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Nietzsche's Perfectionism and the Ethics of Care: A Brief Treatment

Justin Remhof

Nietzsche appears antithetical to care ethics. He often mocks human dependency, for instance, sometimes in ways that appear sexist (see, e.g., Z I Women), and he famously challenges the legitimacy of compassion. Nietzsche's positive ethical position is arguably some form of anti-egalitarian *perfectionism* which holds that goodness is constituted by individual human excellence. Perfectionism, however, coupled with a rejection of the ethical significance of dependency and virtues like compassion, can seem dangerous to modern sensibilities—especially to those in the care tradition. We typically believe that a plausible ethical theory should function to ensure positive rather than negative relations between individuals, and it looks like perfectionism is not up for the task.

I think we should put Nietzsche's perfectionism to the test. In this chapter, I briefly explore whether Nietzsche's perfectionism might not only be consistent with but possibly even support several core features of care ethics. I cannot possibly hope to accomplish a sufficiently detailed comparison of Nietzsche and the ethics of care. I merely want to introduce something new worth thinking about: Nietzsche's perfection is arguably closer to the care tradition than might originally be thought, and, as I see things, this makes his perfectionism more plausible that it might otherwise appear.

The Nietzsche that emerges from this chapter is not a full-fledged care theorist. Nietzsche is certainly not interested in systematically assessing and accounting for the ethical significance of various forms of dependency, for example, and it will emerge that his positive view of compassion seems to be much more demanding than what care ethicists often advance. But no matter: I do not plan on arguing that Nietzsche is a care theorist. I want to explore a reading of Nietzsche's perfectionism that might align with care ethics. From this reading a form of care emerges that appears to be specifically Nietzschean.

Central Features of Care Ethics

Let me lay out six central features of care ethics. For this task, I primarily draw on Held (2006), Kittay (1999 and 2019), Norlock (2019), Noddings (2003), Tronto (1993), and Sevenhuijsen (1998). The care tradition fundamentally focuses on how all people are *dependent* on others from survival to living well. When we are young and old, and oftentimes in between, we depend on others. The fact that we are all dependents implies two further features of care ethics. Care ethicists call attention to the fact that we are all *vulnerable*. Dependent persons are noticeably open to attack, harm, or damage, whether mentally, physically, or emotionally. Dependency also entails that we are all sometimes in *asymmetrical power relationships* to others, especially when needing or giving care. We are not all equal all the time. Dependency, vulnerability, and asymmetry are undisputable realities of human life. In virtue of these realities, care ethicists argue, we all need care. At the least, care is *ethically significant*. Care enables living well given the reality and implications of dependency.

Further features of care ethics emerge when we look at how we might provide considerate care relations. First, considerate care seems to require a sense of *compassion* that involves an attachment and responsiveness to others. Attachment demands that we recognize that others have needs which need care. Responsiveness might best be understood as a sense of reciprocity: one must consider a person as having certain needs that must be met as that person expresses those needs while not presuming that the person is exactly like oneself. Arguably, attachment and responsiveness primarily arise from some form of compassion, that is, an awareness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it. Compassion appears to be crucial for establishing positive rather than negative care relations.

Care theory also contends that *emotions* are ethically significant. Emotional responses can help concerned persons understand and respond to others in a helpful manner. This is not to countenance the legitimacy of any raw emotion whatsoever. Emotions most suitable for enabling considerate care relations should be refined over time through evaluative reflection. Emotions are often other-directed, of course, and care ethicists hold that strategically developing emotional sensibilities can help render dependency relations between people more constructive than non-emotional consideration.

Finally, care ethicists hold that relations between *particular* people are ethically significant. Care theorists are skeptical about attempts to establish universal, agent-neutral ethical principles—principles sought after in traditional ethical programs—on the grounds that such principles intentionally disregard ethical features of specific relationships. As Held says, "the ethics of care *respects* rather than *removes* itself from the claims of particular others with whom we share actual relationships" (Held 2006: 11). Care ethicists do not necessarily close off the possibility of establishing or giving priority to impartial principles. But they often focus on how partial, agent-relative ethical claims might supersede impartial, agent-neutral ones.

The core features of care ethics are then (1) dependency, (2) vulnerability, (3) asymmetry, (4) the development of compassion, (5) the development of emotions, and (6) prioritizing partiality over impartiality. The first three are facts of human life and the last three concern ways in which care ethicists address those facts.

Perfectionism as Self-Transformation

Now that we have a basic understanding of care theory on the board, I want to look at Nietzsche's perfectionism from the perspective of self-transformation (for alternative accounts of his perfectionism, see Cavell 1990, Hurka 2007, Conant 2001, Rutherford 2018). Self-transformation locates the good in cultivating one's highest values. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* I: "On the Three Metamorphoses," Nietzsche lays out three stages of self-transformation. He elaborates on the first stage in the first four sections of *Schopenhauer as Educator* and the second stage in the first five sections of the 1886 preface to *Human, All Too Human*. In principle, each stage of self-development is open to all. Indeed, although I cannot argue for it here, I think Nietzsche's anti- egalitarianism is often best understood in terms of those who can and cannot enact self-perfection.

In the first stage ("camel") one begins searching for one's highest values by engaging in a wide array of difficult but inspiring tasks associated with different and possibly conflicting values. In SE 1 Nietzsche suggests that this process begins when one's conscience calls one to become who one is. In SE 2 he adds that one can avoid value conflict in this stage by determining a dominant highest value around which to order or ground peripheral values. Peripheral values might then mutually support each other by co-supporting the dominant value. In SE 2–3, Nietzsche suggests honesty, cheerfulness, and steadfastness as three possibly dominant values to help those in the first stage.

In the second stage ("lion") one embarks on challenging values adopted in the first stage. This includes, generally, traditional moral values which dominate the Western tradition and, more broadly, values one feels comfortable with—and maybe even complacent toward—after the first stage. The aim is to facilitate self-sufficiency, which consists in rendering one's values more one's own by purging traditional, assimilated values and igniting recommitment to a select few of one's first stage values on the condition that they remain inspiring after being provisionally superseded. Unsurprisingly, then, successfully completing this stage of self-transformation requires hard work and intense discipline.

In the last stage ("child") one's highest values become part of one's habitual nature, which frees one to create new values from a child-like "innocence." Ideally, this process leads to the production of values that give rise to higher humanity. Achieving the last stage is the ultimate goal of Nietzsche's perfectionism.

Can the process of self-transformation account for the central features of care ethics? A major worry is that dependency both precedes and enables the development of one's highest values—it comes prior to any "call of conscience." Perfecting oneself

cannot be successful without somehow accounting for dependency and somehow safeguarding positive dependency relations. Call this the "care challenge." Does this challenge undermine the viability of Nietzschean self-development?

Care Ethics and Self-Transformation

What follows is a sketch of how account of self-transformation might respond to the care challenge. I focus on the first stage ("camel") in conjunction with elements of Nietzsche's philosophy that might account for the features of care ethics described above. I proceed by examining how the first stage of Nietzsche's perfectionism might affirm (6) partiality, (5) emotions, and (4) compassion (in that order) to handle
(1) dependency and by implication (2) vulnerability and (3) asymmetry.

First consider partiality. The first stage of self-transformation assumes that partiality may take precedent over impartial ethical codes, just as care ethicists argue. This largely follows from Nietzsche's attack on traditional ethical programs, which require impartiality to eclipse partiality by demanding universal applicability. For Nietzsche there are simply no features all individuals share which could justify the universal applicability of any one value, principle, or ethical code. Indeed, for Nietzsche different kinds of values should be applied to help navigate unique, individual experiences.

The fact that one's relation to oneself should have priority over allegiance to agent- neutral ethical principles, then, given that the latter explicitly intends to overlook individual distinction, is secured in the first stage. Nietzsche gives individual preference priority. If we make the reasonable assumption that individuals often find features of particular relationships much more ethically significant than features of relationships without personal connection—and I see no reason to think Nietzsche would deny this—it looks like the ethical significance of values developed and sustained between people in close relationships will likely contribute substantially more to self- transformation than any attempted adherence to universal values, principles, or codes. Again, Nietzsche provides all sorts of arguments against the viability of the traditional focus on universality. This suggests that the particularity of specific relationships can and likely do play a central role in the process of self-transformation.

The ethical significance of particular connections to others in the camel stage is reinforced when we notice that for Nietzsche emotions, which he often regards as passions, have significant ethical importance. For him emotions are not mere feelings but much more meaningful: they convey worldly orientations. To use Robert Solomon's (2003) nice example, infantile rage is meaningless, while resentment is meaningful. Resentment showcases an understanding of history, involves a complex sense of injustice, and projects an imaginary future. An emotional orientation might be seen as providing a helpful *strategy* that can be refined over time. Nietzsche says that one moves from "the weight of stupidity" of being passive with respect to passions to "spiritualizing" them through gradual control and eventual mastery (TI Morality 1).

Cultivating passions is necessary in the first stage of self-transformation because for Nietzsche passions are fundamentally constitutive of one's highest values. Indeed,

Nietzsche thinks that emotional development enables flourishing. He describes high values as "refined passions and enhanced states" (KSA 10:24[31]). These enhanced states inculcate a "way of thinking and behaving that, once it has become habit, drive, and passion, will rule in [the individual]" (GS 21, cf. Z I Passions). Developing emotional responses creates a path to one's highest values. This path is often shared with others. Indeed, experimenting with realizing our highest values likely always requires participation in social contexts that involve dedicated others, such as friends and mentors, that support progressive movement. This suggests that developing deeply meaningful and inspiring emotional connections with others is central for self-development.

The fact that emotional orientations are ethically significant, however, does not yet tell us which kind of emotional strategies one might develop into values that can ensure considerate care relations. Some form of *compassion* seems to fit the bill. One might reasonably hold that Nietzsche should appeal to compassion in the first stage of transformation, perhaps as a dominant value around which to structure other values, to properly answer the care challenge. Yet Nietzsche is a powerful critic of compassion (see, e.g., HH 50, 103; D 132–142; GS 271, 338; Z II Pitying; GM P; BGE 222, 225, 260;
TI Morality 1). I now discuss one key passage where Nietzsche details specific worries about compassion. My goal is to suggest that a positive view of compassion can be salvaged and should be integrated into the first stage of self-development.

In *The Gay Science* 338 Nietzsche asks two questions. First, is it good for those who suffer if one is compassionate toward them? Nietzsche anticipates an affirmative reply but provides three reasons for a negative response. I am going to comment on what form of compassion Nietzsche *allows* with each negative reply he gives. Nietzsche does not attack compassion as intrinsically wrongheaded. Rather, his remarks suggest that compassion is instrumentally problematic on the grounds that it can hinder the possibility of self-development. This means that Nietzsche might be amenable to a form of compassion that contributes to self-transformation. This is what I focus on.

Nietzsche first says that since one's suffering is "inaccessible to nearly everyone," whenever we are "*noticed* to be suffering, our suffering is superficially construed," which "strips the suffering of what is truly personal" (GS 338). Notice what this criticism leaves open: Nietzsche allows individuals to feel compassion if they can have a genuine understanding of someone's suffering. This form of compassion aims at helping those who suffer embrace their suffering for self-development. Indeed, Nietzsche then says that those who are compassionate "want to help and have no thought that there is a personal necessity of misfortune" (GS 338). So one who recognizes when another might benefit from suffering will understand when to be responsive and when to abstain from premature help.

Nietzsche finally tells us that ethical systems which "command [one] to help" many times result in one thinking that "they have helped best when they have helped most quickly!" (GS 338). Again, we have space for compassion. Those who take the time to be responsive in the right kinds of ways, eschewing external ethical imperatives and making compassion a personal virtue, may help best. All three difficulties with compassion can be avoided with the right kind of orientation toward being compassionate.

The second question Nietzsche asks in GS 338 is whether it is good for *us* to be compassionate. The first reason he gives against a positive answer is that the demands of reducing suffering may likely disrupt self-transformation. He writes, "[T]here are a hundred decent and praiseworthy ways of losing myself from my path" (GS 338). Attending to our own distinctive needs can be incompatible with attending to the needs of others. Giving aid might be admirable, but we may become overwhelmed. Care theorists have expressed similar worries. For instance, Meyers worries that the demands of care may result in a "plague of commitments" that may blur one's identity (Meyers 1989: 152).

This worry, however, concerns only those whose engagement in aiding others diminishes their own resources for becoming who they are—and this result need not be the case. Nietzsche additionally suggests that aiding others might give one sanctuary from attending to one's own needs—we "take refuge in the conscience of others" (GS 338). Yet it is consistent with these criticisms to claim that one should compassionately provide care if the task is not debilitative and engaged with a proper grasp of one's motives.

Each space I have carved out for compassion names a legitimate form of appropriately attending to and responding to another's suffering. Nietzsche seems to affirm the sense of reciprocity in which one should be attentive to an other's needs while not presuming that the other is exactly like oneself. He requires that we understand when, how, and why compassion can be put to good use. At the end of the day, he even appears to offer a positive view of compassion. He ends GS 338 like this:

> [Y]ou will want to help—but only those whose distress you properly *understand* because they share with you one suffering and one hope—your *friends*—and only in the way you help yourself: I want to make them braver, more persevering, simpler, more full of gaiety. I want to teach them what is today understood by so few, least of all by these preachers of compassion: to share not pain, but *joy*!

Compassion is effective if one can adequately understand another's suffering by recognizing what needs require attention, and for Nietzsche this possibility occurs in close relationships under the goal of working toward mutual perfection. Nietzsche countenances compassion not merely for alleviating distress, then, but to help someone develop the kinds of sensibilities necessary to face inevitable suffering and arouse what Nietzsche calls a fellowship in "*joy*" (GS 338). Indeed, by "learning better to feel joy," Zarathustra tell us, "[W]e learn best not to hurt others or to plan hurts for them" (Z II Pitying). Seeking joy can decrease potential problems with dependency. Zarathustra later adds: "But if you have a suffering friend, be a resting place for his suffering, but a hard bed as it were, a field cot: and thus you will profit him best" (Z II Pitying). Compassion should be implemented carefully for the purposes of helping someone become their highest self. Indeed, "compassion for the friend should conceal itself under a hard shell, and you should break a tooth on it. That way it will have delicacy and sweetness" (Z I Friend). Rather than condemning compassion tout court, Nietzsche embraces a form of compassion characterized by "delicacy and sweetness."

It is reasonable to suppose that this Nietzschean form of compassion should be used to support the self-transformation of those who are dependent, vulnerable, or asymmetrically situated in relation to oneself. Nietzsche's remarks on compassion show that we need not avoid compassion when embarking on self-transformation. We might instead integrate a specific form of compassion into the first stage. Given the reality of dependency, which Nietzsche appears to acknowledge, the likelihood of seeking out and maintaining a beneficial form of compassion can be essential for self- transformation.

The Process of Self-Transformation

I want to point out one final thing. It looks like the process of self-transformation *itself* might help to ensure considerate care relations. Being alive to what constitutes one's own flourishing shows that one has grasped the value of attentiveness, and learning to discriminate and act upon one's own needs arguably enhances the ability to discriminate and act upon the needs of others. Neglecting responsibilities to oneself may likely hinder one's capacity to adequately respond to others. Being responsive to and taking care of oneself help one be responsive to take care of others, albeit for Nietzsche those committed to perfecting themselves.

Conclusion

Care ethicists have typically ignored Nietzsche—and, as I suggested above, it looks like they have good reason to. But this dismissal could be considered shortsighted. By affirming partiality, deliberate emotional development, and a certain kind of compassion, Nietzsche's perfectionism, understood as a form of self-transformation, can to some extent acknowledge and address the realities of human life care ethicists find ethically significant. To reiterate, I do not think Nietzsche can *sufficiently* account for realities like dependency. At the least, though, Nietzsche can provide a substantive response to the care challenge, and I think drawing out the ways in which Nietzsche's perfectionism can support core features of care ethics makes his perfectionism more worth taking seriously.