleid* “saps the capacity to inflict suffering as well as to endure it.”¹²⁰ For

¹¹⁴ Nietzsche (1974, section 335).

¹¹⁵ Sachs (2008, p. 90).

¹¹⁶ Nietzsche (2011, section 443).

¹¹⁷ Nietzsche (2011, section 485).

¹¹⁸ Nietzsche (2011, section 491).

¹¹⁹ Abbey (2000, p. 61).

¹²⁰ Abbey (2000, p. 61). See also Richardson (2004, pp. 176-80).

Nietzsche, the achievement of greatness, especially in the unflinching pursuit of knowledge, which is his main concern in *Dawn*, “requires the ability to endure, inflict, and witness pain.”

¹²¹ As he puts it in *Dawn* 146, and where he presents the idea of a new ploughshare, “if, with regard to ourselves, we do not heed, in narrow, petty-bourgeois fashion, immediate consequences and sufferings: why should we *have* to do so with our neighbour?”¹²² In making this sacrifice, in which we and our neighbours are included, the aim, he says, is to “strengthen and elevate the general feeling of human *power (Macht)*” and, in this way, seek to effect a positive increase in happiness.¹²³ By “sacrifice” here Nietzsche means sacrifice to the cause of humanity’s existential and moral enlightenment. We should note: free spirits try to entice others to see themselves as experiments and as sacrifices; moreover, we should only sacrifice our neighbour to the extent that we are prepared to sacrifice ourselves.

Supposing we went in for self-sacrifice: what would prohibit us from sacrificing our neighbor as well? – just as state and prince have forever done when they sacrificed one citizen to the other “in the universal public interest”, as they put it. But we too have universal, perhaps more universal interests: why shouldn’t some individuals from the current generation be sacrificed for future generations? Such that those individuals’ grief, their restlessness, their despair, their blunderings and fearful footsteps be deemed necessary because a new ploughshare is to cleave the ground, rendering it fruitful for all? ¹²⁴

I think it is clear, both from hints he gives in *Dawn* and says in other texts, that Nietzsche thinks the tasks of free-spirited thinking are ones reserved, and perhaps best reserved, for a few individuals and who will constitute what we might choose to call a moral (or “immoral”) avant-garde.

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¹²¹ Abbey (2000, p. 61).

¹²² Nietzsche (2011, section 146).

¹²³ Nietzsche (2011, section 146).

¹²⁴ Nietzsche (2011, section 146).

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