

Nietzsche's Ethics of the Future: Creative Valuation and the Life of Self-Development

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You must change your life.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, “Archaic Torso of Apollo”

Every animal is driven to pasture with a blow.

—Heraclitus, Fragment 11

Nietzsche's future, his posthumous life, which incorporates our past, present, and future interpretations and evaluations of his work, is riddled with complications and misunderstandings.¹ His conception of existence as the struggle of absolute differences leads to him devaluing and debasing democracy in the political sphere, as well as utilitarianism and deontology in the ethical sphere – for all three come down to an essential equality of human beings (in terms of rights, calculability, and rationality, respectively). What sort of ethics might this strange figure profess, then? Based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the central concept of his thinking, the will to power, combined with the willful propagation and proliferation of this very misunderstanding by Nietzsche's sister and the Nazi party, the myth of Nietzsche as a

¹Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (Toronto: Random House, 2000), “Why I Write Such Good Books,” §1: “The time hasn't come for me yet: some are born posthumously”; and in the “Preface,” 1, to the same work, where Nietzsche makes the now famous proclamation, “Above all, do not mistake me for someone else.” Such mistakes have conceived of a monstrous birth.

fascist philosopher was born. Though even a minimally thoughtful reading of his work would render this myth invalidated, this remained the very problem in the way of clearing up the misconception surrounding Nietzsche's thought and his name. For beyond the deplorable editing work that the Nazi philosophers did to transform Nietzsche's message, the very association of his name to fascist parties and figures dissuaded many from touching his works. Thankfully there were a few thinkers early on who fought to expose this myth for what it was, and to let Nietzsche's thought speak for itself.² Much work has since been done as well, and continues to be argued in the pages of Nietzsche scholarship. But the question remains a contested one: what exactly is Nietzsche's ethics?

In his *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche studies the historical lineage of our moral values, in order to uncover their origin. In doing this, he discovers that, like all things human, they are rooted in our nature, our manner of life.³ Nietzsche then diagnoses “modern morality” (essentially Judeo-Christian values) as an illness, as life-denying, and proposes to create a different ethics, based upon a revaluation or transvaluation of all values (See GM III §26-27).⁴ Such a transformation of our values would be a radically new ethics; but the book that he was to write elucidating this ethics of the future was never written, due to his sudden descent into madness. Nietzsche

²Cf., for example, Georges Bataille, “Nietzsche and the Fascists,” in *Visions of Excess*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); and Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974). Kaufmann did much to make Nietzsche readable in English, both by his translations and the work done in this book, where he works through the myth in order to uncover its falsity as a defamation of the truth.

³Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, “from ‘Homer's Contest,’” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (Toronto: Penguin, 1976), page 32: “When one speaks of *humanity*, the idea is fundamental that this is something which separates and distinguishes man from nature. In reality, however, there is no such separation: “natural” qualities and those called truly “human” are inseparably grown together.”

⁴Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).

provides us with a critique of morality, but does he offer anything to replace it? Looking to his notebooks, posthumously collated and published as *The Will to Power*, in conjunction with scattered hints and traces throughout his corpus, it is possible to garner an understanding of what such an ethics of transvaluation might be. By combining elements from these sources with an understanding of Nietzsche's metaphysics and ontology (which is inseparable from his ethics, as shall be seen), I aim to dispel the misperception that Nietzsche's ethics espouses conflict with others, egoism, and promotes violent spectacles of dominant power displays. Rather, it shall be shown that the conflict and domination is not expressed externally, upon others, but rather inwardly, in relation to oneself. Nietzsche's ethics explicates a way of living by means of creative valuation, a life of affirmation and self-overcoming, aimed at development and improvement, as well as increase, of one's life and character. An *ethos*, then, in the Greek sense, aimed ever towards the future, in line with human life, as well as life more generally.

The thought of Nietzsche could rightly be considered a *Lebensphilosophie*, in that its content and concerns can always be traced genealogically back to the fundament of life. Life is, for Nietzsche, a vital force of expression, an *élan vital*, which works itself through all things. It is inextricably bound up with the will to power, which is an interminable intensification of life, whose expression is the increase of power, of force, of affective potential. Daniel W. Conway describes the will to power as "the irrepressible surge of life [which] legitimates the continual obsolescence of formerly vital forms and the continual creation of new forms,"(538) which connects it with another concept intertwined with life in Nietzsche's thought, that being "self-overcoming." Self-overcoming is the movement of the obsolescence of what was and the continual creation of what will be, to which Conway refers. It is inherent in the futurity of life, as the rolling wave which consumes what was in bringing forth what is to come, the cascading triumph of life of which Percy Shelley wrote. Nietzsche refers to self-overcoming as "the law of life the law of the *necessary* "self-overcoming" in the essence of life" (GM III §27). Self-overcoming is essential and necessary for life because life is will to power, it

is this seething force which seeks expression as perpetual intensification and increase. And the "forms" to which Conway refers? These "forms" are the forms of life (in the Wittgensteinian sense) which manifestly express the will to power, the arrangements of the fundamental differential forces or affects which underwrite what we consider "reality." What the will to power wills in self-overcoming is a new valuation, produced by a new hierarchy of forces, affects, or drives – this manifests itself as a different form of life, a different way of living and acting, and thus a different way of affirmatively relating oneself to life.

The real, according to Nietzsche, is an illusion, an error. For reality as perceived by the senses or through consciousness is a by-product of forces and drives, and their affective interpretation. This means that every fact, insofar as it is always already interpreted (not thematically by consciousness, but "unconsciously" by the forces and drives that make us up, that we "really" are), is not separate from value.⁵ Everything appears as though "colored" or filtered by our moral evaluations which shape our world by means of our form of life.⁶ Our morals and values are thus "symptoms and sign languages" (WP §258) which can be semiotically translated back to the arrangement or conflictual relationship of struggle between our passions and fundamental affective forces. And this is precisely what allows Nietzsche to diagnose the metaphysical illness ailing humanity, the *Weltschmerz* which has plagued us since at least the late nineteenth century – it is our system of values, our form of life, and thus the arrangement of our passions and drives, what we desire and affirm and what we prohibit and repress, which is producing our mass

⁵Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1968), §260: "we first *make* a thing painful by investing it with an evaluation. The extent of moral evaluations: they play a part in almost every sense impression. Our world is *colored* by them."

⁶Cf. WP §256: "I understand by "morality" a system of evaluation that partially coincides with the conditions of a creature's life."

depression. Nietzsche links this to the historical effects of the ubiquity of Christianity and its life-denying desire for the “otherworldly.”⁷

Valuation, then, is a creative process – it prescribes and precludes the possibilities and the relations open to our lives. Everything that is possible is framed by a certain valuation which determines or delimits our reactions and our responses to these phenomena. As Nietzsche puts it, “there are no moral phenomena, there is only a moral interpretation of these phenomena” (WP §258).⁸ And the problem of our “modern morality” is that it creates a set of values, an ordering of our drives, which denigrates and denies the possibilities of life; it negates the will to power in its possibility for expansive expression, enforcing its diminishment in the name of meekness and equality. In such a degradation of life Nietzsche diagnoses the source of modern nihilism, as the “secret pathway to nothingness,” the propensity to extinction which preordains the death of the future (GM II §11). In other words, our systems of morality (for, as mentioned above, utilitarianism and deontology, for example, also function by means of treating all humans as essentially equal) are, for Nietzsche, unethical, in that they lead to the denial of life and its intensifying expressions.

Equality is impossibility in a world as Nietzsche understands it – a world composed of the effects of struggles between differences. The only ones who promote equality are those who seek to benefit from it – the weak, the weary, and those who fear struggle and suffering (who fear life). But to impose what is good for the lowest common denominator upon all people, based on a valuation which effects all life? This Nietzsche sees as a failing on our part – a lapsing into death in the most ignoble and ignominious manner. Our systems of morality, then, are holding us back from our potential, denigrating us by means of “equality” which denies us sovereign and singular creativity as a living individual through a movement towards stasis and unity at

⁷This claim abounds in Nietzsche’s works. For perhaps the most explicit expression in relation to morality, see GM.

⁸Cf. BGE §108.

the expense of difference, distance, and struggle (promoting death at the expense of life, in other words).⁹ Luckily for us, morality is not a categorical determination of reason; because it is a historical product of our lives, based upon our valuations, there remains the possibility of transforming our lives by transforming our values. But how would we do this? This is the proposal of Nietzsche’s ethics of the future – his future ethics, which is also an ethics for the future of humankind.

In order to overcome this empty form of life prescribed for us by our modern moral values, Nietzsche demands the exigency of a transvaluation of all values, a self-overcoming befitting a transformative ethics aimed at the affirmation of life.¹⁰ Such a move would entail the creation of a never before seen form of life, a new transfiguration of our selves by means of a re-configuration of our fundamental forces, a reinterpretation of our becoming away from the ascetic ideal of *the Genealogy* and towards that future being, the *Übermensch*.¹¹ Of course, the *Übermensch* is another raucously misunderstood aspect of Nietzsche’s thought. Far from the “blond beast” that the Nazis attempted to portray it (and consequently themselves) as, the *Über-*

⁹Cf. WP §285; and Paul J. M. van Tangeren, “Nietzsche and Ethics,” trans. Thomas Hart, in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, 395.

¹⁰A pair of important notes concerning the transvaluation – first, the word itself. While most translators utilize the term ‘revaluation’ in translating ‘*Umwertung*,’ I believe that this translation does not adequately capture the radical change that this move entails. On top of this, the ‘*um-*’ can mean not only ‘re-’ as in ‘repetition,’ but also ‘to get around’ or ‘in another way.’ Thus I see ‘transvaluation’ as better capturing the spirit of the sign.

This leads to the second point, concerning the misunderstanding of the transvaluation, part of which may arise for readers if it is translated as ‘revaluation.’ The transvaluation is not simply another inversion of the morality that was inverted by the slave-revolt in morality. It is not a return to the master morality of *the Genealogy*. As I am aiming to show in this paper, Nietzsche’s ethics is future-oriented, and desires what can only be new, creative growth, and not simply a return. For perhaps the most surprising case of such a misunderstanding, see Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 111-112.

¹¹Cf. Nietzsche, GM III §8; and Friedrich Nietzsche, Z:1, “Zarathustra’s Prologue”, §4, and “On the Way of the Creator.”

mensch has nothing to do with racial superiority.¹² Granted, all the talk of domination and mastery in relation to passages concerning this figure are fair prey for misinterpretation. But when read carefully it becomes clear that the object of this domination and mastery by the *Übermensch* is not another, but rather themselves. The *Übermensch* is the figure who has undertaken the transvaluation of values, wrenched themselves and their fundamental drives free from morality in order to overcome the sickness of humanity enthralled by life-denying values. They are the figures who have overcome themselves, what they were becoming (dying, entropic humanity), and transformed themselves through making themselves virtuous by assigning themselves values that are in accordance with life, and allow for the active expression of affective growth, of the will to power. And such a making virtuous is domination, domination of oneself, as Nietzsche expresses.¹³ Valuations disclose for us different “ways of being, modes of existence,” by means of rearranging our drives and fundamental life-forces, our affective states and the responses or actions they produce, based upon possibilities for becoming, for acting, that allow for the greatest growth.¹⁴ By creating values which are in line with life, with increase and intensification, we are dominating ourselves, controlling our affects, our passions, our drives, as well as their expression, by means of mastering them, and thus of mastering ourselves.¹⁵ This has another important determination for our understanding of the *Übermensch* as well. For if they are to be understood as the beings who are becoming more than was previously “humanly” possible by the bounds of the defini-

¹²Aiding this misinterpretation is the use of the phrase “blond beast” in GM I §11 and II §17. But here Nietzsche is not referring to the *Übermensch*, nor to any future people, but rather to the master class of the past, the historical “beasts of prey.” Again we see the effects of misinterpreting the transvaluation for understanding Nietzsche’s ethics.

¹³See WP §304.

¹⁴Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 1; also, cf. page 68, where Deleuze writes that “Becoming-active is affirming and affirmative.”

¹⁵Cf. WP §915, where Nietzsche refers to this training and mastery of the will by means of testing valuations to determine the most life affirming as “a gymnastics of the will.”

tion of the human as the morally fettered form of life, and by means of a transformation of their lives by means of transvaluation, then they needn’t be Hegelian World-Historical individuals; in fact, with enough determination, will-power, force of life, enough struggle and suffering, might not any person become an *Übermensch*?

The *Übermensch* is the figure for the being of futurity – their being is a becoming, and they become by means of overcoming themselves, dominating their willing and developing their existence as a creative will to life.¹⁶ Keith Ansell-Pearson rightly notes that the transvaluation which is undertaken based upon the “ideal” of the *Übermensch* is “a process of complicating our evolutionary conditions of existence. In one sense we are becoming ‘more’ human; in another sense we are becoming ‘more than’ human” (239). Because our lives are informed or en-formed, framed and shaped, by means of our values, our ethical form of life is determinate of our natural evolutionary process. By continuing on the devolutionary and ultimately nihilistic path set by “modern morality” we tend towards “the last man,” and eventually extinction.¹⁷ But by taking upon ourselves the transvaluation of all values, we may perhaps redirect the path of our evolutionary life, towards a greater becoming, becoming greater, becoming *Übermenschen*. And there is nothing standing in the way of any person attempting such a feat. True, it may be a more difficult undertaking for some rather than others, but that is just a fact of nature, for each of us is different and there is no equality. But, at the same time, it is not as though the *Übermensch* is an ideal of perfection, an ethical telos that we strive to attain. No person is “farther away” than any other, for there is no “end” to this ethics. As long as they are engaged in self-overcoming, breaking away from “modern morality” in a creative attempt

¹⁶As Nietzsche notes in GM II §12, “the will of life appears active and form-giving.” It is active in that it allows for greater activity in expressing one’s will to power, and it does this by means of configuring the hierarchy of our drives by means of life affirming valuations.

¹⁷On Nietzsche’s conception of the last man, as opposed to the *Übermensch*, see Z: I “Zarathustra’s Prologue,” §5. Cf. his conception of mediocrity which accompanies the future figure of the last man and their will to equality and non-differentiation in BGE §262.

at bettering themselves by means of dominating their will through assigning values for themselves and their lives, then each person is on the way to becoming an *Übermensch*. And *Übermenschlichkeit* is not a static form of being; rather, it is *this very process of becoming*, by means of affirming life and expressing one's will to power through the effects of transvaluation. Nietzsche's ethics of the future is thus a non-teleological ethics, for the increase of power and intensification of life are potentially limitless.

And so we return to the future. For it is the future that has been guiding this thought all along. Being, in accordance with life, is always transcending and overcoming itself – it is as becoming. “To impose upon becoming the character of being,” Nietzsche writes in a famous passage, “that is the supreme will to power” (WP §617).¹⁸ Our metaphysical notions (or fictions, errors even, Nietzsche would say) such as ‘being’ too must be overcome in the overcoming of our all too human foibles – we must come to think how all of being is but a becoming, an expression of life and the will to power. Here too there is a directedness towards the future, what is to come, but again divorced from teleology. In overcoming or translating our thinking beyond Metaphysics, Nietzsche defines our essence as a sort of non-essence, by means of an elision of definition. He writes that “man is the as yet undetermined animal” (BGE §62).¹⁹ This means that what distinguishes us from the other living creatures is not some essential element or quality, but rather the lack of such a feature. What differentiates us as living beings is that we exist as what Heidegger calls temporality – we do not exist in a present, but are a future that is thrown forth from out of what the past renders possible. We are the future animal, ever becoming what we will have been. But this essentially ecstatic existence, ever outside of any being-present, is not directed at any telos, any logical end or goal prescribed through its becoming. Be-

¹⁸Cf. Deleuze, *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, “Preface to the English Translation,” xi: “becoming has being and only becoming has being.”

¹⁹Cf. GM III §13, where Nietzsche describes the human as “the eternally future one who no longer finds any rest from his own pressing energy, so that his future digs inexorably like a spur into the flesh of every present.”

coming is not subject to a final being; being is nothing else than becoming. As Nietzsche expresses it in a passage from his notebooks, “humanity has no goal, just as little as the dinosaurs had one; but it has an *evolution*: that is, its end is *no more important* than any point on its path.”²⁰ The becoming itself is what matters – becoming for its own sake, becoming divorced from being and from ends. Because life exists as perpetual becoming, is manifest as self-overcoming and the expression of intensification signified by the will to power, life can only be seen as a telos that is ateleological; its end being infinitely deferred, or else attained to only by means of ever transgressing what it was, overcoming itself as end, and projecting itself further into the future.²¹ Thus this ethics is in line with the character of our existence, of our life – it is aimed ever at a future which is yet to come, just as we are ever striving to become more, become better, than we are now. In this sense we might tentatively suggest that Nietzsche's ethics of the future could be considered a sort of character ethics (in the sense of the Greek *ethos*).²²

Much has been said of this ethics at the level of life and affects, but in concluding it might be wondered how this will manifest at the semiotic level of human life and actions. I believe that assuming the transvaluation as the ethical guide to one's life will express itself as a constant goad to bettering oneself, much like taking up Aristotelian ethics. Certainly this is no simple task, and

²⁰Cited in Gregory Moore, “Nietzsche and Evolutionary Theory,” in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, 525.

²¹It is for this reason that Daniel W. Conway fails to acknowledge the radical break from teleology in Nietzsche's ethics. While Conway recognizes the attempt at such a break, he believes that Nietzsche falls back into teleology in positing life as the telos of the will to power and his ethics. See Conway, “Life and Self Overcoming,” 539, as well as 542-6.

²²I might suggest here the parallels between Nietzsche's ethics as espoused herein and the virtue ethics of Aristotle. Both are, broadly speaking, a naturalistic ethics of character, focused on virtue, and operating by means of perpetual struggle to become better, the major difference of course being Aristotle's rationalism and teleology. In proposing such a comparison, I am reading these thinkers in direct confrontation and opposition to the interpretation proposed by Alasdair MacIntyre. Cf. his book, *After Virtue*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), Chapter 9, “Nietzsche or Aristotle?”

will involve constant struggle and perhaps even suffering on occasion, but all for the aim of an expanded experience and feeling of life – a more valuable life. This also means that sedentary idleness and complacency in one's life will no longer be tolerated. While others cannot command or dominantly compel us to act so as to overcome or better ourselves, the requirement remains, shall we say, biologically imperative. For it is up to each individual to do all they can to better themselves by taking this ethics upon their own lives – and every sense of overcoming or growth could thus be seen as a miniature victory, insofar as it is an expression of the will to power and thus of life. And if they choose not to do so, to remain within the moral framework of our modern day perhaps, then this too is their choice and their responsibility – but they shall only continue down the path towards disappearance, slowly fading away as the people who have chosen the path of life, of self-overcoming, struggle to become more than they now are. It is important to note that Nietzsche's ethics, again, is not one of cruelty towards others, domination and enslavement; rather, it is focused on the self, on self-betterment and development by means of overcoming. It is an ethics, not a politics, and it is a mimesis of life in that it is principally a perpetual struggle not with others (as in a Hobbesian Nature), but rather against oneself, what or who one presently is. Our nature, the summative expression of our existence, not to mention the Good, remains indeterminate, ever futural. Aligning ourselves with life, aiming to become better by self-overcoming, projecting ourselves into the future – might we thus consider ourselves good? Would such a life of becoming through transforming and translating our affective formations not be, according to Nietzsche, "the good life" (taking into account its remaining beyond traditional moral valuations of good and evil)? This would have to be the assumption, given that the Good is not a teleological end, but is expressed through the movement of becoming itself.

Of course, only the future will tell. All we can do, in light of the future's silence in the present, is to act so as to meet it – to actualize ourselves into the future, by taking up the ethical imperative to become, irrespective of being and what we might now be taken to be. We must each of us, singularly, change

our lives, so as to become our future – to become the one that we are, as inscribed transvaluatively by the affective ordering of life, of a life of future-oriented self-overcoming.

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