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**Nietzsche on Morality, Drives, and Human Greatness**

**1. A Formula for human greatness**

Especially in his later works Nietzsche makes a point of idealizing a kind of attitude towards oneself. The attitude in question is sometimes wanting or willing, sometimes loving, sometimes affirming or saying ‘Yes’. Nietzsche’s formula for human greatness in *Ecce Homo* is, familiarly enough, *‘amor fati*:that you do not want anything to be different, not forwards, not backwards, not for all eternity. Not just to tolerate necessity, still less to conceal it ... but to *love* it ... ‘(EH*,* ‘Why I am so clever’, 10/KSA 6: 297). And in *Beyond Good and Evil* he describes ‘the ideal of the most high-spirited, vital, world-affirming individual, who has learned not just to accept and go along with what was and is, but who wants it again and again *just as it was and is* through all eternity’ (BGE,56/KSA 5: 75). This alludes to the affirmation of eternal return, an attitude you might imagine yourself having if you were so ‘well disposed to yourself and to life’ that when faced with ‘the question in each and every thing, “Do you want this again and innumerable times again?”‘ you would want nothing more fervently (GS,341/KSA 3: 570). The possibility of glimpsing this ideal is granted to someone positioned ‘beyond good and evil, and no longer, like Schopenhauer and the Buddha, under the spell and delusion of morality’ (BGE,56/KSA 5: 74). So in Nietzsche’s eyes it is a non-moral or supra-moral ideal. Elsewhere Nietzsche makes clear the incompatibility between holding the values of morality and being able to affirm the eternal recurrence of one’s life: ‘To *endure* the idea of recurrence one needs: freedom from morality’.[[1]](#endnote-1)

When he presents his test of ‘How well disposed you would have to become to yourself and to life’, by means of the thought of eternal return (entertained in a brief moment of isolation and vulnerability), Nietzsche mentions only two extreme reactions: either gnashing of teeth, cursing, and being crushed, or tremendous elation and longing. However, it is not clear that the well- or ill-disposedness in question must be simply a matter of either/or; it may be that what is tested is the degree of your well-disposedness to *yourself* and to *your life.[[2]](#endnote-2)* Read in this way, the ideal will be that of attaining such well-disposedness to the highest degree possible. Notice also that this ideal is not put in the form of an imperative or injunction. Nietzsche does not here say how one ought to live. The force of the passage is not ‘Live in such a way that you take this attitude to yourself’. Rather, Nietzsche proceeds by questions and conditionals: if you were confronted with the thought of eternal recurrence, how would you feel? If you felt a tremendous elation, and if you adopted the practice of asking about each and every thing ‘Do I want this again and again?’, and if you could manage to answer ‘Yes’ every time, what degree of well-disposedness to yourself and life would that confirm in you? There is of course an implied assertion: it would show that you were well-disposed to yourself to the highest degree possible. But Nietzsche does not here enjoin us to live in some way, nor does he even say that this is how all of us or any of us should live, or ought to live, or ought to regard our life. The text allows us, I think, to jettison the idea of imperatives here, and see Nietzsche’s ideal as differing in this respect from morality, or at least morality as Nietzsche tends to portray it. Here, I suggest, he is trying to describe what it would be to be this ideal type of individual. Loose parallels might be to ask: how great a specimen of physical prowess would you have to become to succeed in winning the London Marathon ten times in a row? How great a composer would you have to become to sustain consistent style, expressiveness, and narrative through writing a cycle of four substantial operas? In these cases I do not enjoin you to do anything but, by way of a question and a conditional, I make an implicit evaluative claim to the effect that you would be excellent in one respect if you could do those things. I simply say what a certain kind of greatness would consist in.

On the other hand, what is an ideal? Can there be an ideal that has no normative implications? If some state is an ideal one to be in, that implies an *evaluative* claim: the state is a *good* state to be in; it is also a *better* state to be in than other relevant states (such as being sufficiently well-disposed to oneself only to affirm selected parts of one’s life, or being so ill-disposed as to negate it all, or being indifferent about most parts of it). An ideal state must also be, I take it, the *best* state to be in relative to such a range of competitor states. It could perhaps be argued that Nietzsche’s ideal must have some kind of normative force, if one thought along the following lines: if a state is describable as good, better, or the best to be in, it follows that someone would have reason to be in such a state, or reason to want to be in such a state. And if this entailment were thought to hold in general, then, if a state were the best to be in, someone would indeed have more reason to be in it, or want to be in it, than any other relevant state, and Nietzsche’s ideal would be at least implicitly normative. This is not the place to debate whether that general entailment from evaluative to normative status holds, nor is it easy to see how we would show whether Nietzsche conceives value in such a way that the entailment holds. If it does not hold, then Nietzsche’s ideal of being so well-disposed to oneself and to life that one could affirm the eternal return of each and every thing can be the best state for someone to be in, without that someone having any reason to be in it or want to be in it. If the entailment does hold, then someone would have reason to be in or want to be in such a well-disposed state. But we should also think about the extension of the ‘someone’. One of the objections Nietzsche frequently throws at morality is its assumption that *all* human agents ought to do, to feel, to be such-and-such or have some reason to do, feel, or be such-and-such, and one of the relatively uncontentious points in the interpretation of Nietzsche is that he wants to eschew making any specific prescriptions that are binding on all agents.[[3]](#endnote-3) Part of the explanation for this is his view that there is no one condition that is good for all individuals. Another is that in his view only a restricted number of individuals are capable of greatness. Must a good state be good for me if I can attain it? Can a state be good for me only if I can attain it? The ground is somewhat tricky, but here is one intelligible position: it would be good for someone to attain the state of total self-affirmation, if, but only if, they are capable of total self-affirmation. If this is accepted, then given Nietzsche’s view that only a few are capable of attaining the ideal, any implicit normativity, any reason to be, or want to be, totally self-affirming, would apply at most to a few human individuals.[[4]](#endnote-4)

However, note that on this reading it is attaining or sustaining the state of affirmation that is excellent, not what is affirmed. Nietzsche does not speak of assessing or judging the amount of good that a life contains. Rather his question seems to be: given the amount of suffering, lack, boredom, and triviality in a life, how well-disposed can you be towards it? Elsewhere he talks of ‘Saying Yes to life in its strangest and hardest problems’.[[5]](#endnote-5) So his stance would appear to be: life has not fulfilled all my desires, it is not perfect, I cannot change that, but can I still love it? That is the greatest test: to want, love, or say yes to what is strange and hard, what is painful, harmful, or perhaps just tedious or meaningless (‘even this spider and this moonlight between the trees’ in GS,341/KSA 3: 570, ‘the small human being’ in Z*,* ‘The Convalescent’, 2/KSA 4: 274)—to affirm what goes against one’s will or eludes its scope. The notion of wanting even what goes against one’s will may sound troubling, but elsewhere I have suggested that affirming the whole of one’s unalterable life makes sense if one operates with a distinction between first­ and second-order willing: ‘Numerous events in any life will be undergone, remembered, or anticipated with a negative first-order attitude; but that is compatible with a second-order attitude of acceptance, affirmation, or positive evaluation towards one’s having had these negative experiences. If in some course of events one is, say, humiliated, one’s experience is as such unwelcome, painful, and so on: ... Nietzsche poses [the] question: would you be well enough disposed to want your life again, where that (second-order) wanting would embrace among its objects the particular hateful and excruciating humiliation from which you suffered?’[[6]](#endnote-6) So the most excellent human being would not be someone who found everything in his or her life perfect, or even good or desirable, but someone who could affirm his or her life, yawning imperfections and all, without flinching. It also sounds as if the harder and stranger the life, the greater the excellence manifested in affirming it.

**2. The highest human being: internal conditions**

Nietzsche often expresses an ideal of greatness in a different way, in terms of the state of the internal constitution of a human being’s drives and instincts. Here is a passage from Nietzsche’s notebooks of 1884 (in my translation):

The human being, in contrast with the animal, has bred to greatness in himself a plenitude of *opposing* drives and impulses: by way of this synthesis he is master of the earth. Moralities are the expression of locally restricted *orders of rank* in this multiple world of drives: so that the human being does not perish from their *contradictions.* Thus one drive as master, its opposing drive weakened, refined, as impulse that yields the *stimulus* for the activity of the chief drive. The highest human being would have the greatest multiplicity of drives, and also in the relatively greatest strength that can still be endured. Indeed: where the plant human being shows itself as strong, one finds instincts driving powerfully *against* one another (e.g. Shakespeare), but bound together (KSA11: 289).

There seems to be an implication in this passage that ‘drive’ (*Trieb*)and ‘instinct’ (*lnstinkt*)are more or less equivalent. I shall, at any rate, accept this as a working assumption.[[7]](#endnote-7) But we need some conception of what a drive is for Nietzsche. A great diversity of things are called drives by Nietzsche from time to time. What unites them, by way of a minimal characterization, is that they are relatively[[8]](#endnote-8) enduring dispositions to behave in certain ways, which are not within the full rational or conscious control of the agent. Paul Katsafanas[[9]](#endnote-9) has recently given a more detailed set of conditions that Nietzschean drives satisfy. He argues that a drive is a disposition that manifests itself by informing an agent’s perception of objects, generating an evaluative orientation towards them, and thereby bringing it about that the agent’s action, conscious reflection, and thought takes place in the service of a goal of which the agent is ignorant. Katsafanas draws a parallel with Schopenhauer’s account of sexual desire. Here the human individual consciously desires and pursues the individual beloved for his or her personal attractiveness and in the hope of a unique satisfaction for him- or herself with that individual. But all this conscious motivation obscures from the individual the genuine goal of sexual activity, which is the most favourable reproduction of the species. I am sympathetic overall to Katsafanas’ account of Nietzschean drives, but would raise a question about the last part of it: that a drive provides an agent with a structuring goal of which he or she is ignorant. Need this be the case? Take another plausible kind of drive for Nietzsche: a drive whose goal is artistic self-expression. Must it be the case that, in order for me to have this drive, I remain ignorant of its goal? Is it not probable that I will be able to figure out, by examination of my behaviour, that this goal permeates many of my actions? Nor does it seem necessary to think that, once I recognize this about myself (and perhaps start consciously pursuing an artistic career because I recognize my drive), the *drive* to artistic self-expression must cease to operate in me. It might indeed be that such a drive structured my behaviour without my knowledge, but it does not seem constitutive of something’s being a drive that I be ignorant in the way described. It does seem constitutive, by contrast, that I cannot fully *control* the drive to artistic self-expression by conscious thought or rational decision. That is to say, I cannot decide not to have this disposition, or choose not to have it structure my perceptions and evaluations. A drive is a disposition of the agent that the agent cannot switch on or off at will. If someone has a sex drive, then they are disposed to episodes of sexual desire and sexualized perception, not because they want to be or have decided to be so disposed, or because they have grounds or reasons to be. Hence I would prefer to say that a drive is a relatively enduring disposition of which the agent may be ignorant, but which, even when the agent has some awareness of it, operates in a manner outside the agent’s full rational or conscious control, and which disposes the agent to evaluate things in ways that give rise to certain kinds of behaviour.

Much can be extrapolated from the notebook passage quoted above.[[10]](#endnote-10) Thus one factor concerning a drive is its own degree of strength or weakness. A drive that is comparatively strong will presumably have a resilient tendency to persist, structure experiences, and give rise to motivational states in many different contexts over time. A sex drive, for instance, will be strong if it makes its agent persistently seek out objects of attraction and frequently gives rise to relevant occurrent desires, and it will be weak if it rarely does so. Another obvious way in which drives may be weaker or stronger is in relation to one another. An individual may find his or her desires or perceptions on many occasions shaped by one drive at the expense of another, which *can* motivate the individual but fails to do so when the dominant drive is activated. For instance, a sex drive may be present in someone, but be consistently weaker in its expressions than a drive to self-denial that is also present (if we may posit such a drive)—or the opposite may be the case. Considering individual drives on the axis weak–strong, Nietzsche regards the presence of strong drives as characteristic of the greatest or healthiest type of human individual.

Another valuable feature in Nietzsche’s picture of the highest human individual is the multiplicity, fullness (*Fül!e*)or (as I translated it) plenitude of his or her drives. The more numerous the drives that can be sustained in one individual, the greater that individual will be. This helps to rule out some examples that it would be rather ridiculous to consider paradigms of human greatness. For instance, someone who has a strong, even domineering drive towards collecting stamps,[[11]](#endnote-11) together with a few more mundane drives, say, to sleep and to eat, is an over­simplified individual who does not approach Nietzschean greatness, however fervent and dominant his chief drive may become. And even someone whose *only* strong drive was to philosophize or to compose music would not satisfy this model of plenitude.

In addition, Nietzsche requires that this internal multiplicity of strong drives must be unified, united: they must in some way make up a single whole. In stating the philosopher’s ideal in *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche writes: ‘Only this should be called greatness: the ability to be just as multiple as whole, just as wide as full’ (BGE,212/KSA 5: 147). We may also mention here his later idealization of Goethe: ‘What he wanted was *totality,* he fought against the separation of reason, sensibility, feeling, will … he disciplined himself to wholeness’ (TI*,* ‘Skirmishes’, 49/KSA 6: 151). We might describe the requirement here as one of organic unity.[[12]](#endnote-12) So we have the following as aspects of the ‘internal’ ideal of greatness: strength of individual drives, multiplicity of the range of drives, and wholeness or organic unity within that multiplicity. But this unity (as yet still in some respects an obscure notion) must satisfy a further condition: it must be a unity between elements that *conflict.* We might perhaps call it a Heraclitean unity (bearing in mind such fragments as ‘in differing, it agrees with itself-a back-turning harmony [or connection, *harmoniē*]and ‘justice is strife, and ... all things come about in accordance with strife’[[13]](#endnote-13)) . One way to describe it is in terms of the strength of the system of drives as a whole. The elements of the system tend in different directions and threaten to overpower one another, or to destroy organic unity. But when the whole system is strong, rather than falling apart, the drives function together towards ends that are those of the individual as such.[[14]](#endnote-14) In *Beyond Good and Evil* 200, Nietzsche gives this characterization of great individuals who can occur in ages of ‘disintegration’:

... a human being will have the legacy of multiple lineages in his body, which means conflicting (and often not merely conflicting) drives and value standards that fight with each other and rarely leave each other alone ... and if genuine proficiency and finesse in waging war with himself (which is to say: the ability to control and outwit himself) are inherited and cultivated along with his most powerful and irreconcilable drives, then what emerges are those amazing, incomprehensible, and unthinkable ones, those human riddles destined for victory and seduction; Alcibiades and Caesar are the most exquisite expressions of this type (BGE,200/KSA 5: 120–1).

Note (returning to our previous passage) that human beings in Nietzsche’s picture have ‘bred’ the plenitude of drives into themselves. This alerts us that the relations that obtain between what Nietzsche calls drives or instincts are not necessarily immutable givens of human nature, even of an individual’s nature, but are responsive to modification by cultural means. I want to argue further that the same applies to the presence of the drives and instincts themselves: according to Nietzsche’s use of ‘instinct’ and ‘drive’, such things need not be built unchangeably into human beings—neither generically into humans qua humans, nor into the constitution of any human being considered individually. How an individual’s drives operate over time, and even what drives an individual continues to have, is open to change. But take a weaker point first: at the very least the relative strengths and weaknesses of drives are alterable over time—Nietzsche thinks of them as constantly ebbing and flowing. In a particularly rich passage in *Daybreak* he presents drives as continually waxing and waning in response to ordinary experiences:

... our daily experiences throw some prey in the way of now this, now that drive, and the drive seizes it eagerly ... Every moment of our lives sees some of the polyp-arms of our being grow and others of them wither, all according to the nutriment which the moment does or does not bear with it ... [T]he drive will in its thirst as it were taste every condition into which the human being may enter, and as a rule will discover nothing for itself there and will have to wait and go on thirsting: in a little while it will grow faint, and after a couple of months of non-satisfaction it will wither away like a plant without rain (D, 119/KSA 3: 111–12).

This raises the possibility that a drive, if not nourished, may simply disappear. ‘Withering away’ need not, I suppose, strictly be interpreted as connoting ceasing to exist or operate, and Paul Katsafanas has suggested[[15]](#endnote-15) that here Nietzsche may mean instead that the drive loses its power and ceases to influence us for some time, not that we lose the drive entirely. In his recent paper Katsafanas[[16]](#endnote-16) states that ‘drives cannot be eliminated’. I agree that a drive is such that it cannot be eliminated at will by the agent it manifests itself in. By wilfully abstaining from sexual activity, I do not *eo ipso* rid myself of my sex drive. Also it is the case that a drive is not eliminated by its being discharged, however often, in occurrent motivational states. By engaging in sexual activity, I do not cease to be disposed to sexual activity either. But the passage just quoted seems clearly to allow that some drives, at least, may disappear from the agent through lack of ‘nourishment’ by their environment. Some plants that wither for lack of rain obviously do die rather than just ‘growing faint’, and I am not persuaded of any reason why Nietzsche would not accept the transfer of this part of his simile to drives.

Conversely, for Nietzsche, drives can come into existence, or at any rate something that was at some time not a drive in some individual can come to be a drive for that individual. In *The Gay Science* he says that, through education, a way of thinking can ‘*become* habit, drive and passion’ and rule over an individual (GS, 21/KSA 3: 392). Elsewhere Nietzsche talks of a wide variety of things having ‘become instinct’ for people of certain types: ‘Knowledge of the privilege of freedom’ or ‘consciousness of freedom’ (GMII: 2/KSA 5: 294); ‘an incapacity for resistance’ (A, 29/KSA 6: 199–200); ‘refinement, boldness, foresight, measuredness’ (KSA13: 314); ‘noble coolness and clarity’ *(*KSA13: 582) and even—most importantly for my overall concerns in this paper—‘morality’ itself (KSA8: 434). Hence the inclusion of ‘relatively’ in my characterization of a drive: a drive is a *relatively enduring* disposition of which the agent may be ignorant, but which, even when the agent has some awareness of it, operates in a manner outside of the agent’s rational or conscious control, and which disposes the agent to evaluate things in certain ways and to behave in certain ways.

The range of Nietzschean drives is also surprising. In *Daybreak* 109 there is a ‘drive to restfulness’; and in the same place ‘fear of disgrace and other evil consequences’ and ‘love’ are both called drives. In *Daybreak* 119 we learn of idiosyncratic drives to ‘tenderness or humorousness or adventurousness or to our desire for music and mountains’ and also that everyone will have more striking examples of their own. This suggests that some drives, at least, are not common to all human beings. And if a drive can in principle wither away, it becomes unsafe to assume of any drive that it must be present in all human beings at all times or that it must always be present in some individual if it ever is. There may be extremely common drives, such as the drive to sexual satisfaction, or to self­preservation. Some such drives may be not just common but universal to all human beings. Some may even be innate. But even if, for whatever reason, a number of such apparently generic drives are in fact found in all human beings—and Nietzsche indeed talks of ‘all the basic drives of human beings’ (BGE,6/KSA 5: 20)—they need not have an equally prominent explanatory role in all humans or even be immune to disappearance in all human beings. The examples Nietzsche gives also make it impossible to circumscribe what counts as a drive by saying, for example, that all drives are biological or physiological in any sense that would exclude their being acquired by learning or cultural conditioning. And despite our likely expectations for the word ‘instinct’, the evidence does not suggest that what Nietzsche calls *lnstinkte* are different from drives in this respect.

So greatness in human beings, like health or strength, is not an all-or-nothing affair, either at one time, or across times. It looks now to be a matter of degree across all of its parameters: individual drives can be weaker or stronger, there can be more or fewer of them, they can conflict more or less, and be better or worse bound together. And time and circumstance can shift the drives in either direction along these different dimensions, even to the point of creating new drives and destroying old ones. The highest human being, then, will be such in virtue of *attaining* a state in which he or she has a multiplicity of conflicting but unified, relatively enduring, strong dispositions, which dispositions structure his or her perceptions and give rise to motivational states, without being under his or her full rational control.

So far our description of internal conditions specifies only that the drives be individually strong, as multiple as possible, in conflict, and bound into a unity, thus characterizing a type of person as the ‘greatest human being’. Nothing is said concerning *what* the drives composing that type of human being are drives towards. If we read it this way, this statement of internal conditions will be both necessary and sufficient for greatness. Yet it is not beyond dispute that Nietzsche intends it in that way. It might be that greatness is to be measured more conventionally in terms of achievement, for which there are some implicit ‘external’ criteria of value: on that reading one would be great only if one writes great operas, founds great empires or republics, invents great cures for illnesses, and so on. But Nietzsche can still hold that the internal conditions are necessary for any kind of greatness, and that they, in a sense, specify the essence of greatness, the one common factor that is to be found in all cases of great achievement, of whatever kind. He might also hold that no one who satisfied the internal conditions could fail to achieve *something* great, so that even if greatness must be partially constituted by achievements, the internal conditions are sufficient for there to be great achievements, and in that sense still sufficient for greatness. But we have already become very speculative here. It is unclear what ‘external’ criteria of great achievement Nietzsche would accept. I shall continue to concentrate on the internal conditions, which are the common factor in all greatness, even if not wholly constitutive of it.

**3. Greatness and self-affirmation**

We have seen that when looking for a ‘formula of greatness’ Nietzsche thinks on the one hand of an ideal evaluative attitude towards oneself: rather than being someone who has a great or good life, one is great because one is, to a high degree, positively disposed towards oneself, seemingly whatever one’s life has contained. On the other hand he says that human greatness has as its condition certain internal properties and relations of drives and instincts that pertain whether one knows it or not. How do the attitude of self-affirmation and the internal condition relate to one another? A discussion of similar issues by John Richardson suggests one possible answer. His answer is framed in terms of the *Übermensch* or ‘overman’, a notion I am avoiding in this paper, but here I simply want to replicate Richardson’s point in terms of the notion ‘greatest human being’ without, for now, presupposing anything about how those two notions relate. Richardson is opposing the view (expressed by Bernd Magnus) ‘that the *Übermensch* is not an ideal type, but stands for a certain attitude toward life (and especially toward the thought of its eternal return)—an attitude that implies no specifiable character traits’. In opposition to this Richardson states ‘I agree that the overman has this attitude, but I argue that he can have it only because of a certain structuring of his drives—so that Nietzsche does have in mind a type of person’.[[17]](#endnote-17) On this view, one’s being a certain type of human being, a type characterized by states of the drives, explains one’s ability to be well disposed to oneself to a great degree. So human beings internally constituted in the right way will be the ones capable of the ideal attitude of self-affirmation. Or: one’s being able to pass the test for holding the attitude of maximum self-affirmation is explained by one’s having a constitution with a strong, full, conflicting but unified set of dispositions of the kind Nietzsche calls drives and instincts. I am sympathetic to this thought, but do not think it tells the whole story.

**4. Unity, agency and chance**

One large and (I think) troubling question in the interpretation of Nietzsche is this: what, for Nietzsche, brings about or constitutes the *unity* among drives that is requisite for greatness in a human being? We have the idea that drives or instincts are ‘bound together’ *(gebändigt),* and that there is ‘synthesis’ of them within the single human being. Is this a harnessing together of functions that requires no conscious agency because it is literally organic? In other words, does a human being whose drives are unified to any degree have the same *kind* of unity as a healthy octopus or oak tree whose unity consists in their functioning sufficiently well to persist as organisms? Is the human case simply one of greater multiplicity and greater internal tension, but still the same *kind* of functional unity? Nietzsche’s phrase ‘the plant human being’ *(die Pflanze Mensch)* carries this connotation. However, the passage on Goethe perhaps points elsewhere. Goethe’s wholeness is said to be something he wanted or willed (*wollte)* and something he did or made: ‘he disciplined himself’. That does not sound like the kind of thing non-human organisms could do. According to this passage, Goethe brought elements of himself into new relations with one another. He brought about, by will, a synthesis within himself. What that consists in seems pretty unclear, but it would at least appear to be something one does, as an agent, some kind of action. The rest of the passage on Goethe is compatible with this: he ‘said Yes to everything related to him’, he ‘conceived of a strong, highly educated human being …’ —presumably willing to turn himself into such a being— ‘... who could dare to allow himself the entire expanse and wealth of naturalness, who is strong enough for this freedom’.

‘Saying Yes’, ‘conceiving’, and ‘allowing oneself’ are agency words, and the whole exercise is even said to be one of ‘freedom’. So we have to face a question about these states of wholeness, totality, or unity among conflicting elements that Nietzsche tends to associate with being a great or a higher human being: are they ever, or to any extent, brought about by self-awareness, intention, and action (details still to be specified), or are they formations of drives and instincts that come about independently of any agency, in the manner of ‘the rare cases of powerfulness in soul and body, the strokes of luck among humans’ he mentions in the *Genealogy* (GMIII: 14/KSA 5: 367)? Or do they somehow occur in both ways? It must be said that many passages favour the view that detaches consciousness and agency from any role in affecting the state of the drives. The rich section 119 of *Daybreak* discussed above is a prime example. Nietzsche’s leading point there is that no one can fully know the totality of drives that constitute his being, and that ‘their number and strength, their ebb and flood, their play and counterplay among one another, and above all the laws of their *nutriment* [*Ernährung*]remain wholly unknown to him. This nutriment is therefore a work of chance [*Zufall*]*’.* Recall also the famous line ‘Becoming what you are presupposes that you do not have the slightest idea *what* you are’ *(*EH*,* ‘Why I am so clever’, 9/KSA 6: 293). And a forthright notebook passage says ‘The multiplicity of drives—we must assume a master, but it is not in consciousness, rather consciousness is an organ, like the stomach’ (KSA11: 282). Following this line of interpretation, then supposing we are right to think that Goethe went through a process of ‘becoming what he was’, then all of his self-disciplining, conceiving himself a certain way, willing to be a certain way, saying ‘yes’ to parts of himself, was just redundant as far as the core of that process was concerned. His ‘self-mastery’ occurred outside of his own conscious activity. But then the problem of interpretation is this: why would Nietzsche make so much of all this supposed activity if it really were redundant?

We have here, I suggest, two pictures of wholeness or unity: an ‘agency’ picture and a ‘chance’ picture. Some commentators would favour pushing one or other picture into the background as something Nietzsche did not really mean. (Brian Leiter, for instance, would remove all the agency talk as a mere aberration from what he considers Nietzsche’s genuine position, which is a kind of fatalism.[[18]](#endnote-18)) But we might pause to consider other interpretive approaches to the issue. One possibility is that Nietzsche is in tension and fails to disentangle these two positions with sufficient clarity. It could be argued that no peculiar culpability need attach to that, since to stumble over problems in reconciling agency and consciousness with a naturalistic psychology is likely enough in any theory, and hence only to be expected in an unsystematic, multi-layered exercise of rhetorical provocation and critique such as Nietzsche’s. However, another more generous construal is that states of greatness, specified in terms of the necessary internal conditions of the drives, may be differently realizable: some great human beings may turn out that way by chance, others, because of their different cultural context, may need to attain it by action and conscious hard work.[[19]](#endnote-19) For example, a member of an ancient aristocratic warrior caste may simply *be* a case of well-attuned powerful drives without having to perform any work of ‘unification’ upon himself.[[20]](#endnote-20) We moderns, with our developed inner life, reflectiveness, and learned self-denying tendencies, may well, like Goethe, require some kind of demanding work as agents, some self-disciplining or self-governing, before our drives behave in the right way to satisfy the internal condition for greatness.

A bold interpretation would be that an attitude of self-affirmation might be what *constitutes* the unified functioning of conflicting strong drives in the latter kind of human being. It could be that, in a surprising parallel to Kant’s synthetic unity of apperception, the ‘synthesis’ of my drives is brought about from the top, as it were, by my very attitude of affirmation, my ‘owning’ all the drives as mine; or, to parody Kant, that the ‘I will’ must be able to accompany all the expressions of my drives, since otherwise they would not one and all be *my* drives. Clearly an organism such as a cat has some kind of functional unity of drives, for Nietzsche. But the cat cannot take the second-order attitude of affirming its drives as its own: it cannot accept or reject its drives, cannot be pleased or displeased by their presence or by their particular expressions, cannot try to extirpate or promote some drives rather than others, and so on. No human being has complete knowledge of his drives, and no one is in full rational control of their presence or mode of expression. But these factors are not sufficient to put cat and human exactly on a par with respect to their drives. In the human case there is the possibility of attaining a greater degree of unity in the process of taking attitudes to oneself. Consider once again someone with a strong sexual drive or a strong drive to artistic self-expression. While these drives persist, the agent might be continually striving to *disown* them, having set him- or herself to be abstinent and socially conforming. Might not the human being who willed themselves to Goethean wholeness be someone in whom, by contrast, such conscious striving against drives was absent, and whose will aligned itself with as many of the drives as possible, thereby constituting the drives as more of a unity?

This constitutive proposal will not quite do, however. Nietzsche’s official story about striving against one’s drives is that given in *Daybreak* 109: ‘at bottom it is one drive *which is complaining about another.* There is no ‘will’ that can stand apart from the drives, in the following sense: ‘that one desires to combat the vehemence of a drive ... does not stand within our own power’. We should not, then, posit any separate ‘self’ that has full knowledge of and full control over the drives: that I strive to accept or resist one of my strong drives is not a fact about an ‘I’ that exists independently of my set of drives. My set of drives is one that is capable of forming self-conscious attitudes towards some parts of the set. But Nietzsche will say that the fact that I can take a self-affirmative attitude is really just a fact about my drives: a state of my drives manifests itself in self-consciousness as an attitude I take towards my drives.

Finally, however, I want to argue for a different account of the linkage between self-affirmation and the constitution of the drives, with the causality running the other way round from that suggested by our earlier discussion of Richardson. There, the ability to be self-affirming was explained as a symptom of the internal structure of the drives. I want to suggest that in Nietzsche’s picture our attitudes of self-affirmation or self-negation might in addition *cause* alterations to our drives and their relations to one another in such a way as to move them nearer to a state in which they satisfy the internal conditions for human greatness. The excellence of the affirmative attitude to self might play a role in *making* one’s mutable set of drives become richer or stronger. But can the causation run in the right direction to make this in principle possible for Nietzsche? To see that it can, let us turn to the question of what difference morality makes to the attainment or non-attainment of the kind of internal conditions for greatness we have described.

**5. Morality as symptom and danger**

Nietzsche’s causal stories about morality run in two directions. In many prominent instances the state of the drives causes conscious or self-conscious attitudes. Nietzsche says ‘Moralities are the expression ... of orders of rank among these drives: so that the human being does not perish from their contradiction’. For ‘expression of’ I suggest we might substitute the highly Nietzschean notion ‘symptom of’. A morality is at least a set of values of some kind, and to adhere to such a set of values is to adopt attitudes, which include evaluative beliefs and affects—for instance the belief that stronger human beings ought in general not to harm others, the belief that human beings are essentially free to act in certain ways, the feeling that it is blameworthy and in some cases shocking if someone rejects compassion in favour of self-interest, the feeling of guilt over our tendencies to self-assertion, the outrage felt over an act of cruelty, judgements as to why such outrage is justified, and so on. According to Nietzsche, our feeling these feelings, having these beliefs, and giving these justifications is a symptom of the way certain human drives are or have been ordered. Let me exemplify what I take to be the shape of Nietzsche’s position here by giving an over-simplified sketch based on parts of the discussion in the *Genealogy.* People who Nietzsche calls ‘the weak’ or ‘slaves’ have certain drives that tend towards discharging themselves. They have a drive towards retaliation against those who abuse them, but cannot express this drive directly because they lack the power to do so. Drives are opposed by other drives, so let us posit in them a drive to self-protection or self-preservation that inhibits the drive to retaliation. Still, the drive to retaliation persists in latent form and eventually produces the feeling of gaining power over the more powerful, a feeling attained by re-describing the powerful as ‘evil’ and describing harmlessness as ‘good’. Thus a configuration of drives gives rise to a resolution of the conflict within itself by producing the conscious attitudes we have mentioned above: the beliefs that there is free will, that the strong are free to act weakly, that all deserve equal treatment, that suffering is always to be avoided, and their associated affective responses.

An interesting feature of Nietzsche’s account, however, is that our resulting moral *conception* of what we are—our conception of what about us has positive value and what has negative value—and the attitudes that it leads us to take towards ourselves also *cause* us to become beings with fewer, weaker, less coordinated drives, and with less tolerance of their internal conflict. According to morality’s conception, a human being ought not to express a whole range of desires that are regarded as selfish, unruly, and liable to increase suffering and inequality. Humans who adopt the attitudes characteristic of morality then come to hate or disown parts of themselves: they feel guilt about the very existence of many parts of the psyche and seek to identify themselves with a (supposed) pure good-seeking will that is free of the appetites and instincts and stands in opposition to them. And in Nietzsche’s view the set of beliefs and other evaluative attitudes we consciously hold as adherents of morality, as well as being a symptom of a certain state in which the drives stand, is also a force that shapes and perpetuates the state of our drives. Thus it is that morality—moral attitudes—can be both a symptom and a ‘danger’, a decidedly causal notion when one thinks about it.[[21]](#endnote-21) And Nietzsche could scarcely be more explicit about this duality of causal direction: ‘Precisely here I saw the great *danger to* humanity ... I understood the ever more widely spreading morality of compassion ... as the most uncanny *symptom* of our now uncanny European culture’, he says in the Preface to the *Genealogy* (GMPreface*,* 5/KSA 5: 252, my emphasis). Hence we need a knowledge of ‘morality as consequence, as symptom, as mask, as Tartuffery, as sickness, as misunderstanding; but also morality as cause, as medicine, as inhibitor, as poison’ (GM Preface*,* 6/KSA 5: 253). So for Nietzsche morality is not simply other than, or contrasted with, the supposed greatness that human beings can attain in the constitution of their drives. It inhibits the attainment of that greatness. And the relation between morality and the drives has a certain circular or self-perpetuating structure. People in whom drives are already impoverished, weakened, or reduced in number have these drives ordered and contradictions among them resolved when they adopt moral attitudes; the having of moral attitudes also impoverishes, weakens, reduces their drives, or acts to preserve them in such a state.[[22]](#endnote-22)

As we argued earlier, what drives and instincts there can be is variable between individuals and variable over time within an individual. Drives or instincts are mutable, they ebb and flow, can be newly acquired, and can die out altogether. They respond to their day-to-day environment, thriving if nourished, declining or ceasing altogether if starved. Now take the instincts that Nietzsche polemicizes against in the *Genealogy,* ‘the instincts of compassion, self-denial, self-sacrifice’ (GMPreface, 5/KSA 5: 252). If these instincts are influential on my behaviour, it is not that I describe myself as someone in whom an instinct of self-denial has come to be dominant, weakening and perhaps shutting down drives to creative self-expression, adventurousness, or whatever else. Yet by my conscious activity I may nonetheless be continually providing for this instinct of self-denial an environment that nourishes it at the expense of other drives and instincts: I have acquired the belief that it is always right to put the interests of others first, I sometimes act on it and think I ought to act on it more often, I feel passionately that all human beings are intrinsically equal in value, I feel guilty if I hurt anyone else, I am outraged if someone hurts others and does not feel guilty, I like reading Schopenhauer’s essay *On the Basis of Morals* because I warm to the idea of compassion being the source of moral goodness, and so on. In other words, a major shaping influence on the environment that nourishes my instinct of self-denial and starves other drives is found in my own consciously held attitudes; that is, my morality, my acquired set of moral beliefs, feelings and such. Nietzsche makes also the more subtle point that drives that do not ebb away or die out may have their nature and value modified by being harnessed by already moralized drives. In another passage from *Daybreak* he says that one and the same drive may be ‘attended by either a good or a bad conscience’; for example a drive to avoid retaliation may evolve into a feeling of cowardice or of humility, but ‘In itself it has, *like every drive,* neither this moral character, nor any moral character at all, nor a definite attendant feeling of pleasure or displeasure: it acquires all this, as its second nature, only when it enters into relations with drives already baptised good or evil’ (D, 38/KSA 3: 45).

Nietzsche places great emphasis on his claim that the *origin* of moral attitudes lies in the drives of the weak and powerless, and as a result it is sometimes wondered how these moral attitudes could come to be inculcated in someone who is not similarly weak or powerless. Part of the answer, we can now suggest, lies in our degree of ignorance of our drives and their inter-relations with one another, combined with the power of conscious attitudes to be part of the environment that causes changes to our drives. Without intentionally setting out to weaken one’s drives, reduce their number, or change their order of rank, one may affect one’s drives in such ways through day-to-day behaviour in a certain milieu of evaluative attitudes. So someone who is not in need of resolving their ressentiment, not in a master-slave relation, not a lamb at the mercy of birds of prey, can, by virtue of consciously inhabiting the moral milieu, be caused to become someone whose drives keep being impoverished. The *genesis* of this milieu is to be explained by its suiting the slavish and ressentiment-prone, but the milieu of consciously held attitudes, once stabilized, can in turn have *effects* on diminishing the drives of the average unremarkable modern *Mensch,* the diligent, comfortable scholar, and also of any potentially higher, potentially great ‘strokes of luck’ among humanity who happen to be around. Returning to our earlier question—How does an attitude of self-affirmation relate to human greatness conceived in terms of the strength and unity of drives?—we can say that self-affirmation is not only a *symptom* of internally constituted greatness but a *facilitator* of it.

As we have seen, Nietzsche issues frequent admonitions about the redundancy or non-importance of consciousness. This sits somewhat awkwardly with some aspects of his re-evaluative project. The calling into question of moral values is for Nietzsche a prelude to a revaluation of values, and that—some evidence suggests—is an act of free choice of some kind. But never mind that much, which is contentious. Leave it at this: revaluation incorporates *acts.* ‘Doing’ words are everywhere in Nietzsche’s conception of how new values will, or might, come about: invention, discovery, creation, law-giving, tasks, attempts;[[23]](#endnote-23) affects are not just undergone, they are used, brought to bear on topics, allowed to speak (GMIII: 12/KSA 5: 364–5). But suppose that we are especially impressed by the admonitions about the redundancy of consciousness, and we think in consequence of a Nietzsche whose *one and only* re-evaluative *end* is to enable the development of stronger, more multiple, more synthesized conflicting drives below the level of consciousness,[[24]](#endnote-24) then my point is that even this Nietzsche would nonetheless have good reason to use *as a means* the attempt to detach us from our present conscious self­ evaluations, and good reason to use as a means anything that might enable people to cultivate conscious self-affirmation.

Nietzsche’s persuasive process consists, very roughly,[[25]](#endnote-25) of showing up a variety of psychological origins for our judgements, inducing many ambivalent and self­critical feelings, shocking, embarrassing, and wooing us in any and every way that may help detach us from our confidence in our assumed values, and inviting us into a space where each of us can, if we are the right kind of person to be affected by any of the foregoing, use feelings and reflections as yet unknown to us to explore whether there might not be other, healthier evaluative attitudes for us to adhere to. Nietzsche seeks to activate dispositions to affective response that manage to co-exist in us alongside those fostered by morality: our admiration for heroes and creative geniuses who succeed by being a law unto themselves, our almost imperceptible delight in cruelty, our disgust at having responses that turn out to be slavish, our dismay at our own wish to make others feel guilty, our embarrassment at being overwhelmed by compassion, and our doubts about our squeamishness towards suffering. These reactions, if we have them, intimate that there is more to us than the shape that morality moulds us into: other drives co­ exist with those that morality nourishes, and can be provoked into action. If we do not have any such responses—and nobody can really predict how any individual will feel in all this—then we will not have been given any reason to change our values. Nietzsche’s characteristic mode of persuasion will leave us unmoved. Imagine a reader whose Christian sympathies are provoked or strengthened by reading the *Genealogy.* He or she feels overwhelming compassion and approval for the ‘slaves’, is appalled, purely and simply, by the prospect of the ‘masters’ and their so-called morality and feels guilty at the slightest temptation to admire them, warms to the idea of unrequiteable guilt before God, is grateful for the image of sinners being punished, recognizes but laughs off the implications in Nietzsche’s ironic portrayals of Christians, and so on. Such a person is not persuaded to change, or to want to change his or her values; they see no reason to do so. The harder question is whether *there is a reason* for them to do so. I think it plausible that for Nietzsche, who so often portrays himself as writing to be heard only by the few, there is no reason to change one’s values or to want to change them unless one’s affective responses approximate to something like those others described above. Only if one is the kind of human being whose internal constitution allows one to have the self-challenging and ambivalent kinds of response Nietzsche calls for is one in a position to understand the nature of moral values and their effects on their psyche in a way that motivates one to look for healthier values, values that are liable, in Nietzsche’s view, to take one some step closer to greatness. Chiefly, such individuals might have reason to aspire to an ideal of self-affirmation, to being well-disposed to themselves as a totality. If they did aspire towards that ideal, then instead of having conscious attitudes and goals that are symptoms of, and causes of, weakness, paucity, and disunity in their drives, they might have conscious attitudes and goals that are symptoms of, and a cause of, an increase towards that plenitude of strong, conflicting but synthesized drives that Nietzsche sometimes describes as greatness. The attitude of self-affirmation could be both a result of that greatness and a means towards attaining it.

1. KSA 11: 224 (publ. as WP 1060). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Possibly also to ‘life’ as such in some wider sense that I shall not discuss here. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, GS, 335/KSA 3: 563: ‘Sitting in moral judgment should offend our taste. Let us leave such chatter and such bad taste to … the many, the great majority! We, however, want to *become who we* are—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves!’ [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I am ignoring here the question whether other agents would have reason to promote the greatness of the few capable of it. For an argument that this is Nietzsche’s position, see Hurka 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. TI*,* ‘What I owe to the ancients’, 5/KSA 6: 160. Nietzsche also quotes this passage again in EH*,* ‘The birth of tragedy’, 3/KSA 6: 312. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Janaway 2007: 257–8. Bernard Reginster’s analysis of will to power as Nietzsche’s criterion of value gives it a similar structure: ‘the structure of a *second-order desire*: ..*.* a desire for the overcoming of resistance in the pursuit of some determinate first-order desire’ (2006: 132). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Paul Katsafanas argues that *Trieb* and *lnstinkt* are in general terminological variants for Nietzsche, and that the English ‘instinct’ as currently used is a misleading translation of the latter term (Katsafanas 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The inclusion of ‘relatively’ will be discussed below. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Katsafanas 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Richardson 1996: 48 gives a similar account of the aspects and relations of drives, drawing on many other sources in Nietzsche. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ken Gemes’ example. See Gemes 2009: 57. Gemes argues that such an individual would not be *expressing* the full range of his or her drives, and sowould not count as a unified self, on the assumption that ‘Nietzsche as a naturalist believes that as humans we come with a rich panoply of inherited drives’. I argue below that for Nietzsche such inherited drives could die out in the case of some individuals, in which case there could theoretically be an individual with just one such master­drive. My position is that even were this possible, it would not be a case of greatness because of the lack of fullness in the range of drives that *exist* in the person. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. A term used by Hurka 2007: 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Heraclitus, fragments B51, B80, trans. in Barnes 2001: 50, 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For a good account of how we might conceive the various interactions among drives, see again Richardson 1996: esp. 16–72. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Private communication. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. [Additional note: Katsafanas 2013: 746.] [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Richardson 1996: 67, n. l 04. For the contrasting view of the *Übermensch* as solely ‘standing for an attitude’ see Magnus 1983 and Magnus 1986. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Leiter 2002, esp. ch. 3). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. A suggestion made by Ken Gemes. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Such an individual might, however, score relatively low on the parameters of multiplicity and internal conflict of drives. In this respect, modern complexity is more conducive to greatness for Nietzsche—though simultaneously imprisoning us in a condition that makes greatness harder to attain and harder even to conceive. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. See Katsafanas 2005: 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Since some of our conscious beliefs about ourselves act as dangers, inhibitors, nourishers of our drives, they cannot be epiphenomenal, at least in the sense of not being causes at all. (Incidentally, the prominent passage where Nietzsche apparently announces ‘there are no mental causes!’—’Es *giebt gar keine geistigen Ursachen!’* ( TI*,* ‘The four great errors’, 3/KSA 6: 91)—does not have to be interpreted as saying that no conscious mental states cause anything. In context, Nietzsche’s point is that there is no *Geist,* no subject or I that is the cause of thoughts and actions: he is diagnosing the error of positing ‘the will, the *Geist* and the I’ here.) On the issue of epiphenomenalism in Nietzsche see Katsafanas 2005 and Leiter 2002, esp. 92). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. *‘*Themost basic laws of preservation and growth require ... that everyone should invent his *own* virtues, his *own* categorical imperatives’ *(*A, 11/KSA 6: 177); ‘You haven’t yet discovered yourself or created for yourself an ideal of your very own ... We, however, want to *become who we* are—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves’ (GS,335/KSA 3: 563); *‘The total degeneration of humanity ...* anyone who has ever thought this possibility through to the end knows one more disgust than other men,—and perhaps a new *task* as well!’ (BGE,203/KSA 5: 127–8); ‘A reverse attempt would *in itself be* possible—but who is strong enough for it?—to wed to bad conscience the unnatural inclinations’ (GMII: 24/KSA 5: 335). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Brian Leiter argues that what matters is that Nietzsche ‘shake higher types out of their intuitive commitment to the moral traditions of two millennia!’ (2002: 155), and that ‘a critique of moral values ... requires only that Nietzsche’s writings cause the requisite non-rational and non-conscious responses that lead to a loosening of the conscious allegiance these subjects feel towards morality’ (Leiter 2008). (See also Leiter 2002: 159.) [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. As I have argued at greater length in Janaway 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)