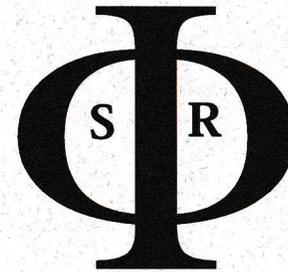


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## Nietzsche's Social Account of Responsibility

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I have two aims in this paper. The first is to add to a growing case against reading the sovereign individual, discussed by Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, as Nietzsche's ethical ideal. I suggest that the conception of responsibility active in the sovereign individual passage is directly at odds with what, as a second aim, I argue Nietzsche's positive account of responsibility to be. Thinking that the sovereign individual, a sort of distant and composed individual who stands apart, represents Nietzsche's ideal fails to appreciate what we can call the social aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy. Nietzsche's positive account of responsibility is a conception that sees as central and crucial our place in a community of interpreting and self-interpreting others who figure in the processes by which we, as Nietzsche puts it, become what we are.

Nietzsche discusses the sovereign individual at only one point in his entire body of work, *On the Genealogy of Morality* II 2:

If we place ourselves at the end of this tremendous process, where the tree at last brings forth fruit, where society and the morality of custom at last reveal *what* they have simply been the means to: then we discover that the ripest fruit is the *sovereign individual*, like only to himself, liberated again from morality of custom, autonomous and supramoral (for 'autonomous' and 'moral' are mutually exclusive), in short, the man who has his own independent, protracted will and the *right to make promises*.... (1967, p. 59)

Lawrence Hatab (1995, p. 37) has raised two important considerations that should lead us to believe that the sovereign individual represents Nietzsche's anti-ideal. First, the sovereign individual's free will resonates more with the ideal Nietzsche is attempting to replace rather than with his own. Nietzsche calls the sovereign individual the "lord of the free will," but Nietzsche rejects the very notion of free will as nonsensical throughout his writings, most notably in *Beyond Good and Evil* 21, and aligns the desire for free will with the view of ourselves offered by slave morality, namely persons as causes, doers, egos.

Second, Nietzsche (GM II 2) describes the sovereign individual as having a "power over oneself and fate," that "has sunk into his lowest

depth and has become instinct, the dominant instinct.” ‘Power over fate’ is not a recognizable goal of Nietzsche’s. Instead, one of his central ideas, *amor fati*, love of fate, calls for the opposite. *Amor fati* calls us no longer to lash out against the world, to see our fate as cornering, determining, or limiting us. Power over fate is a goal only for the subject of slave morality, the internalized doer who sees the world as something to be overpowered.

Christa Davis Acampora (2006b) adds to these considerations the thought that much of the force of the sovereign individual, for those who see it as Nietzsche’s ideal, follows from a questionable translation. The defining feature of the sovereign individual is his right to make promises, but Acampora is correct to point out that the German is better translated as an individual who is able, who has the capacity to promise. The modal in question is ‘*dürfen*,’ which does not carry the legalistic weight of the English ‘right,’ and is usually rendered as may, can, able. Acampora writes of the mistranslation that it “has encouraged those who rely on the translation to think that Nietzsche sees promise-making as an entitlement that one must earn or which one is granted, and which presumably stands in contrast with something to which one might be inherently obliged” (2006b, p. 148). Rendering the passage along Acampora’s lines (as the newest translations do), makes better sense of the contrast that Nietzsche draws between promising and forgetting: it makes little sense to think of a ‘right’ to forget. Finally, thinking in terms of capacities or abilities, rather than rights, fits much better Nietzsche’s project as a whole in the *Genealogy*, and in the passage in question: how, over time, through breeding, and compulsion, we have become the people we are, with the capacities we have. Thus the passage can be read as asking what has happened such that members of a community have come to give and accept promises, a question about the preconditions of the practice of promise-making (necessarily a practice where most people also keep their promises most of the time), rather than what it would mean for a single individual to have some special right to promising.

Acampora also points to the near absence of ‘promising’ as a topic of concern for Nietzsche anywhere but in the sovereign individual section. It is hard to suppose that the defining feature of Nietzsche’s ideal subject is mentioned by him at length only once. Forgetting, in fact, is a far more prominent theme, and is always contrasted with the *ressentiment* of the slave, someone who holds a grudge against the world, who can’t forget. “One cannot get rid of anything, one cannot get over anything, one cannot repel anything... memory becomes a festering wound” (Nietzsche, 1967, p. 230).

Finally, the sovereign individual lays claim to “the proud knowledge

of the extraordinary privilege of *responsibility*, the consciousness of this rare freedom..." (Nietzsche, 1998, p. 37). In what remains of this paper, I want to add to the case against understanding the sovereign individual as Nietzsche's ideal by arguing for what I see as Nietzsche's positive account of responsibility, an account clearly at odds with what we hear about the sovereign individual. First, I'll set out the ways in which the pro-sovereign individual readings lead us astray.

Nietzsche's concern with slave morality is chiefly with the process of internalization wherein human beings come to understand themselves as an inside, a self that stands apart from the world, a doer separate from its deeds. He writes, for instance, of the subject in GM I 13 that "there is no such substratum; there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is simply fabricated into the doing—the doing is everything" (1998, p. 25). The pro-sovereign individual reading and its attempt to trace real causes of action shares with the tradition Nietzsche criticizes the unattractive urge to see us as discrete unities, doers who interrupt a world with our will. Now, 'unity' of personality is a recognizable Kantian goal. To be a person is to will and so act according to principles. Willing gathers together the phenomenal movements of an object in space and makes them the actions of a unified self. Increasingly in Nietzsche scholarship, we see attributed to Nietzsche a sort of naturalized Kantianism where unity remains as a goal but it is a *naturalized* unity, a unity of the drives of a certain sort of organism. Ken Gemes (2009, p. 36) sees Nietzsche as offering an account of free will, part of what he labels Nietzsche's "revisionary naturalistic metaphysics of the soul" in which we act freely insofar as our actions follow from our settled character. In suggesting that Nietzsche countenanced the possibility of a free will, Gemes points to the sovereign individual as Nietzsche's ideal, and describes his achievements in Kantian terms. Since the sovereign individual is described as a lord of a free will, "the implicit message to his audience is that you are not sufficiently whole to have the right to make promises; you have no free will, but you are merely tossed about willy-nilly by a jumble of competing drives, and, hence, you cannot stand surety for what you promise" (2009, p. 37).

Peter Poellner takes the sovereign individual to be Nietzsche's ideal and so describes his ethical project in Kantian terms. He suggests that Nietzsche's concern is how we might become "a 'unique' human being, rather than merely an instance of a certain type of conscious organism" (2009, p. 152). He attributes to Nietzsche interest in answering "a *transcendental* question: the constitutive conditions of full-fledged, autonomous rather than heteronomous selfhood" (2009, p. 152). He writes that Nietzsche is "interested, like Kant, not just in minimal agency, but in autonomous or free agency" and then ref-

erences the sovereign individual as an example (2009, p. 152).

Criticisms such as these push Nietzsche towards Kant, making the Nietzschean actor, like the Kantian, someone who derives his identity from whatever it is that escapes inclination, emotion, and the determination of a physical world of causes. Yet this is precisely the picture of slave morality that Nietzsche objects to! Nietzsche objects to the need in Kant to insist that to be subjects is to be causes, and to be free subjects is to be a special sort of cause. Consider, instead, how Nietzsche describes his heroes:

Goethe... A spirit thus *emancipated* stands in the midst of the universe with a joyful and trusting fatalism, in the *faith* that only what is separate and individual may be rejected, that in the totality everything is redeemed and affirmed—*he no longer denies*. (1990, pp. 112-113)

Goethe achieves freedom by letting go of the desire to be something other than part of the world, to be pure and unmoved; he comes to trust the world and his place in it. It is in the end a freedom that delivers us over to fate, but it is *our* fate, and we trust it rather than, as the sovereign individual is described, claim power over it.

Likewise, when Nietzsche talks about artists as free, the freedom they enjoy is one that delivers them over to their fate. He writes that “their feeling of freedom, finesse and authority, of creation, formation, and control only reaches its apex when they have stopped doing anything ‘voluntarily’ and instead do everything necessarily, – in short, they know that inside themselves necessity and ‘freedom of the will’ have become one” (2002, p. 108). Nietzsche struggles to find the language for his conception of the subject. He describes his heroes as just as multiple as whole, and calls the subject a multiplicity, both ways of getting away from the picture of a self-contained doer, a first cause (2002, p. 106; 2003, p. 46). Instead, he envisions a subject who allows the unity of his personality to follow from the multiple sites where he engages the world, borrowing unity, and so himself, from the world rather than protecting himself from it. Nietzsche’s positive account of responsibility can help us to make sense of what he envisions for the subject.

Responsibility enters this picture through an aspect of Nietzsche’s thought that pro-sovereign individual reading covers over, namely the social elements necessary to Nietzsche’s positive account of the subject. For Nietzsche, our responsibility isn’t for this or that action, but for being the creature we are; and this not because we have chosen ourselves, but, since the world is innocent, we are joyful for being at all, and for being

the people we have in fact become. He writes in a notebook, for example, of “that self-knowledge which is humility – for we are not our own work – but equally is gratitude – for we have ‘turned out well’” (2003, p. 82). To bring this out, consider first Nietzsche’s description of the traditional conception of responsibility. He describes the desire for a free will as “...the longing to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for your actions yourself and to relieve God, world, ancestors, chance, and society of the burden.” He continues: “it is almost always a symptom of what is lacking in a thinker when he senses some compulsion, need, having-to-follow, pressure, unfreedom in every ‘causal connection’ and ‘psychological necessity’” (2002, p. 21). To conceive of responsibility as attaching to a subject that chooses, that is free to choose because separate from the world, is to see the world as a site of ‘compulsion,’ ‘need,’ ‘pressure,’ in Nietzsche’s language guilty. When Nietzsche writes positively of responsibility, he writes in terms of giving back to the world, trusting the world, and so accepting responsibility not out of a debt but out of gratitude. He writes that a higher responsibility would be a matter of “how *far* someone could stretch his responsibility” (2002, p. 106); and of Goethe he writes that: “nothing could discourage him and he took as much as possible upon himself, above himself, within himself. What he aspired to was totality...” (1990, p. 112). The subtle difference pointed to by Nietzsche is between taking away from the world and giving back; bearing a load and stretching into; taking possession of an action and taking as oneself an action. To think that the absence of a free will makes us prisoners of a determined world relies on a view of the world as guilty and hostile, but when we think of all of the events of our lives as events that had to happen, that made us who we are, and we are grateful for it, we affirm our selves as we affirm the world.

Importantly, we need others here. For Nietzsche, it is thanks to others not just that we are the people we are, but that we are persons at all. Nietzsche’s subject is a contest of forces, and it is in common with others that forces are played out, interpreted, given the meaning that they can assume for people. Nietzsche’s central image here is the Greek *agon*, a public place of contest and struggle out of which meaning and value could arise and figure in self-creation. As Acampora writes,

...agonized spaces gather the context out of which distinctive performances emerge. Understood in this light agonized spaces quite literally *activate* an ongoing process of individualization. In this way, the *agon* potentially *cultivates subjects*, supplying

them with integrity and unity where no such traits might exist otherwise. (2006a, p. 328)

It is thanks to the contest between and interpretation of forces that occurs in the *agon* that subjects qua achievements are possible, and so that we *are* at all is owing in part to others.

Robert Pippin argues that our actions are not our effects, but our expressions. Pippin (2010, p. 75) suggests that when we read GM I 13 we see Nietzsche as suggesting not that there is no subject, but that the subject is always and only *expressed* as its worldly actions, and so we need avoid the notion of a 'doer' only insofar as we attempt to separate it from its doings. Pippin suggests that Nietzsche chastises the traditional view of action only for demanding "of strength that it *not* express itself as strength" (Nietzsche, 1998, p. 25). Importantly, Pippin writes that, since we *are* our actions, and our actions are always and necessarily interpreted by others, we are what we are because of the interpretation of others. "I haven't *performed the action*... if nothing I do is so understood by others as *that act*" (Pippin, 2010, p. 79). Nietzsche sees the best of us as able to see ourselves as a complex unity derived from the multiple sites where we act, where we express ourselves in a world. And we do not and cannot do this alone. Responsibility is towards the way in which the meaning of our actions and so ourselves are up for grabs, contested, products of exchanges rather than effects of an ego, and so reliant upon others. We are responsible not for ourselves but to the spaces that make us. Acampora writes of Nietzsche's approval of the early roots of ostracism among the Greeks, when those ostracized were those so strong as to end competition, to silence the *agon* and so the production of meaning. Nietzsche's word for this is *Schein*, which though usually translated as the 'appearance' that contrasts Kant's thing-in-itself, means for Nietzsche the appearing of the world, its seemingness, the ways in which the world *is* not, but comes into being through the ways it appears, seems, to us. When my life bumps up against yours, I am not responsible for my actions because I could and should have done otherwise; instead, what I am is caught up with what you are. I don't owe you anything, but I am responsible for a self that includes you, for we are both what we are because we are both *made* from the whole, and so to affirm my self is always also to affirm yours.

When Nietzsche discusses his ideal, Dionysus, he describes not an individual who stands apart and who affirms the world from a distance. Instead, what is described for us is a being who is open to the world that makes him, and so makes him responsible: "...newer than before, broken open, blown on, and sounded out by a thawing wind, perhaps less certain,

more gentle, fragile, and broken, but full of hopes that do not have names yet, full of new wills and currents, full of new indignations and counter-currents..." (2002, p. 175). Responsibility is this fragility, this self that allows itself to be broken into because the world is not an invader but a friend. Not to see one's self as responsible is not *irresponsibility*, it is nihilism, a failure of wanting the world, a failure to believe the world is worth something and that we are none the worse for being part of it. This is why Zarathustra wants to know not what we are free from but what we are free for (Nietzsche, 2005, p. 55). We don't rescue the freedom of a will from a fallen world. We express our freedom in creating, the way a look expresses longing or care, and we are responsible for the world we make, for what, in the end, our freedom is for.

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