

# Nietzsche on Art and Life

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# Nietzsche on the Aesthetics of Character and Virtue

*Daniel Came*

### 1

This essay addresses the question of the relation of aesthetic to ethical value in Nietzsche's early and later writings.<sup>1</sup> My central contention is that Nietzsche wanted to effect a *rapprochement* between aesthetics and ethics, to extend the structure of aesthetic judgment into the ethical domain, and, indeed, to effect the substitution of aesthetic for ethical concepts when dealing with such typically ethical domains as action, motivation, and character, and their adoption as the predominant terms in practical reasoning. The paper explores the development and transformations of this theme from its introduction in *The Birth of Tragedy* to Nietzsche's imperative in *The Gay Science* to give 'style' to one's character and thereby 'turn oneself into a work of art' (GS, 290). In particular I am interested in what is distinctive about Nietzsche's aestheticist approach to ethical questions, and in what respects, and to what degree, he extends the norms of aesthetic judgment and practice into the realm of ethical appraisal and practical reason.

### 2

'Aestheticism', in the sense that concerns me here, may be understood as a revisionist approach to ethics. Someone who wants to effect a *rapprochement* between ethics and aesthetics—assuming that he wishes to retain the core features of at least one of these kinds of judgment—may do so in a way that favours either the former or the latter. That is, he may wish to extend the structure of ethical

<sup>1</sup> I thank Christa Davis Acampora for comments on an earlier draft.

judgment (roughly as we now practise it) into the aesthetic domain; or, conversely, he may seek to change the way we make ethical judgments to bring them into line with modes of aesthetic valuation, to adjust the ethical/aesthetic borderline in favour of the latter domain.<sup>2</sup> This second strategy characterizes Nietzsche's position. The hallmark of Nietzsche's 'positive' ethics is a tendency to make ethical (-sounding) judgments that behave like aesthetic ones.

In opposition to those philosophers who would view ethical and aesthetic judgment as radically dissimilar systems of thought and feeling, the denial of a strict separation of the two kinds of judgment might be said to represent the workings of enlightened common sense on these matters. Works of art, including those which make no attempt at the realistic depiction of human life, are regularly subject to ethical assessment, and there is a lively debate as to the relevance of these evaluations to their aesthetic status.<sup>3</sup> Less obviously, conduct and character can be judged aesthetically—when we praise an action for its gracefulness, or a person for their wit or charm.

However, none of this is to say, with Wittgenstein, that 'ethics and aesthetics are one',<sup>4</sup> however that might be understood; for the above cases are exceptions to the rule in that they involve the ascription of what we feel to be aesthetic properties, such as charm or grace, to the typical subjects of ethical assessment, and vice versa. The two kinds of judgment are usually quite distinct: the zones of ambiguity and continuity are restricted, and the respects in which they differ—in their logic, their social function and their place in individual lives—are numerous.

But here, as elsewhere, the majority or mainstream mode of judgment is not everything. 'Assimilationist' (and 'separatist') accounts of ethics and aesthetics need not present themselves as schemata for ordinary evaluative practice. Someone might accept that the two kinds of judgment are usually distinct, and yet point out that boundaries in this area are not forever fixed by what most people accept, that within certain limits of intelligibility there is room for individuals and communities to negotiate the ethics/aesthetics divide on their own terms; and thus for arguments in favour of a revision in our ordinary practice.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps most

<sup>2</sup> Or, of course, he may pursue some combination of the two strategies. For simplicity's sake, we may say that an ethic is aestheticist *to the extent that* it imports features of aesthetic judgment into the ethical sphere, without seeking any general account of what balance of revisions is required for aestheticism *tout court*.

<sup>3</sup> For recent interventions in this perennial dispute, see, in defence of the aesthetic relevance of ethical judgments in the arts, Carroll (1996) and Gaut (1998); and in the opposite camp, Anderson and Dean (1998).

<sup>4</sup> *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Proposition 6.421.

<sup>5</sup> Compare in this respect the relation of ethical judgment to religious faith: 400 years ago, the common sense position may have been one of wholesale dependence of the former on the latter; the intellectuals of the Enlightenment made an ultimately successful case for the autonomy of the former, a situation which persists today; yet religious conservatives may still intelligibly call for a

of us do tend to keep our ethical and aesthetic faculties in separate boxes, and perhaps we do usually take the deliverances of the former more seriously; but, revisionists like Nietzsche will suggest, perhaps we shouldn't—either, on realist grounds, because this practice misrepresents the true nature of the respective values, or because it would be more rewarding, or just more interesting, or in some other pragmatic sense more valuable, to do things differently.

### 3

The idea that aesthetic and ethical value, the beautiful and the good, must in some deep sense be akin or even identical, may be traced back in Western philosophy at least as far as Plato. In the *Symposium*, Diotima makes the connection by means of her famous *scala amoris*. Love, *erōs*, takes as its immediate object 'giving birth in beauty' (206a–b).<sup>6</sup> Being the desire 'to possess the good forever', it naturally seeks satisfaction in an immortal object; and thus in procreation, since for mortal creatures such as ourselves, the nearest approach to immortality is through the creation of forms which will in turn propagate themselves *ad infinitum*. All men are thus, by divine dispensation, 'pregnant . . . both in body and soul' (206c).

Being divinely ordained, the ensuing 'birth' must come about by means that are 'harmonious with the divine'—that is, by means of the *beautiful*, so that beauty in others becomes the immediate object of erotic desire. At the lowest, bodily level, this desire is manifested in ordinary heterosexual love, whose aim is biological procreation, the continuance of the goods realized in a person's life in that of his offspring. But in some cases, the soul too is pregnant, and seeks to propagate itself in the form of lasting ideas about the good, in poetry and politics and philosophy, and in the flourishing of the souls of others.

This love too seeks beautiful occasions—first in the bodily beauty and charm of individual friends or *erōmenoi*, and then, ascending, to their beauty (that is, goodness) of soul, and thus to intellectual beauty in general as instantiated in good institutions and sciences; never at any time losing sight of its former objects, but rather forming an ever more general conception of them, until the lover is ready for the final revelation, that of 'the Beautiful itself, absolute, pure, unmixed,

reversion to the *status quo ante*. Some of the 'aesthetes' discussed below, most obviously Nietzsche in his more philhellenic moments, exhibit this kind of nostalgic-reactionary strain with respect to the supposedly more beauty-friendly ethic of the classical world.

<sup>6</sup> Plato (1997).

not polluted by human flesh or colours or any other great nonsense of mortality . . . the divine Beauty itself in its one form' (210e). Only in communion with this Form of the Beautiful (which, it is suggested, may be identical with the Form of the Good) can the philosophic soul give birth to ideas that are truly beautiful, and to traits (in itself and others) that are truly virtuous and good.

## 4

It might seem strange that a Platonist doctrine should have been invoked as part of a naturalizing account of virtue, but this does indeed seem to have been Nietzsche's intention. The Platonic equation of beauty with goodness, whereby (roughly speaking) the beautiful is the good as it features as the object of *erōs*, and may be predicated not only of sensible objects and bodies but also of the individual *psuche*, soul or character is reflected, for example, in Nietzsche's claim that a preference for higher or lower individuals 'is at bottom a question of taste and aesthetics' (*WP*, 353), and in his imperative to give 'style' to one's character and thereby 'turn oneself into a work of art' (*GS*, 290).

Indeed, for Nietzsche, the life-enhancing effects of beauty and the depressing effects of ugliness are such central and universal features of human nature as to provide our chief impetus towards the cultivation of virtue, as well as our strongest defence against life-denying pessimism: 'the sight of what is ugly makes one bad and gloomy' (*GS*, 290). As naturally self-reflective creatures, the ethical qualities brought most often and most vividly to our attention are our own, so that if an exalted pleasure is to be derived from the contemplation of virtue, and a depressing effect from surveying what is vicious, each of us has excellent reason to ensure that his own life and soul are in good ethical-aesthetic shape. Virtue therefore is both partly constituted by the capacity to feel this pleasure and, as one of the natural affections, it is one of the objects in which pleasure is found.

On Nietzsche's view of the person, as in the Platonic original,<sup>7</sup> the self or psyche is not a monadic unity, but is composed of several elements—the various instincts, drives, and passions—which may be more or less unified depending on their interrelations. These relations are determined by the relative proportions of

<sup>7</sup> See *Republic*, bk. IV. The correct relationship between the soul's three elements that is constitutive of justice and the other virtues is often described by Plato in terms that suggest its aesthetic appeal: 'once he [sc. the just man] has treated the three factors as if they were literally the three defining notes of an octave—low, high and middle—and has created a harmony out of them and however many notes there may be in between; once he has bound all the factors together and made himself a perfect unity instead of a plurality, self-disciplined and internally attuned: then and then only does he act' (Plato, 1998, 443d–e).

the parts, and by their conflict or harmony with one another (the degree to which the exercise or satisfaction of one frustrates the operations of another, and the affective by-products generated by such interference). Presumably, certain configurations of these elements will be simply pleasing in themselves, much as certain colours are. Furthermore, just as our tastes are gratified by certain compositional aspects of parts of the external world—a delicate musical cadence, the fine proportions of a statue—so our inner sense relays to the mind aspects of its own composition that please or displease.

## 5

The general picture here is clear: as self-conscious beings, each of us must endure the review of his own mind and actions just as much as that of his immediate surroundings, and the aesthetic sense is just as keen in its appraisal of the objects and relationships it finds within as it is of those in its environment. If the furniture of my house has the power to depress my spirits, then I have excellent eudaimonic reasons to change it if I can; likewise, if what I see of the furniture of my mind fills me with loathing and despair, I should require no further motivation towards reform.

But will this reform be ethical as well as aesthetic? That is to say, does an inwardly pleasing and harmonious character express itself in noble affect and action in respect of self and others? One might argue, as Shaftesbury did, for a strict correspondence between the two realms, between virtue and beauty of character:<sup>8</sup> On this view, a mind is beautiful to the extent that it embodies virtue, and ugly or deformed just insofar as it displays vice. We should thus understand ‘virtue’ and ‘ethical beauty’ as names for the very same property, meaning that ethical and aesthetic evaluations of character are exactly isomorphic, and that questions concerning the good life could be viewed under either an ethical or an aesthetic aspect.

On this view, the aesthetic aspects of the good life are intimately bound up with their ethical correlates. An aestheticist like Nietzsche, by contrast, requires no such connection. His is an ‘immoralist’ doctrine that proposes an outright replacement of traditional morality, seeking to devote himself exclusively, not necessarily to aesthetic goals, but to practical-existential criteria which are best served by aesthetic devices, and to regard all conventional normative considerations as potentially matters of indifference, suspicion, or magnificent contempt.

<sup>8</sup> Shaftesbury’s favoured term for that in which ethical beauty resides is ‘mind’, although on occasion he also uses ‘soul’, ‘temper’, or ‘character’, and often simply speaks of the ‘inward constitution’ or of what is ‘within’, in opposition to ‘outward’ bodily features. ‘Beauty’ is his catch-all term for whatever qualities of mind are aesthetically desirable, but he clearly does not regard it as a monolithic property without sub-types, any more than ‘virtue’ names a single, unitary state of character, as opposed to picking out any of a number of quite diverse forms of goodness.

## 6

Nietzsche's attempt to redraw the boundaries between aesthetics and ethics is part of his general aesthetic approach to life, inaugurated in *The Birth of Tragedy*, a work that is framed by two of Nietzsche's most famous, and most perplexing, pronouncements concerning the ethics/aesthetics relationship. In his original 'Foreword to Richard Wagner', Nietzsche informs us that 'art is the highest task and real metaphysical activity of this life' (*BT*, 17, 18); a remark somewhat amplified in the brilliant 'Attempt at a Self Criticism', with which he prefaced the 1886 edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*: 'art—and not morality—is... the real metaphysical activity of man' (*BT*, 8). The work closes with a reiteration of the claim, originally canvassed early on, that 'existence and the world appear justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon' (*BT*, 5, cf. 25).

Regarding the first remark, it is clear from the original context that Nietzsche chiefly intends it as a rebuttal of those who have little respect for aesthetic activity and experience, who 'see in art nothing more than an amusing sideshow, a readily dispensable tinkling of bells to accompany the seriousness of existence' (*BT*, 'Foreword'). For such people, art could hardly have the function that he wishes to ascribe to it in *The Birth of Tragedy*—that of transforming and sustaining an entire culture's sense of itself in relation to the world, of calibrating its members' various impulses so as to enable them to achieve both individual fulfilment and authentic political community.

This role, 'metaphysical' in the sense that it facilitates man's most general understanding of the world and his place in it, found its paradigm in the culture of the early Attic tragedies. The works of Aeschylus and Sophocles, if Nietzsche is to be believed, effect a unique synthesis of the two elements in human nature and experience that he labels 'Apollonian' and 'Dionysian': the first joyful and serene, associated with beauty, formal clarity, moderation, and the life of the individual, the second ecstatic and frenzied, linked to barbarity, chaos, excess, and the blending of persons into the 'mysterious primordial Unity' (*das Ur-Eine*) (*BT*, 1).<sup>9</sup>

The precise origin of these 'drives' is not clear. At some points, it appears that Dionysus alone represents raw nature, the terrible reality against which Apollo stands for 'mere appearance', a fragile human construct built upon a 'hidden substratum of suffering and knowledge' (*BT*, 4); at other times, both seem to 'burst forth from nature itself, without the mediation of the human artist' (*BT*, 2).

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche's Dionysus and Apollo ostensibly correspond to the Schopenhauerian metaphysics of 'Will' and 'representation', in which the world appears both as raw primal unity (Will) and, in its phenomenal aspect, as a realm of individuated things (representation). Behind this, of course, lies Kant's noumenon/phenomenon distinction.

Whatever their source, both urges find expression in the arts, the Apollonian in sculpture and epic poetry, the Dionysian in music and lyric poetry. Tragedy unites the two poetic forms, in the pleasing imagery of the stage and the fluid unity of the chorus respectively.<sup>10</sup> Each consoles the spectator for the incompleteness of the other: Apollo with the emergence of formal beauty out of the ‘fearful swirling compulsive process of annihilation’ (*BT*, 7), Dionysus with the promise that behind all the barriers of culture ‘life is indestructibly powerful and pleasurable’ (*BT*, 7). From this ‘metaphysical comfort’ emerges a ‘pessimism of strength’, the capacity to accept the full reality of suffering, including one’s own, and yet to rejoice in life.

The ethical aspect of all this emerges when Nietzsche turns to what he saw as the nemesis of Attic tragedy: the philosophical discourse of Socrates. The ‘noble’ Greeks, schooled in tragic acceptance of their terrible heroic world, required neither explanations of why things were as they were, nor explicit justifications for acting as they did. This unquestioning confidence in the order of things eventually eroded, however, and the result was the ‘anti-Dionysian’ art of Euripidean tragedy and Socratic dialectic.

Socrates, constitutionally unable to experience the Dionysian communion that bound his fellow citizens to one another, looked upon contemporary life and its apotheosis in tragic theatre and saw ‘something utterly unreasonable, where causes appear to lack effects and effects appear to lack causes; and moreover the whole so colourful and diverse that it could only repel a balanced constitution’ (*BT*, 14). In place of their fatalism he demanded reasons, an intelligible accounting for facts and actions—a demand which proved lethal to a culture utterly reliant on mysticism and instinct.<sup>11</sup> Out of its demise were born the realism of Euripidean (and modern) drama, and the reductive rationalism of Western philosophy.

The Athenians ‘justified’ their world aesthetically, by finding beauty and energy even in its most terrible depredations;<sup>12</sup> we moderns, the heirs of Socrates, can accept only reasoned justifications, typified by the empirical generalizations of science and the universal norms of morality. But it seems that we are wrong, and they were right: rationalism in art and in ethics is doomed to fail even on its

<sup>10</sup> This division is not quite accurate: Sophoclean tragedy is always, for Nietzsche, more the creation of Dionysus than of Apollo. Even the ‘Apollonian dream-world of the stage’ emerges directly out of, and is but a mask for, the ‘terrifying inner world’ of the Dionysian (*BT*, 9).

<sup>11</sup> See Havas (2002) for a somewhat Wittgensteinian exposition of this contrast between tragic rule-following and Socratic reason-giving.

<sup>12</sup> As Richard Schacht points out, this is the respect in which, in Nietzsche’s words, it is always ‘art’s metaphysical intention to transfigure’ (*BT*, 24), that is, to alchemize the meaningless sufferings of mere natural ‘existence’ into the (aesthetically) magnificent struggle that is human ‘life’. See Schacht (1977). See also the essay by A. E. Denham in this volume.

own terms, and only an aestheticized conception of life can ultimately reconcile us to the conditions of our existence.

Here, then, is the philosophical core of *The Birth of Tragedy*, which shares with Nietzsche's later position, as we shall see, an attempt to supplant the Judaeo-Christian moral mode of evaluation with an aesthetic one. It goes beyond it in two key respects, however: first, the focus of aesthetic attention is deeper, from human lives and experiences to the whole of 'existence and the world'; and second, the range of targets is broader, taking in not just traditional morality, but with it the very idea of rationality, and the whole spectrum of practices that depend on it.

For both the early and later Nietzsche, in the throes of Schopenhauerian pessimism, the dreadful aspects of both the human and natural worlds call for something like a theodicy—some mode of 'justification' that would allow the troubled soul to accept its place in them.<sup>13</sup> The cult of intelligibility embodied in morals, in science, in contemporary philosophy and realistic art, fails to offer such a justification.<sup>14</sup> The consolations of Apollo and Dionysus, by which we are enabled to view the world as we do the objects of our aesthetic attention, with serene detachment or self-negating bliss, provide the only viable alternative. The individual agent resembles the artist, not so much as author of his own life, but more as one who surrenders himself to creative impulses that transcend and transfigure him. He cannot be a work of art in his own right, but he can try to see himself as a single figure making its contribution to the all-encompassing *Gesamtkunstwerk* that is the tragic world.

## 7

According to Alexander Nehamas's influential reading of Nietzsche's mature philosophy, a version of this tendency to view life and the world as a work of art survives as a dominant influence on his later work. This view, says Nehamas, is one by which Nietzsche

looks at the world in general... as if it were a literary text... he arrives at many of his views of the world and the things within it, including his views of human beings, by generalising to them ideas that apply almost intuitively to the literary situation, to the creation and interpretation of literary texts and characters.

(Nehamas, 1985, 3)

This 'overarching metaphor' (164) of the literary text informs, we are told, such diverse doctrines as: the 'will to power' (construed as a theory of substance and causation whereby objects, much like literary characters, exist only as complex

<sup>13</sup> For a fuller discussion of this theme, see Came (2005; 2013).

<sup>14</sup> I discuss Nietzsche's critique of Socratic rationalism at length in Came (2004).

bundles of interdefined properties, no one more ‘essential’ than any other, so that their apparent possession of causal efficacy in their own right is but an illusion); the ‘eternal recurrence’ (understood not as a piece of a priori cosmology, but as the view that because we are—again like literary characters—simply the sum of our experiences and actions, one can only will a change in one’s past at the cost of willing one’s own non-being, so that our lives must be ‘justified’ *in toto* or not at all); and ‘perspectivism’ (a methodological pluralism resulting from the view that the world ‘can be interpreted equally well in vastly different and deeply incompatible ways’ (99), a feature it shares—or so says Nehamas—with literary texts).

Nehamas has been criticized<sup>15</sup> (rightly in my view) for the extravagance of his central claim, given the paucity of direct textual evidence for it. The claim that the later Nietzsche saw the whole world as a literary work, and viewed individual inhabitants merely as characters subservient to some greater ‘text’, seems too close to *The Birth of Tragedy*’s conception of nature itself as a work of art shaped by creative forces that transcend the human, and thus to extend the anti-individualism of that early work beyond actual lifespan. It also relies very heavily on an exclusively literary model, a reliance which sits ill with Nietzsche’s enthusiasm for, and frequent allusions to, the plastic and performing arts. Nevertheless, if we put aside his overall theoretical apparatus, many of Nehamas’s most valuable insights can be preserved in the framework of a less single-minded aestheticism that may be found in Nietzsche’s later works.

## 8

One important theme with obvious artistic analogues is that of *creativity*. Once dubiously located in the ‘primordial Unity’, creativity has, by this later period, come back within the sphere of human culture, but it remains the one source of hope that the world might be redeemed for (at least some of) its inhabitants. This need for redemption has also been reassigned to a human origin. It is no longer the well of pain at the heart of things (the mature Nietzsche had ceased to believe in a ‘heart of things’), but the insufferable mediocrity and lifelessness of our civilisation, from which mankind needs to be relieved; the symptom has become the disease. Here is a typically hyperbolic passage from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

I call it the state where everyone, good and bad, is a poison-drinker: the state where everyone, good and bad, loses himself: the state where universal slow suicide is called—life. Just look at these superfluous people! They steal for themselves the works of inventors and the treasures of the wise: they call their theft culture—and they turn everything to sickness and calamity...

<sup>15</sup> For example in Leiter (1992).

Only where the state ceases, does the man who is not superfluous begin: does the song of the necessary man, the unique and irreplaceable melody, begin.

(Z, I, 11)

The *Übermensch* of *Zarathustra* is one of a series of ideal types that permeates Nietzsche's writing, beginning with the noble Hellene of *The Birth of Tragedy*, and developing into the 'higher man' of the mature philosophy. As Philippa Foot (1973) has pointed out, the reasons we are given for preferring these higher individuals to the 'herd' are chiefly aesthetic ones, albeit of a quite sophisticated kind.

The masses, the 'many-too-many', are not just 'poison-drinkers', 'apes', dwellers in 'the mud and the abyss'; they are mere imitators. They are proud of their 'culture', as if it were their own creation, but it is not: it has been created by others, by real 'inventors', and merely appropriated by them for their own petty purposes. Even the state, the 'new idol' which they venerate, was not invented by them but *for* them, in order to 'lure them' out of their condition as a 'people' and turn them into a 'state', by those who are both creators and, just as potently, 'destroyers', iconoclasts.

Compared with the superfluous, the higher man has the great aesthetic virtue of *originality*: he is 'solitary', his 'song' is 'unique'—and it is uniquely his, for he possesses 'greatness, that is to say, creativeness' (ibid.). It is 'necessary' precisely because it has the gratuitousness of true art, born not in the vulgar 'marketplace' of practical life, but in self-imposed seclusion of spiritual inwardness.

What, in his 'creativeness', does this splendid individual create? The most obvious answer is, 'himself'. This is to an extent right: the higher men are those who, in the words of section 335 of *The Gay Science*, 'are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves'. But in fact the originality of the higher man goes further yet, extending beyond mere self-creation, and into the domain of value itself.

Here is another very typical passage, this time with a more explicit stress on creativity:

Evaluation is creation: hear it, you creative men! Valuating is itself the value and jewel of all valued things.

Only through evaluation is there value: and without evaluation the nut of existence would be hollow. Hear it, you creative men!

A change in values—that means a change in the creators of values. He who has to be creator always has to destroy.

(Z, I, 15)

Over and above the process of self-creation, the higher man is urged to exercise what we may call (although Nietzsche would not) *ethical creativity*.<sup>16</sup> It is not merely the lives and souls of the superfluous that are awry, but the very values they have been given and adhere to. For the creators of those values—and under the latter heading Nietzsche certainly means to include the norms of conduct, routes of feeling, and ideals of character that constitute what he understands by ‘morality’—Zarathustra reserves a certain horrified respect for fellow artists, albeit of a peculiarly degenerate school, who have produced ‘a device of Hell . . . a horse of death jingling with the trappings of divine honours’.

By contrast, he whose life tends towards the *Übermensch*, in creating himself, becomes the creator of the very values he lives by. He invents himself by rejecting, through sheer force of will, the values of the many, and then—much more difficult—by finding the values by which he as an individual may flourish, and living up to them.<sup>17</sup> And if someone can really manage this, he thereby creates a new domain of good and evil: for the individual, the ‘Ego’, now has the power, once reserved for whole ‘peoples’, to turn ‘whatever causes it to rule and conquer and glitter, to the dread and envy of its neighbour’ into ‘the sublimest, the paramount, the evaluation and meaning of things’ (Z, I, 15). But in creating new values, he undermines those that he initially rejected. Many powerful acts of ethical creativity will destroy those old values, the values once constitutive of ‘morality’ itself, altogether.<sup>18</sup>

Nehamas is surely right to see an artistic, if not necessarily a literary, model at work here (Nehamas 1985: 225–34). In Nietzsche’s ethical universe, creativity operates much as it does in the more familiar world of the arts, where an individual artist who rejects the prevailing conventions and produces an original and successful work thereby creates a new set of standards, new criteria for aesthetic excellence and deficiency, which others must take account of.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, to the extent that his success arises from the deliberate disavowal of some artistic norm, the authority of that norm may be weakened. If others, inspired by his example but not imitating him slavishly, also succeed while rejecting that

<sup>16</sup> I employ this label merely as a less cumbersome alternative to ‘evaluative creativity’, etc., and not in order to prejudge the issue of whether Nietzsche is really rejecting morality *tout court* or merely offering us a route to a new one.

<sup>17</sup> See the ‘three metamorphoses’ of the spirit into camel, lion, and child: Z, I, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Z, I, 34: he who has the power to be a creator in good and evil, truly, has first to be a destroyer and break values. Thus the greatest evil belongs with the greatest good: this, however, is the creative good . . . And let everything that can break upon our truths—break! There is many a house to build!’

<sup>19</sup> Compare Kant’s definition of genius as ‘the talent . . . which gives the rule to art’: works of genius must ‘be models, i.e. be *exemplary*; and, consequently, though not themselves derived from imitation, they must serve that purpose for others’ (Kant, 1952, §46).

standard, it will be gradually discredited, until the whole style of art whose practices it codified ceases to be available to us and becomes part of ‘cultural history’.

The adoption of this model gives Nietzsche the balance he wants between normativity and individualism. On the one hand, part of what appals him about morality as such is its eagerness to ‘level down’, to co-opt even the greatest on the same terms as the most spiritually stunted. On the other, he has no wish to get rid of value altogether, and realizes that there cannot be values without some degree of interpersonal constraint, operating even on great men. Ethical creativity provides the solution. In a creative practice, the standards set by successful practitioners constrain the activities of others—unless they are themselves imaginative enough to find original ways to get around them, thereby creating new standards for yet others to reckon with, and so on indefinitely. In such a practice, unlike the ethical life as we are familiar with it, rules *are* made to be broken: every success represents a challenge, not so much to emulation as to creative transgression. One is bound by the prevailing norms in inverse proportion to the strength and depth of one’s imagination, a conclusion with which Nietzsche should be well satisfied.

The theme of creativity as applied to value is given its fullest development in certain passages in *Beyond Good and Evil*. In this later work, the *übermenschlich* types have become, among other things, the ‘new philosophers’, who will bring a fresh hope and danger to scholarship as well as to mankind at large. These new philosophers are on no account to be confused with mere ‘philosophical workers’ who only ‘fix and formalize some great existing body of valuations’, without contributing anything that is truly their own. The philosophers proper, on the other hand, break free of these norms, however well codified, in order to forge new ones:

they say: ‘Thus it *shall* be!’ it is they who determine the Wherefore and Whither of mankind... they reach for the future with creative hand, and everything that is or has been becomes for them a means, an instrument, a hammer. Their ‘knowing’ is *creating*, their creating is a law-giving, their will to truth is—*will to power*.

(BGE, 211)

Their relationship to their lesser brethren is that of artist to critic; but while every artist must to some extent be a critic, no mere critic is an artist. The new philosophers must possess ‘critical discipline, and every habit that conduces to purity and rigour in intellectual matters’, much as artists must hone their critical faculties in order to sustain the quality of their work; for ‘the critic is the instrument of the philosopher’ (BGE, 210). But the philosophical worker knows nothing of the facility and daring of the creator, ‘that genuinely philosophical combination of a bold exuberant spirituality which runs *presto* and a dialectic severity and necessity which never takes a false step... something easy, divine,

and a closest relation of high spirits and the dance'. The mere scholar, who labours under the intellectual yoke of values not of his own making, feels himself thereby constrained, unfree, subject to an external power that he experiences as arbitrary even while he submits to its authority. But the creative moralist, whose values are internal and original to the work that he creates, knows their authority as a 'feeling of freedom, subtlety, fullness of power, creative placing, disposing, shaping': to the artist alone belongs the autonomy of the Kantian subject, for whom 'necessity and 'freedom of will' are... one' (*BGE*, 213).

## 9

If what I have said so far is right, Nietzsche saw the individual *qua* agent as an artist, and *qua* bearer of a character and a life as a work of art; but he also saw that this view, if combined with anything like the Romantic conception of the artist, must indeed lead one to embrace a quite different mode of evaluation, and a different understanding of the moral history of mankind.

If in our daily lives we really are something like artists and works of art, then the business of living and of being 'good' or 'noble' will be a creative practice, one whose rules and aims are not fixed in advance, but are subject to alteration, expansion, and wholesale reinvention by determined and imaginative individuals. Those who lack the requisite talents may achieve a sort of secondary goodness, like that of an amateur artist, by conscientiously following the rules by which others have succeeded; but genuine greatness will be different in kind, something available only to a few, not by obedience to any preordained system of rules, but by the selective contravention of existing canons and the invention of new ones.

To assess the continuing health of the practice, one should look not for a general conformity to familiar ethical norms, but for singular transgressions against conventional morality which nevertheless draw our admiration. The very idea of a 'common morality' must be rejected as expressing a cult of the mediocre, and replaced with a discourse of authenticity and originality exalting just what is uncommon, unexpected, revelatory.

With respect to the aesthete's substantive ethical views, the introduction of aesthetic or artistic values into the sphere of ethics may make remarkably little difference—especially if he allows the application of those values to be determined by his moral intuitions, so that there is little possibility of conflict between the two.

On the other hand, a strong sense of spiritual or biographical beauty may bring to view a supplementary realm of values which are quite autonomous *vis-à-vis* morality, and which compete with it for our allegiance. Or, again, a full-blooded aesthetics of character may engender suspicion or outright hostility towards the ideals morality offers, as expressions of a style of valuation now in its degeneracy.

Nietzsche's aestheticism falls into the latter category, and it is in this connection that his attempt to redraw the boundaries between aesthetics and ethics in the name of an 'aesthetic approach to life' slides into his immoralism.

## 10

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde touches on a deep contradiction within the aestheticist approach to character and virtue. Dorian lives a beautiful life: one that is rich, varied, delightful, graceful, passionate, and possessed of its own curious integrity. And the wake of ruined lives that he leaves behind him does nothing to lessen the splendour of his own. The story of a person's life can embody aesthetic excellence even when he himself displays the worst moral vices. He whose exclusive aim is to make himself or his life into a work of art attempts a separation between subject matter and execution that leaves him without any apparent reason to be good. The portrait can be magnificent, although its subject is demonic.

For someone like Wilde, an instinctive aesthete who tried also to be good, something not dissimilar to conventional moral rectitude ought to be available within the terms of aestheticism, as a natural consequence not of ascetic self-denial but of beauty in action. But the possibility, realized in Dorian, of a life which is beautiful while at the same time depraved, casts doubt on that prospect. Admittedly, his crimes are productive of great ugliness; but it is his soul, and not his 'life', as the nineteenth-century aesthetic movement understood that term, that he defaces.

In fiction, souls can be as real as we want them to be; but if they are absent from the scientifically respectable world of the nineteenth (or twenty-first) century, how can aestheticism offer a defence against the extremes of immorality which some might use as a means to realize their conception of the beautiful?

This kind of problem arises in relation to Nietzsche's aestheticism, which seems to advocate purely formal aesthetic criteria. If Nietzsche's criteria are purely formal, then there seems to be nothing in his evaluative scheme that precludes a morally repugnant character being deemed praiseworthy. The worry is that Nietzsche's conception of the ideal self is so inclusive as to encompass individuals who are morally repugnant. Indeed, if Nietzsche is commending to us a way of living or a type of character on what appear to be purely aesthetic grounds, then this consequence seems inescapable. Nehamas articulates the problem as follows:

Nietzsche's emphasis on the aesthetic organizational features of people's lives and characters... brings out a difficulty... that attends [his aesthetic model]. This involves what one may feel compelled to consider a moral dimension. A literary character... may be a perfect character but represent a dreadful person... The uncomfortable feeling exists that someone might achieve Nietzsche's ideal life and still be nothing short of repugnant.

(Nehamas, 1985, 165–7)

It might seem that this objection mistakenly presupposes that Nietzsche is seeking to impose his own idiosyncratic conception of the ideal life or perfect character. This is clearly not the case, but the worry nevertheless remains that if the perfect character is to be specified in purely aesthetic or organizational terms, then it would appear that these terms license the admiration of a monstrous character.

That is not to deny that Nietzsche endorses certain substantive or contentful traits of character that it would not be inappropriate to describe as Nietzschean virtues (e.g., self-mastery, honesty, creativity, politeness, health, courage). But none of these qualities in itself seems sufficient to preclude the extremes of immorality. Nietzsche does not explicitly link his conception of nobility with immoralism. But he is very clear that an honest appraisal of our situation is such that our conduct is never really constrained by moral principles of any kind, and that to suppose that there are external norms or constraints that absolutely prohibit certain actions is to fall into a kind of inauthenticity. Further, given Nietzsche's view that we have a natural instinctual drive to want to hurt others, to take pleasure in the suffering of others, and to oppress those weaker than ourselves, it is difficult to see how the recognition of the non-binding nature of moral norms could remain mere recognition and not lead also to the indulgence of these natural propensities.

In a certain sense, however, the demand for interpersonal norms to be derivable from Nietzsche's aestheticism is to misunderstand the nature of that project as Nietzsche envisages it. As Foot remarks, 'for an artist, rules would indeed be beside the point: the goodness of what he or she makes cannot be the same as the goodness of other artists' work, as if there could be a manual for producing what is good' (Foot, 1994, 6).

The appeal to an 'artistic plan', then, seems to entail an absence of rules given in advance, and it is in this connection that Nietzsche emphasizes that genuine virtue is created by the agent himself, and is elevated to the status of virtue through the individual's investing value in a particular quality or trait of personality. But while such metaphors may enable us to get a handle on at least the structure of a fully realized human life, it does seem to follow from this that a Nietzschean normative ethics is impossible, on the grounds that Nietzsche's understanding of ethical choice and value precludes advocating any particular choices and values.

If a normative theory is understood as a set of principles dictating in advance how one should act in any situation, then Nietzsche cannot (and would not want to) provide one. If Nietzsche's notion of self-artistry is to furnish a practical ethics, this will be on the basis of a notion Nietzsche sketches of the individual engaged in solitary self-cultivation, to the relative exclusion of concern for 'the other'.

Nehamas, as we have seen, would want to argue that the measure of a good or noble life in Nietzsche's work lies in the integrity of a narrative, that to be a self is to

constitute a story in which a kind of wholeness prevails. But even interpreted narratively, then, the norm of style remains a purely formal one, and so one cannot tell who is good or noble in Nietzsche's sense by looking at the *content* of their lives. Accordingly, the Nietzschean self may indeed turn immoralist, if he feels that the 'moral' life suppresses traits that are necessary for progress in the art of living.

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