

# Nietzsche's Conceptual Ethics

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## Abstract

If ethical reflection on which concepts to use has an avatar, it must be Nietzsche, who took more seriously than most the question of what concepts one should live by, and regarded many of our inherited concepts as deeply problematic. Moreover, his eschewal of traditional attempts to derive the one right set of concepts from timeless rational foundations renders his conceptual ethics strikingly modern, raising the prospect of a Nietzschean alternative to Wittgensteinian non-foundationalism. Yet Nietzsche appears to engage in two seemingly disparate modes of concept evaluation: one looks to concepts' *effects*, the other to what concepts *express*. I offer an account of the expressive character of concepts which unifies these two modes and accounts for Nietzsche's ostensibly bifurcating interests. His fundamental concern is with the effects concepts are likely to have going forward, and it is precisely this concern that motivates his preoccupation with what concepts express. He evaluates concepts by asking for whom they have a point, working back from a concept via the need it fills to the conditions that engender that need and thereby render the concept pointful. For a concept to be pointful is for it to serve the concerns of its users through its effects. But even when it is not pointful, a concept expresses the presuppositions of its pointfulness, which we can work back to by asking who would have need of such a concept. What emerges is a powerful approach to conceptual ethics that looks beyond the formal virtues and vices of concepts at the presuppositions we buy into by using them.

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## 1. Nietzsche as a Critic of Conceptual Authority

What does Nietzsche have to offer the current turn in philosophy from the description to the evaluation of concepts, from ‘conceptual analysis’ to ‘conceptual ethics’?<sup>1</sup> The question indicates not only a way of contributing to contemporary debates, but also a way of looking at Nietzsche. Arguably, he is the figure in the Western philosophical canon that most vividly embodies a sceptical readiness to question the authority not just of concrete individuals and institutions, but of the very concepts we live by. He advocates a ‘real critique of concepts’ (85:40[27]), expanding the scope of ethical evaluation to encompass, in addition to agents and their actions, the entire conceptual architecture in terms of which those agents’ reasons, desires, aspirations, and intentions are articulated.<sup>2</sup>

While this scepticism towards the authority of concepts is Kantian at root, the Nietzschean variety is all the more powerful for being piecemeal and focused on culturally distinctive constellations of concepts rather than on the authority of our reasoning faculty as a whole. It is this use of philosophy as cultural critique that marks out Nietzsche’s thought as ‘strikingly modern’ (Huddleston 2019, 171), and marks it off from Kant’s Enlightenment universalism. What animates Nietzsche’s inquiry into the authority of concepts is the realisation that a culture’s trajectory, and *a fortiori* the trajectory of an individual life, are shaped by the concepts people recognise as authoritative—what concepts people live by can

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase ‘conceptual ethics’ hails from Burgess and Plunkett (2013a, b), and figures prominently in the collection *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics* (Burgess, Cappelen, and Plunkett 2020), in which Nietzsche receives several nods of acknowledgement from analytic philosophers of language; see Cappelen and Plunkett (2020, 1–4, 15, 9), Cappelen (2020, 133, 9–40), and Scharp (2020, 397).

<sup>2</sup> I follow Richardson (2020) in citing Nietzsche’s *Nachlass* by the last two digits of the year of the notebook in which the note occurs, followed by a colon, followed by the notebook number, followed by the note number in square brackets. Translations are my own, though I have consulted translations where available, and amended them only to bring them closer to the original.

make the difference between flourishing and decadence.

Though Nietzsche is best known for criticising the concepts that make up Christian morality, his reflections on the authority of concepts extend to all sorts of concepts besides those of morality, and go back all the way to his first winter in Basel in 1869.<sup>3</sup> As he himself remarks of his 'real critique of concepts', it involves not merely a genealogy of morality in particular, but is more ambitiously conceived as a 'genetic history of thought' (85:40[27]; see also 76:23[125]; HA I §16, §18); in that passage, he notably calls for the valuations surrounding 'logic' to be revealed and reappraised, for example. But throughout his working life, he consistently invites us to ask *on what grounds* we grant a given concept the authority to shape our thought and conduct. Have the building-blocks of our thought become stumbling-blocks to our self-realization? Are our concepts helping us to live, or are we 'stuck in a cage, imprisoned among all sorts of terrible concepts' (TI 'Improvers' §2)? His sustained exploration of these questions made him not just a pioneer, but one of the most radical proponents of conceptual ethics, whose oeuvre exemplifies a rich variety of ways of thinking about the evaluation of concepts.

What fundamentally distinguishes Nietzsche from his predecessors, and more particularly from 'all Platonic and Leibnizian modes of thinking', is, as he says, that he does not believe in 'eternal concepts' (85:38[14]), and considers himself 'freed from the tyranny of "eternal" concepts' (85:35[6]): he rejects the idea that there is one set of concepts that is timelessly and definitively best. Unlike the philosophers who sought timeless rational foundations in Platonic Forms, the human *telos*, the Mind of God, natural law, or the dictates of universal reason, Nietzsche is thus not a *foundationalist* about concepts.

In some moods, especially in his earlier work in which he appears to indiscriminately

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Nietzsche (69:2[10], 3[36, 86, 94]).

dismiss all concepts as incapable in principle of corresponding to things as they are in themselves, he can sound like a *counterfactual* foundationalist, who accepts that no foundations from which to assess the authority of concepts are in fact available to us, but holds on to the thought that if it *were* possible to vindicate the authority of any concepts, that vindication would *have* to take the form of a derivation from such foundations.<sup>4</sup> This is still a foundationalist thought, and it is a version of this thought that licenses Nietzsche's occasional suggestions that all human concepts are distorting and falsifying, because they invariably fail to correspond to things as they are 'in themselves'.<sup>5</sup> *Pace* Williams (2002, 17), Nietzsche need not be read as holding that we *can* in fact look round the edge of all our concepts at the True World we are applying them to, grasp its nature without drawing on any concepts, and use that as a rational basis on which to assess our concepts. But even in suggesting merely that the set of concepts corresponding to the True World is what, *per impossibile*, we would really like to have, and that our concepts are the less authoritative for falling short of that ideal, the early Nietzsche still clings, if only counterfactually, to a

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<sup>4</sup> See also Queloz and Cueni (2019) for a different application of this idea of counterfactual adherence to a position to Nietzsche's critique of asceticism, and see Williams (2006a, 187) for the notion of 'counterfactual scientism'.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to this Neo-Kantian line of objection to our concepts, Nietzsche also suggests—notably in 'On Truth and Lie'—that all our concepts systematically obfuscate differences: we use the *same* concept for 'countless more or less similar cases which, strictly speaking, are never equal' (TL 256). But this line has its own difficulties. To apply the concept *leaf* to two different things is not to claim that they are *identical* with each other, but only that they are *similar* to each other in certain respects. When we do want to make claims of numerical identity, we achieve this not by applying *the same concept* to the leaf, but by applying the concept *of the same leaf*. Moreover, the fact that most concepts have 'countless more or less similar cases' as their extension need not be taken to compromise our capacity to describe the individual case in full detail. Concepts can be combined to form indefinitely fine-grained descriptions, taking us from 'A leaf again' to 'At location *L* and time *t*, there is a leaf with properties  $P_1$ – $P_n$ .' In fact, Nietzsche's argument presupposes the ability to conceptualise the differences that concepts allegedly obfuscate.

foundationalist conception of conceptual authority.

In his more mature work, by contrast, Nietzsche clearly foregrounds a *non-foundationalist* conception of conceptual authority. He no longer indiscriminately condemns our concepts for characteristics they are bound to have, or for failing to cotton on to the 'True World': 'There is no 'other', no 'true', no essential being', he comes to realise: 'The antithesis of the apparent world and the true world reduces to the antithesis "world" and "nothing" (88:14[184]).<sup>6</sup> Instead, he shifts his focus to discriminating *between* our concepts, redrawing the contrast between more and less authoritative concepts *within* our conceptual apparatus:

Though freed from the tyranny of 'eternal' concepts, I am, on the other hand, far from plunging into the abyss of a sceptical indiscriminateness [*Beliebigkeit*]: I rather ask to regard concepts as experiments [*Versuche*], with the help of which certain types of human beings can be cultivated... (85:35[6])<sup>7</sup>

Although he takes there to be no timeless rational foundations from which to authenticate one set of concepts as definitively best, he still takes there to be *some* standard by which to discriminate between concepts—a *non-foundationalist* standard, which is as historically conditioned as the concepts it is used to assess, and might give us reasons to use certain concepts that are reasons *for us* without necessarily being reasons *for any* rational agent.

At the same time, Nietzsche clearly does not take his non-foundationalist conception of

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<sup>6</sup> See Breazeale (1979), Clark (1990, chs. 3–5), Williams (2002, 16–8), and Anderson (2005). For a reading on which Nietzsche was at no point committed to a falsification thesis and the metaphysical correspondence theory it requires, see Berry (2006).

<sup>7</sup> The entry then abruptly ends with: 'und auf ihre Erhaltbarkeit und Dauer —', which might be taken to suggest that Nietzsche was dissatisfied with this way of articulating what the experiments would be testing *for*. In general, these notebook entries must be taken *cum grano salis*. But they also show us a Nietzsche who is not performing to an audience, and is therefore often less theatrical, more soberly analytical, and more open about his own doubts. Occasionally, as in the passages cited above, they contain particularly felicitous expressions of thoughts that seem true to much else that Nietzsche wrote and published.

conceptual authority to license indiscriminate *acceptance* of the concepts we inherited. This sets him apart from certain Wittgensteinian forms of non-foundationalism—associated, notably, with functionalist holism in anthropology and with communitarianism in social and political philosophy—whose pictures of our concepts as forming a harmonious whole encourage an ‘enthusiasm for the folk-ways’ that has been called ‘the continuation of Hegelian conservatism by other means’ (Williams 2021, 278).<sup>8</sup> Instead, Nietzsche urges us to begin by taking a black look at the welter of concepts history bequeathed us:

Hitherto, one generally trusted one's concepts as if they were a wonderful *dowry* from some sort of wonderland: but they are, after all, the legacy of our most distant and most stupid as well as of our most intelligent ancestors. ... What is needed to begin with [*zunächst*] is absolute scepticism towards all inherited concepts. (85:34[195])

If the ‘abyss of a sceptical indiscriminateness’ is to be avoided, this black look can of course be but a first step towards a more discriminating evaluation of our concepts. What is clear, however, is that Nietzsche can hardly be accused of indiscriminate enthusiasm for the folkways.

## 2. Two Modes of Evaluation

So how does Nietzsche propose to evaluate concepts? What makes this question hard to answer, but all the more fruitful for conceptual ethics, is that his work indicates more than one answer to it. There are at least two very different modes of evaluation that have come out

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<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Winch (1958), Taylor (1985, 1989), and MacIntyre (1978, 1988, 2013). This is not to deny that a Wittgensteinian non-foundationalism might assume a more critical form: Williams (2019) as well as Queloz and Cueni (2020) examine what assumptions would have to be made or jettisoned to give it a more critical direction.

of the secondary literature.<sup>9</sup> Broadly speaking, the first judges a concept by the *consequences* of living by it, while the second judges a concept by what *expresses* itself in it. Accordingly, I shall refer to them as the *consequentialist* and the *expressivist* mode of evaluation.

Both modes of evaluation are in evidence in what Nietzsche described in a letter (to Köselitz, 15 September, 1887) as ‘the strongest part’ of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, namely ‘the “Preface”’: at least the *strong* problem that concerns me finds its most concise expression in it.<sup>10</sup> In the third section of said ‘Preface’, Nietzsche asks:

under what conditions did man invent those value judgments good and evil? *and what value do they themselves have?* Have they inhibited or furthered human flourishing [*Gedeihen*] up until now? Are they a sign of distress, of impoverishment, of the degeneration of life? Or, conversely, do they betray the fullness, the power, the will of life, its courage, its confidence, its future?— (GM ‘Preface’ §3)

If one attempts to extract a general strategy for concept evaluation from this passage, there are two directions in which one can go. Guided by Nietzsche’s question whether the concepts in fact inhibited or furthered human flourishing, one might propose to work *forwards* from a concept to its effects and look, in a consequentialist mode, to the consequences of living by

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<sup>9</sup> These are, as I say, general *modes* of evaluation, each broadly shared across one of two internally diverse clusters of views. For examples of views in the first cluster, see notably Leiter (2015), Richardson (2020), and Reginster (2021); for the second, see especially Huddleston (2015, 2019), who draws on Nehamas (1985, 106–40, 200–36) and Pippin (1991, 83–5), and see also Owen (2018, 74).

<sup>10</sup> Though this did apparently not prevent him from forgetting he had written it a year later. Thanking Meta von Salis in a letter from 22 August, 1888, for sending him her copy of the GM because he did not have one in Sils, Nietzsche writes: ‘The first look inside gave me a surprise: I discovered a long *Preface* to the ‘Genealogy’, the existence of which I had *forgotten*... Basically, I only remembered the title of the three treatises: the rest, i.e. the *content*, had been wiped from my memory. This as a consequence of the extreme mental activity that filled this winter and spring and which had, as it were, formed a *wall* in between.’ See Sommer (2019) for a detailed overview of the work’s genetic context and Nietzsche’s remarks on it.

it for human concept-users. But equally, the passage invites one to work *backwards* from the concept to what lies behind it and betrays itself in it,<sup>11</sup> considering, in an expressivist mode, what the concept is a sign of: does it express the distress, the impoverishment, the degeneration of life, or the fullness, the power, the will of life?

This ambiguity between a consequentialist and an expressivist mode of evaluation is not just a slip on Nietzsche's part. The same ambiguity re-emerges in a similarly programmatic passage three sections later:

[W]e need a *critique* of moral values, *for once the value of these values must itself be called into question*—and for this we need a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances out of which they have grown, under which they have developed and shifted (morality as consequence, as symptom, as mask, as Tartuffery, as sickness, as misunderstanding; but also morality as cause, as medicine, as stimulus, as inhibitor, as poison). (GM 'Preface' §6)

Here, Nietzsche asks what lies upstream of morality: What is it a consequence or a symptom of? What is the mask or 'Tartuffery'—a word for hypocritical or false devotion to an ideal that Nietzsche uses no fewer than fifty times between 1883 and 1887—covering up? What sickness or misunderstanding expresses itself in it? But he also, in the same breath, asks what lies downstream of it: What does it cause? Does it act as a medicine, a stimulus, an inhibitor, a poison?

There is ample textual evidence to underscore the importance of both of these seemingly disparate modes of evaluation in Nietzsche's thought. In the consequentialist mode, he prominently declares in *Beyond Good and Evil*: 'We do not consider the falsity of a judgment as itself an objection to a judgment ... The question is how far the judgment promotes and

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<sup>11</sup> On Huddleston's (2019, 150–55) elaboration of the expressivist mode, one would presumably resist the suggestion that what is expressed in a concept is something that lies *behind* it—on his view, what is expressed is something *enshrined in the content* of the concept itself. I address this difference below.



preserves life' (BGE §4). In the expressivist mode, he asks over and over again in the Third Treatise of the *Genealogy*: 'What do ascetic ideals mean?' As Andrew Huddleston (2019, 160) has argued, the answer Nietzsche eventually gives in the closing paragraph suggests that what he is after is neither a definition nor a diagnosis of the effects of ascetic ideals, but a description of what they *express*: '[a] hatred of the human, and even more of the animal, and more still of the material, [a] horror of the senses, of reason itself, [a] fear of happiness and beauty, [a] longing to get away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, wishing, from longing itself' (GM III §28).

Both modes of evaluation differ from more established ways of evaluating concepts. There is a tradition in philosophy of looking at a concept in isolation and asking whether it displays certain intellectual or theoretical virtues: is it clear, distinct, coherent? Or is it vague, open-textured, or incoherent?<sup>12</sup> Another well-established approach is to look at a concept's referential relation to the world, asking whether the concept refers to anything, whether it suffers from referential indeterminacy, and whether it carves the world at its joints.<sup>13</sup> A third approach is to look at a concept's inferential relations to other concepts, pressing questions such as whether the inferential conditions and consequences of the concept's applicability are determinate, reliable, and consistent, or whether they generate contradictions and paradoxes.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This approach is as Cartesian as it is Carnapian. A concept is open-textured or 'porous', in Waismann's (1945, 123) phrase, if it is not vague as things stand, but vulnerable to *becoming* vague (e.g., the concept *mother* might be rendered vague by radical changes in human reproductive technologies).

<sup>13</sup> This referential dimension is foregrounded in, e.g., Hirsch (1993, 2013), Sider (2011), Cappelen (2013), Sawyer (2020a, b), and the essays in Campbell, O'Rourke, and Slater (2011).

<sup>14</sup> This inferential dimension is foregrounded in, e.g., Brandom (1994, 2000, 2001), Cohen (2016), Greenough (2020), Fraser (2018), Mühlebach (2021, 2022, Forthcoming), Scharp (2013, 2020,

Whether one trains one's attention on isolated concepts, on concept-to-world relations, or on concept-to-concept relations, however, one ignores concepts' relations to *concept-users*: how do concepts tie in with the needs and concerns, the capacities and limitations, and the circumstances and challenges faced by situated individuals and communities? To be authoritative, we might think, a concept has to establish contact with the real concerns that animate our thought and conduct in the first place. But these concerns risk being ignored if we focus solely on concept's inherent properties, or on generic properties of their referential and inferential relations.

That is an omission which neither of the modes of evaluation envisaged by Nietzsche is guilty of. In line with Nietzsche's insistence that one must always ask *who* is living by a concept (BGE §221), both the consequentialist and the expressivist mode of evaluation highlight, albeit in seemingly very different ways, how the use of a certain concept ties in with the life and characteristics of those who use it.

Both modes have their difficulties, however. The consequentialist mode seeks to evaluate concepts by their effects, but the effects that a concept actually has across the different instances of its use are hard to sample in a representative manner and isolate from other factors; even if one limits oneself to the effects it has actually had in the past and does not attempt to predict the effects it will have in the future, these past effects are unsurveyably many in number and almost limitlessly various in kind: a concept's effects cascade in multiple directions, are highly context-sensitive, and change radically as the concept is appropriated and repurposed. The resulting causal record or profile one could reasonably hope to extract from this threatens to be a hotchpotch, too ambiguous or shapeless to

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2021), and Jorem and Löhr (2022). Tristram McPherson and David Plunkett also focus on what they call 'the *unreliable inference danger*' (2020, 283).

support firm evaluative conclusions.<sup>15</sup>

But the expressivist mode is not without its own difficulties. Evaluating a concept according to its expressive character rather than according to its effects requires a firm grasp of what it *means* for a concept to possess an expressive character, and of what it means to *get it right*: what sets off ascriptions of expressive character to a concept from projections of subjective associations onto a blot of ink?

As Huddleston elaborates the expressivist approach, it involves approaching a concept hermeneutically, as we might a text or work of art: we can offer an interpretation of the concept that draws out the ideals, values, and attitudes enshrined in it, and evaluate it on that basis. In Huddleston's guiding example, '[t]he sociological' phenomenon of racial segregation has bad effects; but it also enshrines ideals that are themselves objectionable, regardless of their effects' (2019, 150). In particular, the 'Jim Crow laws ... enshrine a certain offensive idea about racial superiority and inferiority', and 'we can object to this content of them' (2019, 158). Another example he offers is Adorno's critique of Stravinsky's music as 'authoritarian': Adorno did not mean that the music causally *leads to* authoritarianism; rather, it is objectionable on account of being *expressive of* authoritarianism.

Adding an example that is closer to Nietzsche, one might look to Bernard Williams's critique of Richard Wagner's *Ring* cycle. Williams contends that those who locate what is problematic about it in the text *as opposed to* the music, or in the anti-Semitic stereotypes they discern in the depictions of certain characters, too facilely defang the problem by externalising it from the music. What is most attractive in the *Ring* is inextricable from what

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<sup>15</sup> See Nietzsche (GM II §§12–3). Prescott-Couch (2014, 158; 2015) draws on these passages to argue that attempts to evaluate morality based on its functional role in social life are bound to founder on the lack of continuity in these functional roles. I offer a qualified defence of some of those attempts in Queloz (2020a, b; 2021, 127–31; 227–31).

is most alarming in it, because the real problem lies in what the music itself so overpoweringly conveys. The celebratory funeral music at the end of *Götterdämmerung*, in particular, expresses a certain ideal of the *transcendence of politics*—not through what it literally *says* (the funeral music has no words), but through its celebration of Siegfried as a heroic strongman who cut through the knotty politics of gods and giants. In that setting, Williams notes, the music can itself powerfully ‘carry the suggestion that perhaps there could be a world in which a politics of pure heroic action might succeed, uncluttered by Wotan’s ruses or the need to make bargains with giants ... a redemptive, transforming politics which transcended the political’ (2006b, 83). In light of the catastrophic history of this ideal in twentieth-century politics, however, these strains in the *Ring* now ‘pull us towards a sense of the work in which the transcendence of politics tends to suggest not the absence of politics, but a higher, transcendental, politics, of a peculiarly threatening kind’ (2006b, 87).

The fact that this expressivist mode of evaluation naturally fits the criticism of works of art does not mean, as Huddleston also stresses, that the grounds on which the evaluation is based must themselves be *aesthetic* grounds. Nietzsche’s own anti-Wagnerian remark that the music of Bizet is much to be preferred because ‘it does not *sweat*’ (CW §1) would be an example of a critique based on aesthetic grounds; but Adorno and Williams base their critiques on distinctly political grounds. To extend this expressivist mode of evaluation to concepts is thus not necessarily to commit oneself to playing Walter Pater at the museum of concepts. One can export the expressivist mode out of the aesthetic sphere without tying oneself to aestheticism about ethics and politics.

But can this mode of evaluation be extended to concepts in general? After all, not all values take the form of value *concepts*, on Nietzsche’s view. He makes room for a more basic notion of *embodied valuing* that we share with non-human animals: the typically

unconscious valuing we do through our drives and affects.<sup>16</sup> Yet the advent of language, concepts, reasoning, and consciousness makes it possible to develop values also in a different sense: to articulate *value concepts* which explicitly and publicly pick out something *as* valuable and give their users *reasons*—reasons for action as well as reasons by which to *make sense* of that thing *as* valuable by connecting it to other concepts. Different cultures will draw these connections differently depending on what concepts they use: while the young noble Neoptolemus in Sophocles's *Philoctetes* recoiled from lying because it was *dishonourable*, for example, Enlightenment figures such as Rousseau or Kant made sense of the value of honesty in terms of how lying to people robs them of their *autonomy*.

Insofar as Nietzsche's expressivist mode of evaluation is applicable to value concepts, therefore, it is applicable to concepts; but Nietzsche applies it also to concepts that are not obviously value concepts. Besides the aforementioned example of logical concepts, he also approaches the concept *God* in this expressivist manner: surveying the concept's transformation over the course of its history, he asks what such a transformation 'bespeaks' [*wovon redet eine solche Verwandlung?*] (A §17). This suggests that Nietzsche's expressivist mode is not limited to value concepts, but extends to concepts more widely.

There remains a difficulty, however, in identifying what lends a concept its expressive character, because what is expressed in a concept is not best understood in terms of the literal *content* of the concept—the metaphor of 'enshrining' cannot be straightforwardly unpacked in this literal-minded way. What makes concepts into such insidious ideological and oppressive tools is precisely that they can express objectionable ideals *without* making explicit reference to these ideals at the level of their conceptual content. They would not be effective instruments of ideology otherwise. As E. P. Thompson observed: 'If the law is

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<sup>16</sup> See Richardson (2004, 78–80; 2013, 767; 2020, chs. 3 and 4).

evidently partial and unjust, then it will mask nothing, legitimise nothing, contribute nothing to any class's hegemony. The essential precondition for the effectiveness of law, in its function as ideology, is that it shall display an independence from gross manipulation and shall seem to be just' (1975, 263). Conversely, the lofty ideals of liberal democracy might find their most important expression in the dry jargon and technical concepts of bureaucrats and legal clerks, and part of the ingenuity of such arrangements is that this does *not* depend on the ideals figuring in the thinking of the bureaucrats and clerks in question. A concept's content and what is expressed in it can radically come apart. So what lends a concept its expressive character?

One possibility would be to identify the expressive character of a concept with the attitudes that concept-users express through *tokenings* of the concept on particular occasions. This would allow conceptual content and expressive character to come apart: the richly thick (i.e. descriptive-cum-evaluative) aesthetic ideals of a tailor who judges the cut of a suit might only ever find expression in very thin terms ('Just right!');<sup>17</sup> likewise, the moral ideals of a writer might be forcefully—indeed, *more* forcefully—expressed in a soberly descriptive account of how someone pulls a horse out of deep snow.<sup>18</sup> But this analysis would not entail that the concept *right* itself inherently expressed sartorial ideals, or the concept *horse* moral ones. Rather, the ideals 'enshrined in concepts' would then simply be the ideals *of concept-users* as expressed in *individual instances* of concept use. Patterns might conceivably emerge when considering which concepts tended to be used to express what. Yet this would still hardly warrant ascribing expressive character to the concepts themselves.

Huddleston indicates two different ways of spelling out what lends a concept its expressive character. The first, which he labels the 'reductive approach', maintains that a concept

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<sup>17</sup> The example is Wittgenstein's (1966, 5–9).

<sup>18</sup> See Diamond (2018, 225–9).

enshrines  $x$  if one or both of the following conditions are met: a) the concept is borne of  $x$ ; b) it is sustained by its appeal to people who are  $x$ . In Huddleston's Nietzschean example, 'the Christian conception of God enshrines weakness, either because it is a) borne of weakness; b) sustained by its appeal to weak sorts of people; or both' (2019, 164).

The second approach, which Huddleston labels the 'autonomous approach', holds that a concept enshrines  $x$  if the object or referent of the concept *bears out* interpretation as being or exhibiting  $x$ . In his example, 'this conception of God enshrine[s] weakness because a God who lacks the brave, masterful features of pagan divinities ... just *bears out* the interpretation as being a fundamentally weak God, i.e., that is just an apt description of such a God' (2019, 165–6).

Huddleston remains agnostic between the reductive and the autonomous approach, and deems Nietzsche's remarks too coarse-grained to decide between them.<sup>19</sup> But the latter, autonomous sense of 'enshrining' is explanatorily prior to and capable of underpinning the former, on Huddleston's view: if a certain conception of God autonomously enshrined weakness, that would help *explain* its creation by and appeal to weak individuals.

While Huddleston compellingly shows *that* Nietzsche engages in the expressivist mode of evaluation, however, it would be desirable to be able to say more about *how* Nietzsche arrives at his judgements concerning the expressive character of concepts, and what exactly is involved in a concept having such a character. Furthermore, recognising that Nietzsche repeatedly invokes both modes of evaluation in the same breath renders pressing the question of how the two modes *relate*: are they *toto coelo* different and incommensurable? Why does Nietzsche seem to want to combine them? And can they be combined? Can one arrive at a single consequentialist-cum-expressivist bottom line regarding a concept, or are

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<sup>19</sup> See Huddleston (2019, 166).

the two modes more like two styles of painting, where one either depicts textural detail at the expense of capturing light effects, or, like an impressionist, sacrifices texture to light? In the next section, I propose to answer these questions through a unifying interpretation of the two modes of evaluation.

### 3. Unifying the Two Modes

On the account of Nietzsche's conceptual ethics I propose, he evaluates concepts by working *backwards*, first from concepts to the *needs* to which they answer, and thence to the characteristics and conditions of those who have them. There are many passages where Nietzsche emphasises that concepts answer to needs: 'Our *concepts* are inspired by our *need*' (85:2[77]), he writes; 'the *most useful* concepts have remained; however wrong their origin may have been' (85:34[63]). He makes similar remarks about moral concepts: 'These valuations and orders of rank [that we encounter in every morality] are always expressions of the needs of a community and a herd' (GS §116). 'The origin of our valuations: out of our needs' (86:7[2]). 'All virtues arise from pressing needs' (72:19[175]).

But the most suggestive entry-point is a passage from Book Five of *The Gay Science* (written for the 1887 edition of the book), which also appears, in slightly revised form, in the collage of material composed in 1888 for *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (published in 1889):

If I have one advantage over all psychologists, it is a keener vision for that hardest and trickiest [*verfänglichste*] form of *backward inference* with which the most mistakes are made—the backward inference from the work to the maker, from the deed to the doer, from the ideal to the one who *needs it*, from every way of thinking and valuing to the commanding *need* behind it. (NW 'Antipodes'; see also GS §370; 85:2[101]; 86:7[7])

This passage, I suggest, offers us the key to Nietzsche's conceptual ethics more generally: faced with a certain concept, one attempts a *backward inference* from every way of thinking and valuing to the *need* behind it, and thence *to the one who needs it*.



To see how this reading allows us to unify the two modes of evaluation we considered, we need to give a more definite meaning to the idea that 'a way of thinking and valuing' might have a 'need behind it'. I take it to mean that a concept can *answer to* a need insofar as the concept is what the need is a need *for*. We can accept that there are such needs *for* concepts without having to suppose, implausibly, that concepts are the sort of thing one *simply needs*, as human beings simply need water, or sleep. We merely need to distinguish between 'inner' needs and 'instrumental' needs.<sup>20</sup>

Inner needs can be physiological or psychological, thus encompassing emotional or affective needs,<sup>21</sup> but they are needs one has *categorically*, just in virtue of the kind of creature one is, or, on Nietzsche's more dynamic picture, in virtue of the kind of creature one has *become*—one can *acquire* categorical needs, as he makes clear: 'The moral sense is a *taste*, with certain needs and dislikes: the *reasons* for the origin of each need are forgotten; it acts as taste, *not* as reason' (79:42[15]).

Instrumental needs, by contrast, merely involve needing something as a means to the realisation of some ulterior end, and unlike ascriptions of inner needs, ascriptions of instrumental needs make it appropriate to ask what one needs something *for* ('I need a suit.' —'What for?' —'For the wedding'). Instrumental needs are thus hypothetical rather than categorical: one has them *if* one is to realise some further end.

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<sup>20</sup> This is my preferred terminology, which draws on a passing remark of Williams's (2011, 51) contrasting 'inner' with 'technological' needs and combines it with Wiggins's (2002, §6) more carefully worked out contrast between 'categorical' and 'instrumental' needs.

<sup>21</sup> For a reading of Nietzsche which emphasizes 'affective needs', see Reginster (2021, 30). On his reading, however, the relation between such an inner need and a value judgement (and, by extension, the concept enabling the articulation of that value judgement) is functional *as opposed to* expressive. On the present reading, concepts are either expressive of *and* functional in relation to such inner needs, or *merely* expressive of them, but in the sense that, circumstances concurring, they *would be* functional in relation to them.

Given this distinction, Nietzsche's reference to the 'commanding *need* behind' a concept can be read as referring, *in the first instance*, to an instrumental need. Even if one rejects instrumentalising views of most other things, *concepts* are plausibly thought of as being needed, when they are, as a matter of technological rather than psychological or physiological necessity: they are needed merely instrumentally to perform some task, or to meet some prior need which really is an inner, categorical need.

If we take the need that immediately underlies a concept to be an instrumental need, however, this need must itself be understood as a product of the way the *characteristics* of certain concept-users—their inner needs, their drives and affects, their strengths and weaknesses, their abilities and limitations—combine with their *circumstances*—their natural and geographical environment, their material and technological affordances, their social structures and institutions, their position in society—to render that concept, or some broader class of concepts of which it is an instance, *needful*. One does not fully grasp an instrumental need unless one grasps what engenders it. Who would have need of such a concept? What concatenation of inner needs and external circumstances would engender that instrumental need? What, in other words, are the concept's *needfulness conditions*?

This indicates the crucial idea that a given concept is only worth using if certain *presuppositions* are fulfilled: concept-users must have certain inner needs, pursue certain concerns, and their circumstances have to be propitious to meeting these inner needs using this concept. Only then is there a *point* to using the concept, because the concept derives its point from these supporting conditions. The concept of *weight*, for example, is one we instrumentally need for all kinds of ulterior needs, and yet it would be pointless if the laws of gravity were such that objects on earth randomly changed weight all the time.<sup>22</sup> Likewise,

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<sup>22</sup> Wittgenstein (2009, §142) offers a similar example.

the concept of *intention* would be pointless if we took absolutely no interest in each other's reasons for action.<sup>23</sup> And the concept *blasphemous*, as Oscar Wilde made a point of showing through his famous refusal to so much as *enter into* whether a certain story was blasphemous, is pointless if there is no deity there to offend.<sup>24</sup>

Every concept thus comes with certain extraconceptual presuppositions that have to be realised for the concept to be pointful by meeting an instrumental need. These presuppositions concern what users of the concept and the world in which it is deployed are like. But the presuppositions do not have to figure in the *content* of the concept. It is just that living by a certain concept only has a point, i.e. meets a need, against the backdrop of certain facts: the facts engendering an instrumental need for the concept.

While this explicates the pointfulness of a concept in terms of its needfulness—what gives point to a concept is the fact that it meets an instrumental need—needfulness is not the same as pointfulness: the fact that something is needed is notoriously insufficient to bring it into existence, and only once a concept is actually in use can it be pointful. A concept can thus be needful already long before it is introduced, and *a fortiori* long before it can be pointfully used; indeed, its needfulness is likely to loom large in the explanation of why the concept emerged and was retained in the first place. But once the concept is in use, the concept will be *pointful* if and as long as it is instrumentally *needful*. Accordingly, the presuppositions a concept expresses are, in the first instance, its *pointfulness conditions*, but since its pointfulness in turn presupposes its needfulness, it thereby also expresses its needfulness conditions.

Even on this analysis, a concept is not *inherently* needful, nor does it *inherently* fill a need: it only does so if hooked up to the right concept-users in the right circumstances. So how

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<sup>23</sup> See Anscombe (1957, §21).

<sup>24</sup> See Hyde (1973, 107).

can one work back from a concept to its pointfulness conditions?

The key is to see that even when a concept *fails* to fill an instrumental need, because it is *not* hooked up to the right concept-users in the right circumstances, it will nonetheless *express* the conditions that *would* render it pointful. One merely has to ask: who would have need of such a concept? Archaeologists routinely make sense of mysterious relics by reverse-engineering the instrumental needs they would have met in certain kinds of societies. In a similar spirit, a concept can betray something of the physiological, psychological, and evaluative perspective from which it would be most worth having. In this spirit, Nietzsche invites us to ask what, quite apart from their truth or falsity, the claims articulable in terms of a concept ‘tell us about the people who make them’ (BGE §187); ‘I say of every morality: it is a fruit, by which I know the soil from which it grew’ (88:14[76]); ‘[t]he values of a human being betray something of the structure of his soul and where it finds its conditions of life, its true need’ (BGE §268). By using as our hermeneutic lever the assumption that a concept answers to an instrumental need—a principle of charity for conceptual reverse-engineering—we can work our way to a picture of the conditions from which such a concept would derive its point.

Strictly speaking, what a concept expresses in this way is always the entire *set* of conditions that would jointly engender a need for it and imbue it with a point: not only (i) some human concern, but also (ii) the features of concept-users and (iii) the features of their circumstances that only *together* give those concept-users reason to pursue that concern using that kind of concept. But one can—and Nietzsche does—take a concept to *metonymically express* one element of such a set *by* expressing the whole set: a concept tailored to satisfy a desire for revenge in the hands of the weak under circumstances of oppression by the strong, for example, might metonymically be said, simply, to express a desire for revenge; or to be a sign of weakness; or to speak of oppression by the strong.

We can thus understand the *expressive character* of a concept in terms of how the concept expresses certain presuppositions, namely its *pointfulness conditions*—the conditions that *would* render the concept instrumentally needful and thereby give point to its use. This analysis of expressive character also allows us to make sense of Huddleston's example of the Jim Crow laws being expressive of racist attitudes, values, and beliefs regardless of their deleterious effects. If someone ignorant of the relevant history came upon these laws and asked: 'Who would need laws like these?', they would be led to the conclusion that it is *people with racist attitudes, values, and beliefs* who would be *best served* by having such laws, even if the laws were ostensibly free of racist content.

A superficially analogous way of understanding expression in terms of the presuppositions of successful use can be found in non-truth-conditional semantics, where it has been suggested that the *expressive meaning* of a word such as 'Ouch!' or 'cur' can be captured by identifying the conditions for the *felicitous use* of the word ('Ouch!' is felicitously used just in case the speaker experiences pain; 'dog' and 'cur' have the same truth conditions, but 'cur' adds the use condition that the speaker have a negative attitude towards the referent).<sup>25</sup> But the present account of the expressive character of concepts is significantly different in three respects: first, it is not about the meaning of words, but about the causal profile of concepts; second, the expressive relation it highlights between a concept and its presuppositions is a functional rather than a semantic relation (the concept can only serve its point if the presuppositions are realised), and need not be part of what a competent user would have to grasp about the concept in order to count as such (whereas someone who did not understand that using the word 'cur' felicitously presupposed a negative attitude on the speaker's part would fail to grasp the full meaning of the word); and third, Nietzschean

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<sup>25</sup> See Gutzmann (2013) for a survey of varieties of expressive, non-truth-conditional meaning. Another congenial approach is 'success semantics' (Blackburn 2005).

reverse-engineering aims, in the first instance, to intuit what makes the entire practice of living by a certain concept pointful, not what makes individual instances of concept use pointful. However, by grasping what makes a practice of concept use pointful in general, one acquires some sense of when it would be pointful in particular. Consider the cyclists' practice of holding out their right hand before taking a right turn: it is in light of my understanding of what makes the practice pointful in general that I recognise its pointlessness on particular occasions.

To be sure, moving from a concept to its pointfulness conditions requires a genuine backward *inference* that requires delicate interpretation and judgement, and there may not be a uniquely right way to do it. Some concepts plausibly serve several points at once. Certainly, a concept's pointfulness conditions cannot simply be read off the concept algorithmically, as a barcode scanner might read off the number of a product. What is required here is 'historical sense' in the specific sense Nietzsche gives the phrase in a notebook entry expanding on BGE §224: 'the ability quickly to guess ... the connection between ... valuations and the conditions of life, the relationship between the authority of values and the authority of effective forces (the presumed relationship usually even more than the actual one): the ability to *reproduce* all this in oneself is what constitutes historical sense' (85:35[2]). As on Huddleston's account, discerning a concept's expressive character remains a matter of interpretation.

But that interpretation is nonetheless constrained by what genuinely makes sense and what remains obstinately unintelligible, what holds up and what falls flat. If future generations subsisting exclusively on a diet of sustainably produced vitamin pills were to dig up one of our can openers, they might reasonably hypothesise—even if they no longer store food in cans—that this object expresses an instrumental need to open cans, and thereby expresses conditions of life that render it instrumentally needful to store food in cans; the

rival hypothesis that it expresses a need to make music will simply not hold up in light of the object's intrinsic features and the kinds of sounds humans tend to regard as musical. More generally, there are claims about what a concept expresses that no truthful interpretation of the concept's place in human lives will bear out. It thus stands with claims concerning the expressive character of concepts much as it stands with hermeneutic claims in other disciplines, from evolutionary biology through archaeology to history. There is *room* for interpretation in making sense of the past, but there are also claims about the past that no truthful interpretation of the historical record will bear out (as the French Prime Minister Clemenceau said to a representative of the Weimar Republic wondering how future historians would make sense of the outbreak of WWI: 'This I don't know. But I know for certain that they will not say Belgium invaded Germany').<sup>26</sup>

On this account, then, we can make sense of the many expressivist-sounding passages in Nietzsche; but we can do so in a way that integrates them with the consequentialist-sounding passages, because this account of what is involved in a concept's expressing something is itself ultimately articulated in terms of the causal *effects* of the concept. It merely adds the idea that to consider a concept's expressive character is to think in *modal* terms about those effects, looking not just at what effects a concept *actually* has, but at the effects it *would* have under different circumstances. To say that a concept expresses a desire for revenge, or a longing for another world, or a yearning for life to be ultimately fair, is to say that the concept is recognisably tailored to serving those concerns, which is to say that, in the right hands and under propitious circumstances, it would tend to have effects conducive to the satisfaction of those concerns.

The conceptually basic case, on this account, is the case in which the concerns *expressed*

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<sup>26</sup> The story is recounted in Arendt (1968, 239).

by a concept and the concerns *served* by it align: we aim to imaginatively envision the conditions under which a concept would in fact serve the concerns it expresses; 'serve', we might say with Ryle, is a 'verb of success', which signifies not just that some performance has been gone through, but that something has been brought off: it designates a *successful* performance.<sup>27</sup> But this analysis also entails that the two relations can come apart: a concept might *express* a concern *without serving* it, because the conditions necessary to serving it are not given; and it might *serve* a concern *without expressing* it, because its effects only fortuitously but unsystematically and unreliably satisfy that concern through some fragile alignment of circumstances.

This modal interpretation of expressive character pays dividends on several fronts. It integrates the expressivist with the consequentialist mode of evaluation; it demystifies the notion of expressive character by explicating it in terms of the causal notion of serving the concerns of concept-users; and it offers some epistemic guidance in identifying expressive character by adding the idea that what a concept expresses is a function of the *robustness* of its ability to serve a concern across variation in the relevant contingencies. A concept need not *invariably* serve a concern in order to express it. But it does need to serve it *non-accidentally*. There has to be something about the concept itself that makes it *apt* to serve that concern. One way of spelling out this idea is again in modal terms, which we can do particularly vividly in the idiom of 'possible worlds':<sup>28</sup> there has to be, not just a handful of

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<sup>27</sup> See Ryle (2009, 114).

<sup>28</sup> I take it that use of this idiom need not entail unpalatable ontological commitments to possible worlds and their equally uninviting implications for modal epistemology. Talk of possible worlds can be given a deflationary gloss as an especially perspicuous and precise way of making explicit what ordinary modal talk expresses anyway. Just like ordinary modal talk itself, talk of possible worlds can be demystified by a functional account on which it 'serves the function not of tracking features of additional worlds and reporting on their features, but rather of adding ... expressive power to our language' (Thomasson 2020, 123); see also Brandom (2008).



scattered because vastly different possible worlds in which it happens to serve that concern, but a reasonably large cluster of neighbouring possible worlds in which it systematically, if not invariably, serves that concern, even if our actual world now lies outside that cluster.

By way of illustration, consider the legal concept of a *basic rights infringement* which, when demonstrably satisfied, empowers individuals to trigger a process of judicial review aiming to determine whether their basic rights have in fact been violated by state action or omission. This concept plausibly evinces a liberal concern to protect individual liberties against the powers of the state. In the first instance, therefore, the concept might be thought to express a liberal society's instrumental need to give individuals legal means to push back against the state's curtailment of their most fundamental liberties.<sup>29</sup> Still, by some unlikely conjunction of circumstances, the concept might end up playing into the hands of the *illiberal*-minded at a certain juncture. Does this mean that the concept also expresses their concerns? No, because this serviceability is of the accidental kind 'which alters when it alteration finds': it is highly counterfactually fragile, breaking down in most nearby possible worlds. The concept's aptness to serve the concerns of the *liberal*-minded, by contrast, is far more counterfactually robust—that is what lends force to the expressivist claim, regardless of whether the liberal concern is actually being satisfied as things currently stand.

What it takes to substantiate a claim about expressive character, on this view, is to make plausible that the concept in question is *apt to serve* the concerns of certain types of concept-users under certain types of circumstances, and that this aptness is primarily due, not to an improbable alignment of the stars, but to features of the concept itself. To be able to *make sense* of a concept *as* expressing a certain concern, we have to be able to tell a story about what would engender an instrumental need for some such concept in particular. And what better

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<sup>29</sup> See Cueni (manuscript) for a detailed argument to that effect.

way to do this than to paint, as vividly as possible, the picture of those whose concerns and circumstances would engender the relevant need, before showing, equally vividly, that the adoption of the relevant concept would effectively serve their concerns?

Strictly speaking, moreover, the envisaged situation need not be, nor ever have been, actual. A concept's aptness to serve certain concerns might in principle be revealed to be latent in a concept merely by considering counterfactual situations. Admittedly, if the concept is one that has in fact been widely used for a long time, this strongly suggests that the situations were in fact realised at some point. But *when* and *where* exactly would not be as important as giving one's reader the means to *make sense* of the claim that the concept is indeed strikingly well suited to meet a certain need, for instance by demonstrating how it would be instrumentally rational for agents in a certain situation to adopt the practice of living by the concept—no matter whether they adopt it for that reason or unwittingly, as a result of certain psychological regularities or historical contingencies.

Consequently, this analysis of expressive character can help us make sense of Nietzsche's vivid but vaguely situated origin stories. By the punctilious standards of a trained philologist, his genealogies of concepts should seem extravagantly insouciant about indexing their objects to particular times and places. But this criticism only bites if the genealogies are primarily in the business of dating and describing the actual historical emergence of concepts. If, on the other hand, they aim to substantiate claims about the expressive character of concepts, they do a splendid job of showing what features of certain human beings and their circumstances would combine to generate certain pressing needs, and how apt to serve those needs certain concepts are. This offers us one potentially fruitful way to interpret not only the many expressivist-sounding passages in Nietzsche, but also his genealogical thumbnail sketches: perhaps one of their purposes is to lend plausibility to hermeneutic claims about the expressive character of concepts by giving the concepts a backstory and

fleshing it out.

Above all, however, this analysis proves its worth by allowing us to make sense of Nietzsche's seemingly bifurcating interests not only in what concepts have in fact *brought about*, but in what they *express*; not only in concepts *as causes*, but in concepts *as effects*; not only in concepts' actual *record* of hindering or furthering life, but in concepts as *signs* or *symptoms* of a certain life. If Nietzsche is interested both in concept's effects and in what they express, it is not because he has a wobbly grasp of his guiding question. It is because both aspects are relevant to his critique of concepts.

The analysis suggests two rationales accounting for Nietzsche's interest in what conditions of life a concept expresses as well as in its actual effects. One is that what a concept expresses of the conditions that would render it pointful is a valuable epistemic guide to the kinds of effects it actually tends to have, even if no-one now has the concerns that would be best served by those effects. Precisely because, as we saw, a concept's effects are unsurveyably many and various, it is worth using a concept's expressive character as a guide to the hidden patterns in its causal profile. By coming to understand that a certain concept of *good*, or of *God*, or of *nature*, is the kind of concept that people brimming with *ressentiment* towards the strong, or with disgust for humanity, or with hatred of life, would have need for, one is given some reason—however defeasible—to think that the effects of living by those concepts, even if those who live by them *lack* such life-denying attitudes and feelings, are unlikely to be effects conducive to the satisfaction of more life-affirming concerns, and more likely to further, *even in their absence*, the concerns of those who would have need of such concepts. Concepts can subsist outside of their needfulness conditions, and thereby continue to systematically have effects that we might not want to see systematically realised.

The other rationale for Nietzsche's bifurcating interests is that it makes sense for someone who wants to gauge the value of a concept *to possible future ways of living* to consider both

of these dimensions: not just a concept's actual impact so far, but its *potential* impact; not just what concerns it has already served, but what concerns it *might yet come* to serve. Far from collapsing the expressivist aspect of Nietzsche's critique of concepts into its consequentialist aspect, this unifying interpretation thus stresses the role of the expressivist aspect in expanding the scope of relevant effects to encompass not just the effects a concept actually has, or has actually had, but the effects it is likely to have going forward, just in virtue of the kind of concept it is.

Accordingly, it is the synchronic preoccupation with a concept's under-appreciated present effects and the forward-looking preoccupation with its likely future effects that *motivates* the backward-looking preoccupation with what the concept expresses, because grasping what conditions of life a concept expresses through its aptness for them can tell us something about how it relates to our own concerns now, and how it will relate to them going forward. By asking who would be best served by a concept, one learns something about whether it is likely to serve us.

#### 4. Nietzsche's Conception of Conceptual Authority

The upshot of Nietzsche's conceptual ethics thus far is that the concepts can be evaluated according to whether they serve the concerns of those who live by them. This in itself already yields a coherent standard of evaluation: one *could* embrace a pure instrumentalism about concepts that simply aspired to tailor people's thinking tools to the instrumental needs engendered by their concerns and circumstances. A concept would then be a *good* concept to the extent that it was needful and pointful. More precisely, it would be good *for* those who needed it.

But to leave it at that would be to miss a crucial further turn of the screw in Nietzsche's account. His conception of conceptual authority is not purely instrumental, which is to say

that the vindication of a concept *in relation to a need* is not yet the vindication that counts. Needfulness alone is not enough.

In part, this is because much of a society's conceptual repertoire is tailored to *social* more than to *individual* needs.<sup>30</sup> Its concepts serve to communicate, to measure and evaluate things by communally agreed criteria; the values it encodes are largely values that stake claims *against* the interests and needs of the individual, and thereby render individuals more sociable, more fit for social coexistence (they serve to 'tame' and 'herd', in Nietzsche's vocabulary). As a result, many concepts, and value concepts especially, cater to the needs of the community *at the expense* of the needs of the individual. As Nietzsche writes, 'consciousness', along with the conceptual apparatus in terms of which it is articulated, 'is finely developed only in relation to its usefulness to community or herd' (GS §354). This means that 'each of us, even with the best will to understand himself as individually as possible, ... will always bring to consciousness precisely the 'not-individual' in him, his 'averageness'—that through the character of consciousness ... our thought itself is continually ... translated back into the herd-perspective' (GS §354).

Hence, the freedom of the 'free spirits' lies notably in their breaking free from this system of social purposes, with its 'economically justified' (87:10[11]) concepts that are tailored to social needs and turn the individual into a useful cog in the social machine: 'What a sense of freedom there is', Nietzsche exclaims, 'in feeling, as we emancipated minds feel, that we are not bound by a system of "purposes"! (85:2[206]). He does not invite his readers to assess the authority of concepts according to how well they meet the social needs of the community they find themselves in. Seeing this connection is doubtless valuable to understanding how we came by the kinds of concepts we have; but it is not the ultimate standard of conceptual

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<sup>30</sup> As Richardson (2004, 81–94; 2020, ch. 6) has emphasised.

authority from the point of view of the individual considering what concepts to live by. There is a reason Nietzsche does not just ask *whether* there is a need behind a concept, but *who* needs it.

To evaluate a concept, one has to grasp not just whether it is needed and what it is needed for, but what *creates* a need for it. The concept can then be evaluated *together with what creates a need for it*. The passage I used as an entry-point into the present account, describing the backward inference 'from the ideal to the one who *needs it*, from every way of thinking and valuing to the commanding *need* behind it', continues: 'is it *hatred* of life or *superabundance* of life that has become creative here?' (NW 'Antipodes'; see also GS §370). A concept's authority is a function not just of its needfulness, but of what its needfulness is rooted in. Hence Nietzsche's interest in whether value concepts are 'a sign of distress, of impoverishment, of the degeneration of life', or whether they 'betray the fullness, the power, the will of life, its courage, its confidence, its future' (GM 'Preface' §3). For example, he notes of 'the concept of "nature" ... as a counter to the idea of "God"' that

it is the expression of a profound sense of unease concerning reality ... *But this explains everything*. Who are the only people motivated to *lie their way out of reality*? People who *suffer* from it. But to suffer from reality means that you are a piece of reality that has *gone wrong* ... The preponderance of feelings of displeasure over feelings of pleasure is the *cause* of that fictitious morality and religion: but a preponderance like this provides the *formula* for decadence. (A §15)

For Nietzsche, then, it is not needfulness *per se* that counts, nor even needfulness for life, but needfulness for individuals who are *overflowing* with life, health, and vitality. However well a concept serves a need, if that need is engendered by weakness, *ressentiment*, and hatred of life, that will speak *against* the concept in the eyes of those in whom life is superabundant. If, by contrast, the need behind the concept is itself engendered by overflowing vitality and will to life, that will speak in favour of the concept in the eyes of those in whom life is superabundant. Concepts that are 'a consequence of decadence' or 'a symptom of weakness',

because they served or at least *express* a broken will to life, a form of life in decline, are therefore 'incompatible with an ascending and affirmative life' (EH 'Destiny' §4). Just as he envisages a 'critique of values by the standard of life' (86: 7[45]), Nietzsche envisages a critique of concepts by the standard of life.

Notice, however, that this ulterior evaluative basis, which forms the backbone of his non-foundationalist conception of conceptual authority, need not figure explicitly as a premise in his case for or against a particular concept. On Nietzsche's view, life evaluates *through* the reader when presented with the presuppositions that render a concept pointful. When he holds up a concept for evaluation by a reader in whom life is overflowing, he only has to trace the concept to the need that lies behind it, and show the reader what conditions of life would engender that need. This is why he contents himself with pointing out, for example, that

[t]he knightly-aristocratic value judgments have as their presupposition a powerful physicality, a blossoming, rich, even overflowing health, together with that which is required for its preservation: war, adventure, the hunt, dance, athletic contests, and in general everything which includes strong, free, cheerful-hearted activity. The priestly-noble manner of valuation—as we have seen—has other presuppositions ... they are the most powerless. (GM I §7)

If, as Nietzsche believes, 'every animal ... instinctively strives for an optimum of favourable conditions under which it can fully discharge its strength and achieve its maximum sense of power' (GM III §7), because 'life itself is the will to power' (BGE §13; see also A §6), he can count on the fact that 'life itself evaluates through us' (TI 'Morality' §5).<sup>31</sup> Some readers will 'look from the optics of the sick at healthier concepts and values', while others will look 'from the fullness and self-sureness of a rich life down into the secret work of the instinct of

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<sup>31</sup> A connected notion of expression which I do not go into here is the expression (as opposed to repression) of drives, which is central to Nietzsche's notion of health and informs his conceptions of life and will to power; see May (1999, 29) and Gemes (2013, §2.2).

decadence' (EH 'Wise' §1); but he can count on those in whom life is superabundant to feel alienated from a concept upon realising that the conditions rendering the concept needful and pointful include weakness, *ressentiment*, or hatred of life. In coming to understand *whom* a concept would help to live and *why*, we come to understand whether it can help *us* to live.

## 5. Conclusion

I have argued that while Nietzsche is fundamentally concerned with the effects concepts are likely to have going forward, it is precisely this concern that motivates his backward-looking preoccupation with what concepts express. Nietzsche evaluates concepts by asking for whom they have a point, and he approaches that question through a backward inference from a concept via the instrumental need it fills to the conditions that engender that need and thereby render the concept pointful. For a concept to be pointful is for it to serve the concerns of its users through its effects; but even when it is not pointful, a concept expresses the presuppositions of its pointfulness, which we can work back to by asking who would need such a concept. Understanding what need a concept is tailored to meet sharpens one's eye for the effects it is apt to have, and thereby helps one gauge whether the concept promises to help one to live.

The virtues of this account are that it makes sense of Nietzsche's seemingly bifurcating interests in both the effects and the expressive character of concepts. The account demystifies the expressive character of concepts, explains how one might go about identifying that expressive character, and shows how it can be understood in terms of the effects of concepts, thereby unifying two seemingly disparate modes of evaluation. It also explains why Nietzsche would look not only to the effects of concepts, but also to what they express, because a concept's pointfulness conditions are a good guide both to its under-appreciated present effects and to its likely future effects. And finally, it helps us make sense of Nietzsche's



genealogical sketches, because making the case for a claim about the expressive character of a concept requires one, in the first instance, to make plausible that a concept *would* serve the concerns of certain kinds of people under certain kinds of conditions rather than to specify when and where exactly it had these effects.

Nietzsche's thought thus exemplifies a rich approach to conceptual ethics that promises to be more widely applicable. For instance, I take it to yield a powerful interpretative template for understanding Williams's critique of the concepts of the 'morality system': the peculiar configuration of moral concepts epitomised by Kantian morality makes sense once it is seen as expressing a concern for ultimate fairness that these concepts cannot fully satisfy, because the conditions required for them to do so—roughly, the conditions outlined by Kantian metaphysics—are not given. More generally, looking to the concerns concepts express as well as to the concerns they actually serve through their effects allows us to diagnose motivated distortions in our conceptual apparatus and wishful thinking in philosophy's constructions.<sup>32</sup> Above all, however, Nietzsche's approach to conceptual ethics exemplifies a salutary willingness to look beyond the theoretical virtues and vices of concepts at the presuppositions we buy into by using these concepts, a willingness to venture beyond the firm ground of diagnosing formal flaws, and risk that trickier inference, that backward inference from high-minded concepts to human concerns.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> As Berry (2018, 396) argues, Nietzsche himself exploits this in his diagnoses of the '*motivated irrationality*' he discerns in philosophical systems.

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